TOR is the South West Doctoral Training Partnership’s (SWDTP) leading journal for the social and economic sciences. It is managed by students and annually publishes the highest quality research from across the SWDTP. TOR aims to introduce students to the process of publishing in peer-reviewed academic journals and to support students’ professional careers by offering a rigorous yet supportive environment that helps develop their skills as a writer. TOR follows the utmost standards of academic publishing, as all articles are peer-reviewed by trained independent reviewers and members of the editorial team, and all feedback is constructive and free of bias.

Following the success and popularity of TOR, we are excited to announce that TOR will be changing from its current journal-based format to a magazine-style format for issue five in 2019. The reason for this change is to broaden our target audience and to facilitate more cross-discipline research from students and early-career researchers. Look out for us in future communications and do not hesitate to get in touch. TOR is open to all researchers from undergraduate to early-career researchers, whether funded through the SWDTP or not. We look forward to hearing from you!

Considering this change, the final issue in our current format is aligned with the SWDTP Student Conference 2017 theme of Research in a Changing World: Critical Approaches. An amazing array of articles and blogs related to this theme are included in this issue. These range from insightful discussions on the value of a digital presence for researchers, to papers examining topics of emotional and mental health while undertaking post-graduate research. The papers raise relevant issues during and after PhD study, and the future of academia. The issue finishes with an interview of Dr Frederick Harry Pitts, Lecturer in Management at the University of Bristol, who shares with us his love for research and his research interests in the future of work.

TOR is a valuable resource for anyone interested in current social and economic affairs, and for students looking to get a head start on their academic career or professional writing. We would like to thank all the authors and peer-reviewers for their input, and the editorial team for taking the time to make this issue possible. We hope you enjoy issue 4 and we encourage all readers to consider becoming a part of TOR or to publish a blog or article for our next issue in 2019!
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I was fortunate enough to be able to present at the SWDTP Annual Conference 2017 in Bath on my research into bisexuality. Having not completed my empirical research yet, I was excited to present my theoretical framework to an audience, to field questions, comments, and observations from a range of participants in different subject areas. I structured my presentation around the different strains of bisexual studies I had identified, explaining and critiquing each one, before presenting my way of interpreting bisexuality in my study. This brief piece will sketch out the three schools I described and evaluated, before briefly touching on the direction I intend to pursue in exploring bisexuality.

The first and most common school of thought in bisexual studies, is bisexual life narratives. This school of thought stemmed from the way in which bisexuals were alienated from the broader Lesbian and Gay civil rights movement in the late 20th century. Bisexuals were excluded from Lesbian and Gay narratives as they threatened the inviolable essential characteristics of the Lesbian and Gay identity, and thus did not contribute to the discourse around claiming rights on the basis of being ‘born this way’. However, in the 80s and 90s, bisexuals became more active, and began claiming their identities in collective groups to embrace and celebrate their bisexual identities. This led to a number of texts, such as Bi Any Other Name (Lani Ka’ahumanu and Loraine Hutchins 1991), and Purple Prose: Bisexuality in Britain (Kate Harrad, 2016), which sought to justify bisexual identities. Through claiming and validating an identity, these texts intended to support anyone struggling with their sexualities and affirm their sexual orientations. In studying bisexuality, this approach is not theoretically nuanced due to the individuation of the bisexual experience, and the way in which the bisexual label is uncritically applied and used without nuancing the experiences of group sexual identities.

The second school of thought commonly seen in bisexual studies is where bisexuality is understood as a transcendent sexual orientation. This school stems from the bisexual pride movement, in which bisexual was illustrated as not only a good identity, but the best identity. Through the transgressive attraction to more than one gender, theorists in this school saw bisexuals as gender-blind, and thus more progressive, and more in touch with a base sensuality/sexuality than any other sexual orientations. Texts such as Vice Versa: Bisexuality and the Eroticism of Everyday Life (Marjorie Garber, 1995) and Bisexuality: A Study (Charlotte Wolff, 1979) portrayed bisexuality as the norm, which social constraints had narrowed and forced into either heterosexuality or homosexuality. In studying bisexuality, this approach is not encouraged due to the explicit hierarchy of sexual orientations, uncritical adoption of the term bisexual, and suggestion that bisexuals are not subject to a wider process of cultural pressures.

The third school of thought, heavily inspired by Queer Theory, is Critical Bisexual Studies, in which bisexuality is seen as complicit in the construction and maintenance of sexual orientations. Essentially, this approach is discursive, and looks at the power and problematic nature of occupying a bisexual identity. This approach also suggests that bisexuality can be a strong position from which to nuance and twist monosexual identities, through demonstrating the fluidity of sexuality, gender, and gender identity. Theo-
rists in this field have written texts such as Bisexual Spaces (Clare Hemmings, 2002), and A History of Bisexuality (Stephen Angelides, 2001). Although this approach is conceptually and theoretically developed, and there is a significant nuance in its approach to bisexuality, ultimately, the theorists fail to engage with material and real-world implications of bisexuality. Bisexuals exist in a world where the material conditions affect them on the basis of their sexual orientation. Bisexuals are subject to increased rates of sexual violence, increased mental and physical wellbeing problems, and increased addiction issues. Critical Bisexuality Studies fails to make any practicable recommendations concerning these material realities, and consequently is not an appropriate framework for an emancipatory sociological study.

And thus, we get to the theoretical framework I intend to adopt for my study. Heavily informed by Surya Monro’s 2015 text, Bisexuality: Identities, Politics and Theories, my approach emphasises the material, embodied, and temporal elements of bisexuality. Focusing on the fluidity of identities, the intersectionality of privilege within an identity grouping, the effect of gender and the body on bisexuality, and the way in which temporality affects identities, I propose to situate the bisexual material life squarely in the centre of my PhD project, whilst also emphasising the role of the social context in shaping, constraining, and facilitating the bisexual life. With this, I ended my presentation and I am excited to see how my theoretical framework works in the field. I believe that, based on comments and questions from the audience afterwards, it will hold up in practice. We will have to wait and see.

For more on bisexuality, please see:


If you would like to access any support related to the content of this piece, please see:
Closing the gap between social work research and practice: Applying critical realism to social work research

Mim Cartwright

Mim is a third-year ESRC funded student at the University of Bristol. She is studying for a PhD in social work. Before starting her PhD she worked as a social worker in England. Her research focuses on the role of social workers with children in care, and how good relationships between children and social workers can help children to do well in care.

Abstract

Social workers practice in a complex environment where the work they carry out is impacted on, not only by the child and family they are working with, but also their training, work environment, local and government policy, and the wider culture. In contrast, methodologies that commonly underpin social work research tend to simplify the social world by measuring only what can be directly observed (Anastas, 2014). As a result, research findings are not always applicable to the complex realities of social work practice. This paper proposes critical realism as an alternative philosophy to underpin the methodology of social work research. By applying critical realism to the development of the authors’ current PhD research, the paper will show how the philosophy helped to develop a methodology that had the potential to mirror the complexities that social workers face in practice. The paper concludes that more social work research should be underpinned by a critical realist philosophy to explore its’ potential to ensure social work research is relevant to social work practice.

Introduction

The authors’ PhD study aims to explore how relationships between children in care and social workers support children’s wellbeing and identify reasons why relationships between children in care and social workers are not being prioritised in practice. The relationship between a child in care and their social worker is likely to be the most important relationship that a child has with any professional involved in their life (Stein, 2009). Children say they want a social worker who stays long-term in their role, listens to them, is reliable and helps them to actively participate in decision making (McLeod, 2006; 2007; 2010). Underpinning this is the basic need to ensure that children in long-term care have a stable relationship with a social worker. However, most children in care are still experiencing an unstable relationship with their social worker; research by the Children’s Commissioner (2017) found that 56% of children in care experienced at least one change of social worker and 10% of children experienced 3 or more changes of social worker in one year. The author is proposing one reason relationships are not being prioritised in practice is because research into the issue has been based on methodologies that do not adequately represent the complex reality of social work practice. From the authors’ perspective, as someone who has previously worked as a social worker, this can mean that findings from social work research do not always adequately reflect the complexities of social work practice. This paper will explore the importance of ensuring social work research is meaningful to social workers and applicable to the complex realities of social work practice.

The paper will then propose critical realism as an alternative philosophy to underpin the methodology of social work research. Critical realism is philosophy of science that allows the complexity of real life situations to be explored due to the way that it views reality as stratified, and therefore considers different levels of reality, including what may not be directly observable (Lennox and Rozzet, 2017). As a result, critical realism appears to have the potential to bridge the gap between social work research and practice. Despite this potential, critical realism has not been used widely as a methodology within social work research (Craig and Bigby, 2015). The authors’ current PhD study will be
used to demonstrate the application of a critical realist perspective to the development of a methodology for a piece of social work research. Through this it will be argued that critical realism should be applied more frequently within social work research to explore its’ potential to close the gap between social work research and practice.

Social Work Research Methodologies

Since the beginning of this century, there has been a growing emphasis on evidence-based practice in social work in England (Houston, 2005). Evidenced-based practice aims to provide social workers with the answer to ‘what works’ in practice (Pawson, 2006; Dustin, 2007), and has the potential to be positive for the profession because good research can help practitioners to ensure they are providing a good quality and accountable service to those they work with. However, evidence accepted as ‘good’ tends to be biased towards positivism, a philosophy which asserts that society can be observed and explained “logically and rationally” (Babbie, 2013, p60). For example, within evidence accepted for the evaluation of projects for the innovation fund for children’s social care, the Randomised Control Trial (RCT) was considered the most robust form of evidence (McNeish, 2017). RCTs are a deductive form of experimental research, designed to corroborate or falsify an hypothesis set out by the researcher based on existing theory, to produce research results that are reliable and reproducible (Hodkinson, 2008; Babbie, 2013). Therefore, such research can help explain what outcomes are likely from an intervention.

However, RCTs are less useful for understanding “how and why health and social care treatments and services work the way they do” (Houston, 2010, p89), and the results from experiments based on artificial closed comparisons may not always translate to a real world context (Pawson, 2006). For example, positivist methodologies typically exclude the voice and experience of service users, and therefore risk not upholding social work values. Because of this, social workers can be sceptical of the application of the findings of quantitative research to practice (Beddoe, 2011). Therefore, while quantitative research methods can be useful for social work research seeking to determine the effectiveness of an intervention, there is a risk they ignore the complexity of problem-solving and commitment to anti-oppressive practice within social work practice (Dustin, 2007; Anastas, 2014).

Such concerns have led to a strong qualitative research tradition within social work (Peile and McCouat, 1997). Qualitative research methods explore meanings through the voices of service users and are particularly useful in research that aims to explore the way that “marginalised groups are negatively defined by prevailing language and cultural norms” (Craig and Bigby, 2015). Qualitative research is underpinned by a number of different research philosophies, but has its roots in interpretivism, which seeks to understand the subjective meaning of individual situations (Peile and McCouat, 1997). Qualitative research therefore typically takes an inductive analytical approach, emphasising individualistic differences in experiences and meanings, and can mean social structures underpinning these are either ignored or their influence minimised.

For example, two influential pieces of research exploring why good quality relationships are not being achieved between children and social workers identified both that organisational issues, such as high caseloads and resource issues (social structures), and social workers own skills and training (individual experience), can be barriers to social workers being able to build good relationships with children (Winter, 2009; Ruch, 2014). However, in the analysis, Winter concluded that a “good quality relationship can happen in spite of or despite organisational and structural constraints”, and therefore “inter-personal and intra-personal attributes are as, if not more important” (2009, p458), and Ruch concluded that in order to improve relationships with children:

...initiatives should be resourced that develop practitioners’ reflective capabilities and help to improve their communication skills by equipping them to effectively respond in child-centred ways to the unpredictable and uncomfortable realities of practice (2014, p2160).

Therefore, in the analysis of both pieces of research, the social structures represented by the organisational issues were concluded to be less important than the individual experiences represented by social workers’ skills and training.

From the authors’ perspective, as a practicing social worker, these analytic conclusions do not represent the practice experience of building and maintaining good quality relationships with children in care. While good interpersonal and intra-personal skills can help to build good relationships with some children, high caseloads and typical practices within organisations mean in practice that social workers do not have the time or support to build the relationships they want to with all the children they work with.

Therefore, taking a purely practice perspective, providing more individual training in communication skills, or improvements to individual reflective capabilities (individual experience), would seem less important than addressing organisational and structural practice constraints (social structures). This suggests that there may be a difference in the way that research results are interpreted in academic and practitioner contexts, with social work research tending to put more emphasis on individual experience and social work practitioners on social structures.

Social Work Practice Methodologies

This difference in perspective may be due to differences in the way that problem-solving is exercised in social work practice and research. Social work practice has three aims; the first is therapeutic to promote individual change, the second is problem solving to understand a problem within
its wider context and the third is promoting social development and social change (Adams et al., 2009). Due to this, social workers use a methodology to understand social problems that enables them to find practical solutions that reflect individual needs. This is underpinned by: an ontological model of social problems referring to both subjectivist, objectivist and social constructionist assumptions; including a model of how social problems are reproduced; and finally an epistemological reflection on the uncertainty of understanding and explaining social problems adequately (Nissen, 2015, p229). Therefore, social workers use a complex ontological and epistemological model to understand situations in practice. This model includes aspects of both qualitative and quantitative research methodologies, a recognition that social structures exist that may not be directly observed, as well as recognition that it is not possible to be certain about outcomes in individual situations.

In relation to the authors’ current research, this complexity is demonstrated through the Framework for the Assessment of Children and Need and their Families (Department of Health, 2000), which is used in England to assess how well a child is doing in care. Within this model, the child’s welfare is assessed within the context of their developmental needs, parenting capacity, and family and environmental factors (Jack, 2001). This is based on the bio-ecological approach (Bronfenbrenner and Ceci, 1994), which outlines that the development of a child needs to be both situated within the environment in which it occurs, and understood as an ongoing process. In order to understand how elements in the immediate and wider environment impact on development, the “ecological environment is conceived topologically as a nested arrangement of structures, each nested within the next” (Bronfenbrenner, 1977, p514), which directly and indirectly influence each other. In contrast, as outlined in the previous section, social work research tends to be based on ‘flat’ ontological and epistemological underpinnings that reduce reality to only what can be directly observed and known (Anastas, 2014). This then represents a methodological gap between how problems are understood in research in practice.

Critical Realism

A critical realist perspective is proposed as one way to bridge this gap between social work research and practice. Critical realism was originally developed by Bhaskar in the 1970s and is a philosophy of science which aims to outline “a theory of what (good) science is and does” (Gorski, 2013, p660). Critical realism criticises both positivism and interpretivism for being flat ontologies that only allow for investigation of the empirical domain of reality, therefore reducing what exists to what can be either observed or experienced (Danermark et al., 2002). However, by embracing both the interpretivist idea of multiple constructed realities and the positivist idea that there is a truth ‘out there’ (Braun and Clarke, 2013), critical realism offers a stratified view of reality which goes “beyond the empirical, exposing generative mechanisms and their underlying structures” (Lennox and Rozzet, 2017, p28).

Critical realism therefore aims to uncover causal mechanisms, not in the traditional positivist sense of causation which assumes a linear process, but in terms of how causal mechanisms work within a social structure, whether they have been activated and under what conditions (Sayer, 2000). In seeking out causal mechanisms the critical realist researcher is trying to provide a theoretical explanation for the social world (O’Mahoney and Vincent, 2014), which has explanatory power for why things tend to happen in certain ways (Danermark et al., 2002; Groff, 2004). These tendencies can be used to build theory to help clarify and simplify what is being observed (O’Mahoney and Vincent, 2014) but are also understood to be “fallible and open to adjustment” (Danermark et al., 2002, p15). In this way critical realism “treats the world as theory-laden, but not theory determined” (Fletcher, 2017, p182).

A critical realist researcher will typically start with a problem and, through a review of current literature on the subject, develop an initial theory which outlines potential mechanisms impacting on the empirical domain (O’Mahoney and Vincent, 2014; Fletcher, 2017). The initial theory informs the research design and allows for a deeper analysis, through which potential causal mechanisms will be reconceptualised to “support, elaborate or deny that theory to help build a new and more accurate explanation of reality” (Fletcher, 2017, p184) within a particular time and place (Bhaskar, 2014). Therefore, critical realism can help to “explain social events and suggest practical policy recommendations to address social problems” (Fletcher, 2017, p181). This seems to offer the opportunity to develop a methodology within research that is more likely to be relevant to social work practice.

Applying Critical Realism to Social Work Research

The current research project began by undertaking a thorough literature review. From this a model (Figure 1) was developed to outline the potential mechanisms that may impact on the relationship between children and social workers.

The model was developed using the bio-ecological approach (Bronfenbrenner and Ceci, 1994) and previous research applying the approach to children in care (Coman and Devaney, 2011). Within this model the child is nested at the centre inside each of the other system levels. The chronosystem considers any non-normative transitions the child has experienced, for example entering the care system and changes of placement. The microsystem represents systems that a child looked after is most likely to come into direct contact with, for example their school and children’s social care, and the mesosystem considers the connections between these systems. The exosystem considers the structures of organisations, including organisational issues and local policies, and the macrosystem the overarching patterns and culture that govern social work practice with children in care in England. The contextual and implicative influence arrows indicate how these system levels can in-
fluence each other. The different system levels in the model can also be represented through the critical realist worldview, which identifies three different levels of reality: the empirical domain, the actual domain and the real domain (Blaikie, 2007). These different levels of reality are mirrored within the ecological system and the way that each level impacts on the child in care (Figure 1).

Taking the child’s perspective, the empirical domain, which consists of events that can be observed, is represented by the microsystem and is what children directly experience. The actual domain, which consists of events whether or not they are observed, is represented by the microsystem and is what children directly experience. The actual domain, which consists of events whether or not they are observed, is represented by the exosystem and mesosystem and events that may impact on this direct experience. The real domain, which consists of structures and mechanisms that produce these events, is represented by the macrosystem, and the way that law, policy and culture impact on the other system levels. Therefore, this allows exploration of how the development of children in care is influenced by, and has influence on, different system levels. This then is underpinned by a belief that, while personal experience is subjective, wider structures represent an unseen reality that can have an impact on direct experience (Danermark et al., 2002).

The first advantage of applying a critical realist perspective in social work research is that the stratification of the social world is close to the way social workers’ problem-solve in practice (Longhofer and Floersch, 2012). This has been demonstrated by exploring how the three domains of reality within critical realism apply can be applied to the bio-ecological approach which typically underpins social work practice with children in care. Secondly, because critical realism is concerned with identifying potential causal mechanisms, it can uncover social structures that may cause oppression and therefore has the potential to emulate anti-oppressive social work practice (Lennox and Rozzet, 2017). However, some philosophical commentators have argued, when identifying causal mechanisms, the researcher may make biased value judgements leading to the research being unethical (Hammersley, 2009; Briar-Lawson, 2012). To date, much of the writing about critical realism has been engaged in complex philosophical debates using inaccessible language resulting in few examples of applied critical realism in social work research (Craig and Bigby, 2015). This has resulted in a lack of methodological development and therefore clarity about how to apply the research in practice (Oliver, 2012; Bhaskar, 2014; Craig and Bigby, 2015). Until more research is carried out in social work underpinned by a critical realist philosophy, these criticisms remain hypothetical, based within philosophical arguments about the approach, rather than proven ethical concerns based on social work research carried out using the methodology.

Conclusion

This paper does not intend to argue that critical realism is the only philosophy that can underpin social work research. In fact, critical realism as a philosophy is compatible with a wide-range of methods (Briar-Lawson, 2012), and therefore would invite a pragmatic approach to research where methodologies and methods are appropriately linked to research questions and aims (Danermark et al., 2002). However, this paper does argue that it is important to ensure that social work research is “based in theories and constructs that matter to practitioners, ones they use and find meaningful” (Anastas, 2014, p577). Because critical realism is a philosophy of research that closely mirrors the complex methodologies that social workers use to make sense of problems in practice it does appear to have potential to explain social problems and make recommendations for how to improve practice. This potential is being explored through the author’s current PhD research, in the hope that it can contribute towards closing the gap between social work research and practice.

References


Blogs

Less is more: managing ambitions in a conference

Xiaye Huang

Xiaye is a doctoral researcher at the Graduate School of Education at Exeter, with degrees in Educational Research (MSc), Educational Technology (Bed) and Business Management (BBM). Xiaye is interested in higher education, student experience and employability, with her current research focussing on Chinese domiciled international students’ perceptions of employability.

In this blog, I will demonstrate my purpose of attending a conference and how I manage the expectations for a ‘perfect’ conference experience as a doctoral researcher.

Attending conferences is one of the essential parts of academic life. Why do I attend conferences? Are they worth the time spent traveling and preparing for the presentation? My answer is yes. My supervisors also said that even though they have busy schedules, they attend at least two conferences regularly. From my experience, apart from having time for a ‘semi-vacation’ and something to add to my CV, there are more reasons why I attend conferences.

According to my experience in recent years, I attend conferences for the following reasons:

1. To create a deadline in the progress of research and overcome procrastination. Conducting research is time-consuming and needs a consistently high level of dedication and patience. In doing research, the most exciting part is the planning stage, meeting the participant and arranging the interview. Once the paper is accepted by the conference, and I agree to attend it, it means I will include it into my schedule and prepare for it. It accelerates the process of turning my current research into a paper, or at least, ready for a presentation.

2. To update my academic ideas and research area. There are many ways to keep an eye on the up-to-date research, including subscribing to content email for key journals in your research area, following the key researchers on Research Gate or other research showcases. From my point of view, attending a conference is the most efficient way to achieve all the above-mentioned objectives. The presentations in a conference are selected by the committee of the conference which are the most up-to-date, highly relevant in the panel. You can get a full story of the research in a short presentation. This saves me a lot of time in searching and reading papers and helps me to make connections between the knowledge I get in the conference and my previous knowledge. In all, this is an efficient way for me to develop my knowledge.

3. To meet the key author in this research area in person. Whenever I read textbooks or literature, I feel that the researcher who published the paper is far away. In a conference, however, it is possible to see them in person.

4. To get feedback from audiences and taking feedback from the audiences into account. Because someone listening to the presentation might be the person to review the journal submission, such as editors for the conference proceeding journal, or peer reviewers for journals in relevant research area. Secondly, experience by the audiences might have contribution to the research. Therefore, in my opinion, feedback from the audiences should be highly valued.

The first reason for managing expectations is that time given for a presentation is limited. A huge amount of information included in the project; this presentation is a deduction for the full research project. Delivering a presentation is like telling a story about the research, it is easy to miss out details in the research. When I was preparing for my presentation, I found that it might be too ambitious of me to cover all the elements of my research in 10 to 20 minutes.

The second reason for managing ambitions is to respect the progressive achievements of the PhD project. I presented a part of my research at the SWDTP conference. Normally, the presentation follows the structure of an academic paper, including introduction, method, findings, discussion and conclusion. I knew my research was not completed, and therefore, I could not stick to this structure. Before presenting at the SWDTP conference, I kept thinking that I would not present anything until I found a significant and interesting finding. At SWDTP, the majority of participants and audiences are doctoral researchers, who are
planning and conducting their research and have some preliminary findings. Taking this into account, I overcame my stage fear, therefore, and I presented a part of my research, focusing on its literature review part, including its background and policy context. This, in my point of view, is significant for this stage of my research.

2. The third challenge is about how to manage emotions during the presentation question and answer session. The ‘question and answer’ session is hard to prepare beforehand. It is essential for new presenters to know how to manage the question and answer session and how to deal with the feedback from the audience. Rather than defend myself, I considered this session as an opportunity for communication and discussion about my research.

3. Looking back at my experience and seeing how the audience responded to my presentation, it has shown me that presenting at the SWDTP conference is a rewarding experience that helps me to manage my ambitions for huge achievements and impacts, then, turn it into manageable outcomes.
Critical encounters with mental health and PGR/PhD experiences

Chloe Asker

Chloe is a first year SWDTP ESRC funded PhD student in the Department of Geography at the University of Exeter. Her work uses ethnographic and participatory style methods to understand lived experiences of mindfulness and mental health.

Flicking through the ‘Research in a Changing Word: Critical Encounters’ conference programme, I was particularly delighted to see sessions and presentations that specifically dealt with the topics of emotional and mental health. Seeing an event that addresses ‘taking care of your own emotional health on a PhD’, and explores supervisor-student ‘communication breakdown’ and its effects on mental wellbeing, imbued me with a sense of hope. This hope came in two senses. First that scholarly dialogues that interrogate the effects of neoliberalisation on mental health are happening. And second, because we (as PGRs or PhD researchers) are starting to lead these discussions in forums such as the recent SWDTP conference.

Open conversations about emotional wellbeing are vital at all stages of life in academia, particularly in a current climate where 40% of postgraduate students report symptoms of depression and stress-related conditions (Guthrie et al., 2017, p. xvi). Stigma surrounding mental health in the academy (England, 2016) has meant that discussions have been ‘largely silenced and secret’ (Mullings et al., 2016, p. 162). This is troubling in a context where neoliberal forces are configuring ‘all aspects of [academic] existence in economic terms’ (Brown, 2015, p. 17). The neoliberalisation of the academy is increasingly producing a range of anxiety-inducing processes (such as employment precarity and unstable contracts, audit culture, and competition) that are detrimental to mental health and wellbeing (Berg et al., 2016). To illustrate this, a recent open letter from 121 academics argued that ‘originality and critical thought’ were ‘being threatened by forces of marketisation’, which is causing ‘unprecedented levels of anxiety and stress among both academic and academic-related staff and students’ (Lesnik-Oberstein et al., 2015, n.p.).

In this context of a changing academic ‘ecology’, it is important that we ignite, maintain, and reflect on these conversations surrounding mental health and wellbeing. This political act of ‘care’ or ‘caring-with’ carries the ability to contest neoliberalising forces within the academy (Askins and Blazek, 2017; Mountz et al., 2015). Sharing personal narratives, histories and lived experiences is an important way to connect with others (England, 2016). One that provides a sense of collegiality and being-together, allowing us to contest individualised logics of neoliberal academia (Askins and Blazek, 2017). As early career researchers, I believe that taking part in these practices is highly important in order to begin to shape cultures around mental health for the future.

The conference held two great examples of this. The first was Emma Ranger’s presentation on ‘Communication breakdown – when we don’t know what we don’t know’ got to the heart of feelings of imposter syndrome and anxiety that are common experiences for many PhD students, at all stages in their journey. Emma’s reflection of her personal experiences concerning her mental health and supervisor communication was inspiring – an openness that I aspire to within my own pedagogy.

Particularly resonating was the idea that grappling with ‘threshold concepts’, those ‘portals’ or ‘gateways’ that lead to new ways of understanding, interpreting or viewing something (Meyer and Land, 2005, p. 373), can cause emotional experiences that are uncomfortable and unknown. Emma reflected on her ‘critical turning point’ in her first year of her PhD. She realised that she was waiting for guidance and reassurance from her supervisors, whilst becoming concerned when her work wasn’t completed in a ‘correct’ or ‘right’ way. The ‘unknown unknowns’, those thresholds we cannot reach because ‘you don’t know what you don’t know’ and the gap between her knowledge and her supervisors, cultivated feelings of inadequacy and self-doubt that lead to detrimental effects for her wellbeing.

Second, a workshop held by Lynn Linsdale, Judy Ryde, and Samantha Stone questioned ‘How can you take care of your own emotional health when writing a PhD?’. This was a much-needed reflection of the intertwining of life experience and research choices, and how this can produce trauma or ‘vicarious trauma’ – the emotional residue of working with traumatised people. The research topics we
choose often have an important meaning for us that can bring up past memories and emotions during our work. Here, self-care and reflection is vital, it ‘is not only worthy for us as individuals, but rather, enables us to return to our work with students and colleagues with renewed energy and enthusiasm’ (O’Dwyer et al., 2018, p. 2).

The paper sessions and workshops were important for challenging the silence around mental and emotional health that exists in the academy, and opening up opportunities for discussion between early career researchers. However, something the sessions did not consider was how and where do we continue these conversations? What can we actually do to collectively resist structures that compromise our mental health? And who does and can do this work?

A pragmatic stance is vital, and whilst discussions (at conferences, in journal articles) about mental health and academic work are important, they also need to happen in our everyday spaces of scholarship. Regular and collective conversations and proactive action are needed in order to change and resist existing structures and stigma. Examples such as: group coffee and lunch breaks, Early Career Researcher (ECR) networks (these might be found in your department, if not, collaborate with others to set them up), emailing lists (e.g. https://lists.queensu.ca/cgi-bin/listserv/wa?A0=MHGEOG-L), ‘Shut Up and Write’ sessions (see SUWT UK), reading groups, and ECR-led (or academic-led) initiatives and groups (see @wellbeingwedgeo on Twitter). These forms of self-care and collectivisation are collaborative and ‘quiet’ resistances, in which everyday acts of friendship and support are political in nature (Pottinger, 2017) – as ‘prioritising care is to resist’ (O’Dwyer et al., 2018, p. 2).

Although, as Askins and Balzek (2017, p.1090) argue, we need to be careful about care. Conversations about mental health require an engagement from a range of diverse voices – including those at all stages of their career. We need reciprocal, two-way discussions and collaborations, in order not to allow a few to carry the weight and emotional burden of these conversations, or to perpetuate and essentialise traditional gender roles concerning care givers and receivers.

Notes


2Neoliberalisation and neoliberal forces refigure humans as economically rational beings, whilst also producing us as economised beings (Berg et al., 2016, p. 170; Brown, 2015). These forces have deeply affected academia. Consequences include, but are not limited to: reinforcing competition between individuals, departments, institutions and so on; transforming the academic from labourer to human capital; the marketisation of scholarship; short-term or precarious labour contracts; and accounting and monitoring systems (Berg et al., 2016, p. 171).

3There are also wellbeing services provided by many Universities and Student Unions (see Exeter’s Wellbeing Service and Advice Unit), as well as talk-based therapies available through the NHS and support through mental health charities such as Mind and Anxiety UK. However, this blog post focuses on collective responses to the ‘mental health crisis’ that hope to resist a culture of individualism and stigma.

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Communication breakdown – when we don’t know what we don’t know

Emma Ranger

I am a second year, full-time PhD student in the Exercise, Nutrition and Health Science research group within the School for Policy Studies at Bristol University. My research is a qualitative exploration of interactions between individual motivation and the urban environment in enabling adults to adopt active travel, such as walking or cycling. The aim is to influence and refine policies related to urban design and active travel.

“Communication breakdown
It’s always the same
I’m having a nervous breakdown
Drive me insane!”

( Led Zeppelin, 1969)

In undertaking a PhD, I am finding it involves as much learning about myself as my chosen subject, and this is having a seismic effect on me as a person. In the light of current debates about student mental health issues, I began to see my issues as emotional thresholds which I was crossing as I travel along the PhD path. I was inspired to contribute to the “Critical Encounters” path of the SWDTP conference, having just gone through my own critical encounter during a recent supervision meeting. My supervisors and I had a sudden realisation of the source of a communication breakdown which had been holding us up for weeks, namely that there was something that we all didn’t know we didn’t know. The result was a dramatic (but positive!) change in the dynamic of my relationship with my supervisors.

I decided to examine this event qualitatively and try to find ways to articulate what I had generated, in theoretical terms. The presentation I delivered was an informal telling of this personal encounter, which I thought would resonate with other PhD students who might be having similar issues. Does the following sound familiar?

You’ve been disappearing down a black hole, feeling like you’re never going to get anywhere. You doubt yourself at every turn – you’re terrified, you might not be doing your PhD ‘right’. If only your supervisors would give you more information, then you’d know what to do – right?

A friend asks you ‘why you don’t just tell them what you are going to do rather than asking?’ You look at her like she was mad – You can’t possibly do that, you don’t know anything! You don’t have enough experience to challenge these experts! It’s not your place to do that! Having ideas? The very idea! But isn’t that what you are supposed to do…?

It is a key moment when you realise that you are constantly waiting for guidance as you had not thought yourself far enough advanced to be ‘allowed’ to have your own ideas. Your supervisors, however, assume that you are an intelligent person, it would be obvious to you that that is exactly what you are expected to do.

When I felt like this, I wanted to know what I was missing and why this was happening. Due to some aspects of my life-course, I didn’t yet understand that I was capable of, and entitled to, my own ideas. In a nutshell, I grew up being told I was stupid, would never amount to anything, and that having my own opinion was arrogant and disrespectful of my elders.

I took an auto-ethnographic stance in framing this situation for presentation at the SWDTP Student conference. Auto-ethnography, or, writing about yourself in relation to your culture, is a qualitative process examining your own personal experiences, in order to illustrate your experiences in relation to, and in the context of, a particular culture (Ellis, 2011). The impetus often involves a critical point or sudden realisation and thus wanting to make sense of a situation or context (Aziato, 2015; Hamood, 2016). In my case, I realised, that although I am a knowledgeable and intelligent person, this was not enough. You have to learn to have the courage to speak up for yourself and risk being wrong, because this is what PhD research is all about. It is not about waiting around for someone to tell you what to do. After half a century of being alive I can testify that this is a tough thing to do when you are not used to it!

According to the threshold concepts model the kind of learning process I’m describing here is a ‘threshold concept’. A “...transformed way of understanding... without
which the learner cannot progress..." (Meyer & Land, 2006, p3). In learning, we cross thresholds into new knowledge which supersedes what we knew before. Additionally, once we cross into a new realisation, we cannot go back and unknow the new knowledge. In some contexts, crossing into new knowledge can be emotionally challenging (Booth, 2006). Learning that accounts of history are not a single truth but versions from different perspectives or, as a child, that it is possible to calculate the weight of Venus, might be disturbing as they challenge our world view.

I then wondered if there might be some way to identify these so-called ‘unknown unknowns’. Things that you don’t know you don’t know and therefore cannot ask questions about. Luft and Ingham (1955) developed a concept they called the Johari Window, based on four areas of knowledge (or not) about the self (Figure 1). The ‘window’ is a square divided into four areas of differing levels of self-awareness, for example, information you don’t know about yourself, but others do. Using this model, it is possible to generate knowledge of the ‘Unknown Self’ by describing yourself and comparing this to a description of you by those who know you*. Personally, I am constantly surprised by what I discover about myself during my PhD journey.

Speaking out can feel terrifying, especially in front of established figures in your field, but feeling fear is human and the more you do it the easier it gets. In confronting my fear of speaking my mind I uncovered more than I wanted to know about myself. It was very uncomfortable, but also liberating, because knowing what the problem is means you can look for solutions. I was once told that completing a PhD is as much about being brave, thick-skinned and determined, as being clever or having a certain kind of education, and the more I learn to be like this the better things get. If I had not had the critical encounter which I talk about here, I would never have had the nerve to deliver a presentation about my personal mental health issues to my peers at the SWDTP conference.

![Figure 1. The Johari Window (Successful Culture, 2016)](https://successfulculture.com/build-more-self-awareness-stronger-culture-using-johari-window/)

If you recognise you are struggling with your PhD then do seek help, either from your institution or the health ser-

References


Taking the podium

Asha Ladwa

Asha is a second year ESRC-funded PhD student in Psychology at the University of Exeter investigating how therapies for depression work.

I knew that a PhD would involve numerous responsibilities: teaching, keeping up to date with research, and getting a grip with advanced statistics. I also knew that at some point I would need to muster up the courage to present my work to an audience. This is something that I’ve previously wanted avoided, as I’ve always hated public speaking and experience an intense anxiety at even the prospect of getting up in front of a crowd. I had managed to convince myself that being only 8 months into my PhD I could delay this inevitability for at least another 6 months. I had started my PhD at an unconventional time (March not September) so when my friends were jetting around the world to attend and present at conferences, it seemed far too early to for me to even consider submitting an abstract to a conference. So when the SWDTP conference call for abstracts came around I batted away the idea of presenting. I had barely started my first study - what would I even talk about? But my friend and peers rallied around me and encouraged me to go for it. I was reassured that it was a friendly and supportive atmosphere, so it was a great way to get some presentation practice.

My previous experiences of public speaking often resulted in mind blanks and a wobbly voice as soon as I took to the podium. I knew that to avoid a repeat of this, I would need to prepare. I had heard the cliché ‘fail to prepare, prepare to fail’, but I felt for this conference it really rang true. This was especially so as this was the first conference I had attended. I decided to concentrate on the PhD landscape theme for my talk and present about why my research is important, what I have been doing so far, and the future studies I hope to conduct.

A PhD is often considered a solitary process, but there are moments when your peers become an integral part of your success and achievement. I gathered a group of friends to be my presentation audience. With their help I tweaked my presentation slides, slowed down my speaking, and cut the frantic hand-waving I unknowingly did. Even with lots of preparation I was still going into the unknown. How many people would be at my talk? What would happen if I froze? What kinds of questions would be asked?

On the morning of the presentation I was nervous to say the least. On the train ride from Exeter to Bath I was rehearsing my presentation in my head and looking at my notes so much so that my friend threatened to chuck them out of the train window. Arriving at the conference I was surprised by a feeling of excitement. After listening to the introduction and first keynote speaker, it was my turn. PowerPoint uploaded, I was standing in front of unfamiliar faces and with a brief clearing of my throat I started my presentation. I was amazed to find that I didn’t stumble over my words and instead slipped into the rhythm of the presentation. Ten minutes flew by and I was relieved that many from the audience met me with questions - ones that were thought provoking and I could answer. Even when the questions had closed a number of people came up to me to express their interest in my research. My talk and the conference as a whole felt like a success.

Looking back, I am glad to have presented and pushed myself to do something I was uncomfortable with. Now that my upgrade presentation is coming up, I feel more prepared to stand in front of my peers and examiners. Although I am still nervous about presenting, I’m buoyed by my experience at the SWDTP conference and feel eager to once again share my work with others. Perhaps at the next conference, I’ll get to hear about some of your research too!

See you there!
A flock of academic sheep?

Beatriz Gallo Cordoba

Beatriz is a third year Advanced Quantitative Methods PhD student at University of Bristol. Her research is about ethnic and social inequalities in the Colombian education system.

This blog is the consequence of multiple conversations about careers in academia, and of two of them in particular. The first one was with my mom, trying to explain to her what— in my very personal perspective— I would have to do if I wanted to pursue a career in academia; the second one was with my friends, who are also PhD students and have their personal perspectives of what is needed to be ‘academia worthy’. These conversations lead me to question why the pressure for publishing has become a salient characteristic in academia. This is a debate I would like to encourage at every level within academia.

In the conversation with my mom, I was explaining what, in my view, is the progression pathway of a career in academia. I told her that one conventionally starts with a post-doc, where one builds an attractive portfolio of publications and teaching experience. Then one hopefully gets a job as a lecturer, and one is put in a sort of ‘test drive’ where is supposed to publish a lot (a.k.a to be productive) for around five years. After that, one kind of secures a position in a university and then it is almost like one can catch one’s breath, but one is also expected to contribute to academia in many other ways, like being an editor, a peer reviewer, organising conferences but still, of course, publishing. No wonder my mom identified publishing as a milestone of a career in academia, and then she asked me how people get their articles published.

Then I explained that once one has written an article, it is usually sent to a peer-reviewed journal—maybe paying a fee. Once there, usually unpaid peer-reviewers and editors provide feedback about the article and, after making the appropriate changes, it is published. Then other people can see it—usually for a fee unless the authors have paid for ‘open-access’— and cite it in their articles, which will go through the same process. My mom just looked at me, astonished, and asked: if journals do not pay editors or peer reviewers, then who gets to keep the fees people have to pay? I answered: I guess the editorials; I suppose that is why editorials are among the companies with the highest profit margins. At that moment we both questioned our lives’ decisions, wondering why we did not choose to create our own editorial. She did not say anything, but I could see on her face she was questioning why someone would wish to contribute to this cycle over and over again.

The conversation with my friends was slightly different. It was more about how the PhD has equipped us to pursue a career in academia. Here, the word ‘competitiveness’ and comparisons between the US and UK soon appeared. One of my friends maintained that PhD alumni in the UK are known to be less ‘competitive’ than their peers in the US because students in the later are ‘encouraged’ to publish all the way through their PhD, while UK students are usually inhibited to do so. I argued that this is the case because the idea of what academia is about is different on both sides of the Atlantic, although I recognise the tendency is leaning towards the US-model. In my view, the US model prioritises quantity and almost neglects quality, treating academics virtually like printing machines; while the UK model cares so much about quality that almost forgets about the quantity; one cannot publish until one is ‘ready’, often after one is done with the PhD. That is why—in my perception— in the US it does not matter if one has not slept or eaten well in weeks, as long as something has been published. In turn, in the UK (at least in my university) there are constant reminders of the importance of having a life beyond the academia. I have to recognise, however, that in the UK the pressure for publishing is still in the air, at least if one is aiming for a career in academia.

In my perception, the pressure for publishing has been increasing in the UK, as the number of publications is more often used as a selection criterion for grants and academic positions. It is quite apparent when browsing job advertisements for post-doc positions that having a portfolio of papers is critical for getting the jobs. This pressure in the labour market does not match the incentives and advice from schools and senior academics in UK universities, who encourage book-like (as opposed to set-of-papers-like)
thesis and waiting until the end of the PhD to publish.

Hence my friend is right, is not she? If one is spending three to four years in a PhD, one better gets a job after completing it? Unemployment is not an attractive prospect for anyone. But then, why is this the case? Why is one’s value as an academic strictly linked to one’s number of publications? Yes, sure, dissemination is an important task, but the process of understanding concepts and generating ideas is not a manufacturing one. It takes time, it happens at any moment -not strictly 9 to 5- and it is a different experience for every person. This is not an industrial process that can be just standardised and expected to produce a sound output every month or so. But then, why is this the expectation? Why did I so naturally explained to my mom that this is how you build a career in academia?

When did academia become publication-centred whereas there is so much more about the research process? Why, if academics are the ones reviewing and editing, does the dissemination process have to go through big editorial companies that know little about research and apparently too much about making a profit? Why are we accepting this pressure to publish through them as natural? Are we, the ones working in academia, critical thinkers or just sheep following a hungry wolf?
Can research have impact, in a climate of anti-expertise?

Helen Foster-Collins

As an ESRC-funded PhD student at the Graduate School of Education, University of Exeter, Helen is part of the Centre for Research in Professional Learning (CRPL), and her current research looks at how first-year trainee doctors and newly-qualified teachers learn and obtain support from others in the workplace.

The world is changing...

With the rise of populism and anti-elitism, alongside a mistrust of ‘experts’, what does it mean to undertake a PhD and do research in 2017?

This was the tag-line for the SWDTP Conference 2017, and it got me thinking about whether academic research, including that produced during my own PhD, can have an impact on the real world, in what has been cited in the media as a growing climate of anti-expertise, where even politicians have been claiming that we’ve ‘had enough of experts’.

In an ideal world, one might imagine that researchers produce robust evidence, which governmental policy-makers and institutions can then draw upon, to create evidence-based practice. Certainly, this seems to be the intended aim in some areas of working life, such as medicine, where the BMJ (previously known as the British Medical Journal) draws up specific guidelines for best practice, based on the latest scientific medical research, even if this is not always consistently implemented by doctors. However, it has been argued that when it comes to governmental policy-making, there is often a process of selecting and creating ‘policy-based evidence’ instead, where items of research are sometimes chosen from obscure or poor-quality sources, or even conducted specifically by those departments themselves, for the purposes of shoring up decisions which have already been taken, based on ideological, personal, or political grounds.

However, recently, there has been a move towards challenging UK policy-makers on how they go about choosing research evidence, and to examine the quality of that research. ‘Sense about Science’ is a small organisation which aims to uncover the path of reasoning that policy decisions are made on, and assessing the transparency of this process, producing its report ‘Transparency of evidence: a spot check of government policy proposals, July 2016 to July 2017’. Although one wonders how many people might read such reports, due to a lack of awareness, interest or time, thus leaving us open to being swayed by sound-bites and enticing promises, it does seem to be a step in the right direction - if we want research to have an impact upon the real world. Also, information can move more freely now, with the internet as its conduit, allowing us to see the facts behind the decisions - so long as we choose to go looking for them.

But what about in the USA? Arguably, attitudes towards expert knowledge are currently much worse over on the other side of the pond, with active steps being taken by the current government to erase the results of research from public view – such as purging climate change information and official reports from government websites. However, backlashes against this type of censorship are happening there too, with groups such as ‘March for Science’, a world-wide organisation campaigning against political interference into scientific research and dissemination, or the hackers who worked through the night to try and ‘rescue’ climate change data from governmental websites before it disappeared, possibly forever. So, although it may seem as though a majority have lost trust in the experts, clearly individuals and groups still exist who wish to promote robust science and research-led policy decisions.

It is often stated at points in history that ‘things are getting worse’. However, seen over a greater time span, it can be seen that social change often moves in cycles. All attempts to suppress knowledge have inevitably failed in the end... though not perhaps without some suffering during the meantime.

In addition, past perceptions that academics only talk to each other appear to be receding, with the importance of ‘impact’ now being written into research proposals as standard, and the dissemination of results to stakeholders and the wider public viewed as an essential part of the research process. This was not the case when I attended university the first time around, many years ago, when it was often felt that academics resided in ‘ivory towers’, and rarely communicated their research to wider audiences. These days, there are even spin-off books, written in accessible style, trying to communicate research findings to the public, such as Daniel Kahneman’s book on the topic of rational and intuitive thinking, or Carol Dweck’s research upon growth mindsets, to cite two amongst many examples of such writing. This suggests that there is an appetite for the results of research amongst the public.
For my own PhD research, looking at the workplace support of foundation year doctors and newly-qualified secondary school teachers, it was a key part of my research proposal that the results of my research should \textit{not} reside solely within the pages of a research journal, to be read by other academics, but should also be communicated more widely, with those who educate teachers and doctors, and to the professionals themselves, through a variety of mediums and direct communication. We also intend to invite some of the teacher participants to meet with junior doctors at a cross-professional event at the University of Exeter, to spark discussions about the differing natures of their workplace environments and working experiences, as well as perhaps uncovering some surprising similarities.

In this way, it hoped that even in this ‘changing world’, it is possible that the results of research \textit{can} and \textit{will} make an impact upon the real world, as so many of us researchers hope and intend.

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Becoming a digital scholar

Dr Albert Sanchez-Graells

Dr Albert Sanchez-Graells is a Reader in Economic Law at the University of Bristol Law School, specialising in EU public procurement and competition law. Albert teaches law and economics. Most of his research papers are available at his SSRN author page and he comments on legal developments his blog.

The increasing digitisation of the world we live in is producing pervasive changes on the object of social science scholarship (both teaching and research) and on the ways in which scholarship across all fields is conducted, published and disseminated (for detailed analysis, see Daniels & Thistlethwaite, 2016). It is thus no wonder that PhD and early career researchers have developed a keen interest in understanding what this all means and in developing effective strategies to become ‘digital scholars’. This is not to say that scholars that have been in the game a bit longer have all gone digital, and ‘technology-averse’ or ‘technology-averting’ scholars are still very much present. However, as with many other entry requirements to the academic profession, it now seems that access to an academic job is almost conditional on establishing (or having established) a digital presence.

Against this background, I think it was a good call for the organisers of the SWDTP Student Conference to include a session on this topic as part of the programme dedicated to reflecting on ’Research in a Changing World: Critical Encounters’. I am not so sure they chose the best facilitator for the session, but it was my great pleasure to exchange views and experiences with a great group of PhDs and ECRs. The following is a summary of the most salient points I took home from the discussion, which may or may not provide some useful guidance to scholars approaching their ‘digital transformation’.

1. There are different levels of engagement for ‘digital scholars’, and everyone can find an intensity with which they find themselves comfortable

Almost everyone employed by a higher education institution, research centre, public sector or private services provider will have some ‘involuntary’ online presence—if nothing else, due to the creation of a (possibly pictureless) personal profile page in their institutional website. Beyond that, developing a digital presence can mean different things to different people. Some will be comfortable with having their papers available in open access repositories (be they institutional, or general like SSRN), other people will take the additional step of blogging (again, either in institutional or specialised blogs, or in their own—which can be easily created with blogger, wordpress or my favourite squarespace), and the most enthusiastic will create profiles in social networks—either professional (academia, linkedin) or mixed (facebook, snapchat)—and/or engage with twitter (as well as some of the more techy-oriented add-ons, such as tweetdeck or hashtagify). I am not sure whether this would count as supporting one’s digital presence or goes beyond that, but there also are increasing possibilities to share presentations (slideshare, prezzi) and videos (youtube) in digital platforms, which are used in different ways by academics and academic institutions.

It is important to decide ‘how far to go digital’ depending on one’s personal circumstances, but also bearing in mind that for a digital presence to be effective and convey the right messages (of being active and engaged, of having interwoven digital interactions as part of general academic activities), it will be necessary to keep a certain level of update or activity. While posting new papers on SSRN can hardly require any specific timing for updates and contributing guest posts to institutional or other blogs can also be done sporadically, running your own blog will require something between 3 and 10 posts a month, and having a ‘satisfied’ following on twitter will probably require some daily activity.

Therefore, it is important to consider how much time and energy it is possible to spend in these activities and how they fit around daily/weekly routines. Conversely, though, it also seems to me important to have very good reasons not to engage in non-recurring activities such as facilitating open access to scholarly publications and writing up more accessible blogs—as these can generate clear advantages (see below) and do not create an on-going commitment with the ‘digital world’. Thus, I would wholeheartedly invite everyone reading this to try to create a blog post on the basis of their most recently completed piece of research (Prof Dunleavy offers great tips on how to do so). The exercise will not be in vain, as it will help you reflect on your writing and, once you have your blog post, you will be one step closer to creating or boosting your digital presence (eg, by sending the blog post to a suitable platform in your field of expertise).
2. There can be great gains from nurturing a visible digital presence, but they may come late and most of them are rather serendipitous

Other than for those that genuinely enjoy those interactions, or those that use digital tools as part of their research method, the main advantage of engaging with the ‘digital world’ is probably not for the academic, at least in the short term, but rather for society at large. A big part of the content and effort that is put into developing the digital presence (eg blogs, active twitter interactions, etc) will primarily be for the benefit of the audience to which it is addressed—and, ultimately, for anyone engaging with those insights, with the knowledge, as a public good.

Scholars will only benefit from making the content accessible to such broader audience—which would otherwise largely ignore academic research behind pay walls or solely disseminated in academic circles—to the extent that there is an engagement with the research and, in particular, if that research is adopted or followed by relevant stakeholders and policy-makers. Therefore, the main role that digital scholarship can have is that of supporting the core academic endeavour of pursuing and exchanging knowledge both for its own sake and for the bettering of society.

From a more utilitarian perspective, in my view, there are two additional important points to bear in mind here. One, that while one has control over his or her own digital strategy, the availability of content and one side of the engagement efforts, there is always an uncontrollable element in that ‘shouting at the internet’ does not mean that anyone is necessarily listening. This should not detract from the value of putting ourselves and our research ‘out there’ because we never know when someone might start listening. Second, it is worth stressing that impact (in particular in REF terms) can hardly be fabricated, but it can be facilitated. And, in an environment where most people (including professional researchers, journalists and policy-makers) are getting their information online (Google knows it all), having a digital presence can make a big difference in terms of being noticed and benefitting from important opportunities.

In my own personal experience, it has taken a long time of sustained effort in building a digital presence until it has generated some tangible benefits—but these have been rather substantial. I started blogging in 2011 in Spanish and then switched to English in 2012 when I joined UK academia. It took the best part of three years of blogging regularly to get my personal blog positioned as the blog of reference in my core area of expertise (EU public procurement law). But once the blog’s presence and reputation (and mine, indirectly) were established, a few high-profile opportunities emerged, such as the possibility of acting as an expert for the European Court of Auditors (2014), the European Commission (2015), being invited to submit evidence to the House of Lords (2016) and to engage with the Department for International Trade (2018). I am thanked regularly by practitioners for the update and insight provided by the blog, and I have also been contacted by journalists who had identified me as an expert in the areas they were intending to report about (sometimes rightly, sometimes not). Of course, this is not solely the result of my blogging and tweeting activities, but had my ‘deeper’ research or my ‘standard’ expertise not been disseminated through the blog, twitter and SSRN, they probably would have gone largely unnoticed. I think my experience may serve as an indication that there is value in being digitally present, even if it is not clear whether anyone is watching or listening, and even if the advantages are not immediate (or even observable). Thus, the investment of time and energy in blogging, tweeting or otherwise being active in social networks needs to be seen as cumulative and for the long term.

Of course, it must be acknowledged that more digital exposure also means more space for criticism or even trolling, in particular if one engages with controversial topics and/or holds controversial views (such as the one I held concerning Brexit or the Catalan independence challenge). While constructive criticism should always be welcome (and digital exchanges are great at facilitating timely feedback), trolling or even online abuse can be quite annoying. That said, unless one becomes an ‘academic celebrity’, it is also fairly unlikely that dealing with the less pleasing side of twitter or other interactions cannot be restrained by simply ignoring or blocking a few trolls—who also tend to lose interest rather quickly.

3. What and how much to show?

A final point bearing some consideration before embarking in the construction or reconstruction of one’s digital presence is to consider how to balance academic (or professional) and personal aspects. Some people will not make a hard distinction between personal and academic personas (I do not, although I have a separate twitter handle for my blog and for myself), while others will prefer to keep their digital presence purely academic. This is certainly a matter of personal choice and I can see advantages and disadvantages in both approaches.

On the one hand, it may be that the audience one is trying to address is rather formal or even institutional, so that content or interaction based on personal experiences, hobbies or non-expert opinions is not necessary, welcome or even frowned upon. On the other hand, however, and within limits, it seems interesting to know more about the researcher/academic and his or her world view. Moreover, some distinctions can be somewhat artificial. While I would have no problem in refraining from tweeting about jazz music or bread-making if I wanted to keep my twitter account ‘academic’, I would not be sure where to draw the line when I engage with current events, exchange political views, or discuss issues outside my core area of expertise.

I think that there will not be a right or wrong approach (although it is always good to consider whether we would
be happy to share personal details and information with perfect strangers in a face-to-face interaction, which can help deflate a certain ‘online hype of anonymity’), but it is worth considering this issue at the outset and to keep a consistent approach which one feels comfortable.

Wrapping up

On the whole, I think there is plenty that researchers and academics can happily embrace in the process of becoming digital scholars or building up a digital presence. I think that everyone should be pushing open-access agendas as far as possible and blogging about their research, with no exception. Other steps, which require more energy and time, will appeal to different people at different levels of intensity. The only advice I would venture is to consider those demands in advance and, if in doubt, to step into the digital world incrementally. I think that doing so and disseminating research to the widest possible audiences has value in and of itself. I also think that it can generate significant benefits for researchers and academics in the long run, which should influence the level of investment in time and energy and provide some comfort when the effort may seem to be lost. Finally, like in everything else, we need to decide what persona to project in the digital sphere, and the one certainty is that there is no one size fits all.
Meet the researcher

Dr Frederick Harry Pitts is a Lecturer in Management at the University of Bristol, where he also leads the Faculty Research Group for Perspectives on Work. He holds a PhD in Global Political Economy from the University of Bath. He is the author of Critiquing Capitalism Today: New Ways to Read Marx (Palgrave, 2017), and, with Matt Bolton, Corbynism: A Critical Approach (Emerald, forthcoming).

Q. What inspired you to go into research?

Well, where to start the story... It happened through various circumstances. I was always struck by the absurdity of a lot of things as a kid, so when I was sitting on the bus and watching everybody going to and from work as I was going to and from school, I always used to think that if you were looking down from space and saw this you would think that it’s strange that the day is constructed this way. So, I guess I was always interested in the same topics that I’m interested in now: work and working times.

I was the first in my family to go to university and I didn’t know anyone who had been to university when I was younger, so I didn’t really have a sense of what being an academic was. The nearest thing I had to hand was Sam Neill’s character in Jurassic Park. After that I wanted to be an archaeologist. I was also a big fan of another archaeologist- my maternal grandfather, Ralph, was a stunt driver in Raiders of the Lost Ark and so I guess Indiana Jones was another academic who loomed large for me. Later on, I got into reading and I read some Marx quite early- the Communist Manifesto, when I was 14 or something, and I was into the more cerebral, intellectual side of punk music, so I guess the dye was cast a bit by then.

During my A-levels I didn’t pay much attention to my studies. I went to university in the village I grew up in, at what was then Falmouth College of Arts. My UCAS got rejected from every other university I applied to, so I stayed where I was and did a media studies degree. After my first year, I dropped out of university to try and become a rock and roll star, but the band thing didn’t quite work out how we imagined it would – we weren’t Oasis or the Rolling Stones overnight. So, I went back to university again, and I didn’t really want to be there. But my second semester back, I read a book, Witness Against the Beast by E.P. Thompson, a Marxist analysis of the works of William Blake and their relationship with religious nonconformism - and that just changed everything.

After that, my attitude completely changed, I spent all my spare time reading, completely voracious, and I didn’t miss a single seminar or lecture ever again. One thing I found was that there is always one Marxist in a department who will take you under their wing and who will guide you. My undergraduate dissertation supervisor, Meredith Miller, really motivated me to go further and read and understand Marx. So, when my degree finished I applied to do the only Masters course I could do on the local campus, in political theory. I did that part-time while working in call centre employment, admin work, working a bit in adult education. I had no expectations of anything beyond that.

The first module centred on a close reading of Hardt and Negri’s Empire, and that again totally changed my life. I received from it a completely different way of understanding my own position as someone who was working in call centres and admin jobs, a very different line of work from the skilled working-class background of my family. Hardt and Negri gave me the tools to understand that, and I’ve been researching the same topics drawn from that book - immaterial labour, the changing of world of work, the future of capitalism, revisionist readings of Marx- ever since. It is to this day the best module I’ve ever taken. At the end of my Masters, my then disser-
tation supervisor, Tim Cooper, suggested ‘Why don’t you do a PhD?’ I really hadn’t thought of it. In the end I applied to quite a few places and, successful in getting funding at only one, ended up moving away from Cornwall to study at Bath. So that’s how I got into research, and now, well, I’m here...

Q. Who inspires you, in the research field and beyond?

My paternal grandfather, Fred. He read a lot—encyclopaedias and Reader’s Digest books of facts, things like that, but he wasn’t educated in any substantial way. That passion for reading and the search for knowledge he had, I have always found quite inspiring. I think of him a lot as he died the week I started at Bath, so his passing is bound up with the start of my research career. As regards the political commitment of my research, my maternal grandmother, Sheila, worked in big houses and out on the land, and the story she tells of her own act of resistance against the condescension of rural class relations has always influenced the way I see the world.

Q. What are the best, and worst, aspects of working in the research field?

The best thing is that it’s the activity which I feel realises and self-actualises what I want to do as person. I also happen to be paid for that.

On the flip side, there is the tendency to self-exploit and work every minute of the day, on the assumption that you would be doing it anyway - but when things are determined as ‘wage-labour’ that activity does change to a certain extent, so you aren’t only doing it for yourself, but also someone else. Then, there are the forms of measurement and the incentivisation of certain kinds of research that can sometimes make you feel conflicted about trying to do what you want with your time.

But still, I could not think of a job I would rather do than this because it allows me to do what I would be doing anyway but on the happenstance that I am paid for it, which is great. However, with the context of higher education, and the valuation of research outputs as this fetishized object resulting from thought and thinking, I find that can pose difficulties for some of the types of research that I do which are more critical or theoretical, which it can be harder to find outlets for that are valued in the same way as more empirical outputs.

Q. Some of the themes in our conference issue include communication and mental health. How important do you think good relationships with the people you work with are to maintaining good mental health and wellbeing, given the many challenges that modern academics face?

Well, we have just gone through this period of industrial action and I think that this has acted as a release valve on a lot of pressure which has built up for academics who otherwise would have burnt out. Although those weeks of strike action meant that academics had to catch up on their workload in fewer and fewer days of work each week, it also set boundaries on what could be done - and academics were also encouraged to only work their contracted hours. I noticed that this not only brought the people around me closer together and we felt more support from one another, through the experience of taking action together and being on picket lines, but that it also set new expectations and standards about what people would and wouldn’t do.

This seems to have been quite transformative, although I don’t know how long it will last. In terms of stress, those pressures are still there, but there is the possibility now that people have realised their strength to withstand them in ways that might combat this. The strike was an intervention in the ticking time bomb of mental health in academia, and people have realised their own individual strength to say no.

Q. Your research looks at the future of work, encompassing topics such as basic income, automation, precarity, and so on. What do you imagine the daily life of humans will look like in the future?

A great deal of current thinking on this is presupposed on the idea that robots are going to replace humans, but I don’t think that’s going to happen. I think, if anything, the tendencies towards new tech-
nologies in the workplace will augment human labour to make it potentially an even more alienating, abstract form of drudgery. Combined with creeping fascism, and nationalism, and populism, maybe things don’t look so pretty.

Everyone is treating this as if there are utopian tendencies in all this technological change, and with policy suggestions like the basic income which require quite a strong and assertive state – but, if that coincides with those political conditions, I don’t think that what we’re facing is utopia but rather something much more dystopian. So, how I see things in the future: I’m not hopeful for the possibility of change but I do think the possibility of new forms of governing our relationship with work, new ways of structuring that through things like cooperatives, offer some potential for change. But, I think that some of what we recognise as problems with capitalism maybe are more intractable and permanent than just a critique of capitalism would allow. So although the work I do is critical of capitalism, I recognise that the future that we are able to foresee developing now could involve something worse than that rather than something better.

Q. Interviewer: So, it’s not so much the technology itself as the social systems that surround that, is that what you’re saying?

The technology doesn’t come out of a vacuum – very few people would say that technology is just an autonomous force itself. However, whilst people are talking about technology accomplishing these changes in the workplace, they are also forgetting about their own power to sculpt how that pans out. Unless you face up to the social and political conditions out of which this stuff is coming, that kind of economic determinism that things are just going to change of their own accord is dangerously complacent. Everyone is fixated on the future and we spend too much time talking about the future right now. I prefer to talk about futures, in a sense that there are multiple, plural futures available to us which we can choose between and interact with and shape.

All this time spent thinking about the future, people aren’t really facing the contradictions and their consequences that look more like the past than the present. Everyone loves to think that they are living in a golden age where the future’s just knocking on their doorstep and we’re in a great wave of innovations. But I think analytically that doesn’t capture the continuities. It emphasises change too much. So, I don’t actually think things are going to be drastically different – at least not for the better but potentially for the worst. Right now, part of the imperative to some extent is to defend the way things are. The changes that are underway may make us wish that we’d done more to protect the liberal democratic capitalism than we had, and I say that as a Marxist: there’s something worse.

Q. How relevant do you think Marxist theory is in a post-Brexit Britain?

Well, we aren’t in a post-Brexit Britain yet...The problem with Marxist theory is Marxists. A lot of Marxists are fundamentally wrong about how they see the world. I’m uncomfortable about calling myself a Marxist- I know I just did- but Marx himself said to his son-in-law Paul Lafargue ‘one thing’s for sure, I’m not a Marxist’. Marx is a big open book, a lot of his work was unpublished in his lifetime, it was cobbled together from bits and pieces he’d left lying around. So, what we know as Marxism is open to revision and interpretation and deconstruction and reconstruction, and there are better and worse applications of that.

So how I think about Marx, many Marxists would reject as fundamentally un-Marxist. The less dogmatic it can be, and the less fixated on struggles of the past, specifically escaping the inheritances of Bolshevism and Leninism and Trotskyism as far as possible - throw away that baggage and it can make itself relevant. A lot of the UK left still see things through the prism of what Lenin wrote in the early 20th century & it even finds itself defending Brexit, as a type of left-wing Brexit or ‘Lexit’- as if Brexit is going to some how offer the possibility for a state-managed economy and nationalisation of the railways and that type of thing. That’s playing out in elements of the Corbyn project- something I chart, with Matt Bolton, in a forthcoming book, Corbynism: A Critical Approach.

I hope we don’t yet live in a post-Brexit Britain. I hope that Brexit doesn’t happen. I don’t think Marx would recognise this legacy he’s left behind of people advocating a completely reactionary and nationalist policy of retrenchment into the nation state. So, to
stand the question on its head, Marxist theory can make itself completely irrelevant in a post-Brexit Britain, through facilitating the existence of post-Brexit Britain by thinking there is some good in it... which there isn’t.

Q. We heard that you were involved in setting up the TOR journal at the beginning, as one of the founding editors. What motivated you to set that up, and also do you have any general tips for students about how to be successful in getting published?

The TOR Journal was set up at the instigation of a fine academic named Ben Bowman, another PhD student at the time on the politics pathway. We both started at the same time, as part of the first South West Doctoral Training Centre cohort. The pressures on PhD students to publish have increased now but back then it was a place for people to get used to the publishing and peer-review process in a welcoming way. My responsibility was setting up different sections, where people could submit articles which weren’t normal journal articles but shorter, comment-type pieces which applied their research expertise.

I published a lot during my PhD, because I’d already done a lot of writing on my topic during my MA and MRes, which meant I could put a lot of my research out there as journal articles while I was doing my PhD. Whenever I finished writing something for my PhD, I tended to package it up and submit it somewhere, but not necessarily to well-known journals - it was more of a quantity rather than quality approach in that sense, I chose places that were open access and that got my work out there.

I enjoy writing, and write a lot, and was consistent in what I was writing about from an early stage, so when I got to my PhD I had research that I could get out there. But - and this might be different for different people - I don’t think publishing a lot in the long run did me a lot of favours when I was trying to get a job after my PhD. It was later on when I published in some slightly better journals that verified this, as I don’t think many people looked back at what I’d published before. So, if I was going to offer some advice it might be to focus on getting one or two really good high-quality papers out of your PhD, or do something that shows the potential to publish in high quality journals- work your way up but be selective about what you are aiming for.

As I was finishing my PhD, I got a book contract for the theoretical part of my research- now published as Critiquing Capitalism Today: New Ways to Read Marx, and I had this in mind whilst I was completing the final leg of my PhD. I found an appropriate book series and submitted a proposal to that- following advice given to me by one of my supervisors. This was really good as at the end of a PhD you have such a big piece of work. Some people’s PhD’s will lend themselves better to being partitioned into papers than others, and some people will have a more theoretical contribution, which is maybe more difficult to partition. The book route offers another alternative route for the output of work and people shouldn’t neglect that as an idea, even though books are probably undervalued in comparison to a paper - a PhD is a book in itself after all.