

Social research at a time of fast feedback and rapid change

The case for ‘slow science’

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Abstract

This contribution offers a reflection on the shift in social science towards participative enquiry and collaborative research practices. In doing so, the paper challenges the common conception that the methodological indeterminacy that participatory research may occasion undermines its scientific credentials by rendering its processes and outcomes vulnerable to idiosyncratic events, subjective interpretations, local variability and chancy outcomes. The focus of the article is not just that participatory processes require research flexibility to enhance the pragmatic outcomes of research, but that the researcher’s theory and methodology may need to be recalibrated from discipline-controlled givens to publicly-negotiable points of departure. This latter point expands the paper’s argument to advocate for research that has “the power to be affected” (Hardt 2007, x) by the views, feelings and experiences of those it targets, and of those affected by its processes and conclusions. Using video-reflexive ethnography to illustrate this point, the article exemplifies what it means for the *researcher(s)* to be affected by the constraints

inherent in their own research approach and disciplinary priorities (Iedema 2021).

Keywords: participative research, slow science, affect, reflexivity, video-reflexive ethnography

Introduction

This contribution offers a reflection on the shift in social science towards participative enquiry and collaborative research practices. This shift occurs at a time when there is a growing general sentiment that science and technology – collectively constituting a ‘scientific-technocratic order’ - are becoming less accessible to public involvement. This is due to this scientific-technocratic order becoming embedded in “computerized networks that provide few meaningful possibilities for citizen participation” (Fisher 1999, 295). Counter-balancing this, the last two to three decades have witnessed a corrective to this scientific-technocratic opacity, with efforts afoot to optimise public involvement in science in various ways and to various degrees (Strasser et al. 2019). Specifically, the shift towards participative enquiry may be seen to be part of this development to ensure that those who are the object and subject of (social) science are able to maximise the appropriateness of its foci, directions, operations and applications.

Today, participative enquiry and collaborative research practices generally are integral to how many research projects around the world are designed. In the UK, involving service providers and service users in studies of service processes and in discussions about outcomes is now *de rigueur* from a grant funding perspective. The UK’s National Institute for Health Research initiated a public involvement drive titled INVOLVE (superseded in 2020 by the NIHR Centre for Engagement & Dissemination¹). Endeavours such as these are aimed at optimising citizen involvement in and public understanding of healthcare (service) funded projects. What these developments confirm is that the label ‘expertise’, besides being associated with knowledge, specialisation and professionalism, may now also be applied to very different epistemic practices anchored in first-hand experience, lived reflection and creative-artistic dis-

covery. In all, life world and science now find themselves on a different, if not more equitable, footing than was the case in the past.²

The deliberative orientation of participative enquiry soon became prominent in domains like collaborative public planning (Innes and Booher 1999) and community development (Craig, Mayo, and Popple 2011). These domains have exploited for considerable time now the community building opportunities that are inherent in public deliberation. As Craig *et al* suggest, public deliberation is unique as it harbours the possibility of participants co-creating 'live meaning' on the strength of their current socio-political circumstances and evolving experiences. Involving the public in this way results in ...

an 'embodied argument' [since it is] a continuing search for new forms of social and political expression, particularly 'at the grassroots level' (within a participatory paradigm), in the light of new forms of political and social control. (Craig, Mayo, and Popple 2011, 7)

The aim to ensure that research *across the board* engages with 'new forms of social and political expression [arising from] new forms of political and social control' has recently been articulated with renewed conviction in Isabelle Stengers' *Another science is possible: A manifesto for slow science* (Stengers 2018). In this book, she defines 'slow science' in opposition to 'fast science'. The latter prioritises outcomes achieved through practical inflexibility and methodological intransigence that are touted as instantiating 'scientific rigour'. This rigour offers material evidence and procedural reassurance for fast science's claim to be able to realise objectivity: its 'point of view from nowhere' (Nagel 1989). In contrast, slow science prioritises openness to and deliberation with those represented by, interested in, targeted with and affected by scientific research outcomes. The direction and effect of such deliberations are 'soft' in so far as that they remain open-ended and under-determined.

The present paper explores the implications of Stengers' slow science argument for science generally and for social science in specific. In exploring these implications, the paper questions the common conception that methodological indeterminacy undermines scientific endeavours by rendering their processes and outcomes vulnerable to idiosyncratic events, subjective interpretations, local

variability and chancy outcomes. The unique focus of the present article and less frequently discussed in the social science literature, however, is not just that participants' involvement may engender research foci, processes and insights that move beyond the remit of what researchers might be able to conceive or achieve on their own. In this paper's conception of 'slow social science', the researcher's theory and methodology are recalibrated from discipline-controlled givens to publicly-negotiable points of departure. This latter objective requires the paper to connect Stengers' slow science argument to the idea of research that has "the power to be affected" (Hardt 2007, x) by the views and feelings of those it targets and those affected by its findings and conclusions (Iedema 2021).

Science that commands 'a power to be affected'

Spinoza (1632-1677) conceived of people's 'power to be affected' as a critical feature for them to be able to assume the role of early modern citizen who cohabitates in and provides the socio-cultural condition of possibility for the then emerging nation states (Steinberg 2020, 2018). Citizens could not be people who adhered rigidly and defensively to their own habits, knowledges and mores. They needed to be people who were able to discern and acknowledge (critically or imitatively) the validity of the values, ideas and expectations of others around them. Spinoza's 'power to be affected', then, was and is a power that grew (grows) from people being able to negotiate diversity and achieve a measure of allegiance under circumstances of significant socio-political change and religious tension.

For Spinoza, it was neither the novel practices, knowledges and riches of mercantilism, nor the fear inspired by increasingly well-organised and newly bureaucratised-militarised state power that took priority and precedence over the formation of the early nation state. For Spinoza, paramount was *affect*; that is, people's ability to be affected by, and through that learn from and be motivated to negotiate novel forms of life into being with *other* others – people assuming the role 'fellow citizens'. Spinoza's emerging citizenry was instructed to be sufficiently open to (i.e. affected by) different others to experience, question, and alter its own responses to a multiplicity of contrasting and at times incompatible views and practices (Steinberg 2018).

We can draw a parallel between Spinoza's 17th century psychopolitics and today's science. As did the 16th century pre-nation state denizen, 20th century science prioritised its own practices and values. It pursued the economic-procedural goals of discovery and progress at the expense of openness before those whom it affects in their everyday lives. Isabelle Stengers refers to this science as 'fast science' (Stengers 2018). Having come up against its own limits (Latour 2018), 21st century science has had to 'slow down' in the face of environmental degradation; that is, take time to account for the views of stakeholders who may be affected by the findings and outcomes such science produces. This is 'slow science' (Stengers 2018) as it displays a 'power to be affected' by those whom it analyses and whose lives it affects. It balances scientific expertise and affect by positing dynamic public deliberation as its own condition of possibility and legitimacy.

Social science has also slowed down. It invented action research, participatory inquiry, appreciative inquiry, and a host of other approaches that have sought to involve research subjects in decisions about what to study and how (Creswell 2009). In effect, these are examples of slow *social* science that operate at the intersection of affect, openness, expertise, analysis and complexity. Its researchers are 'passivity competent' actors (Sloterdijk 2013) whose ...

... passivity competent conduct belongs to the play / game intelligence that defines all people living in the contemporary networked world, where we cannot make a move without also being moved. ... Allowing oneself to be affected symbolises the situation of all those who intervene in themselves through allowing others to intervene in them ... [this makes possible] participation in unfamiliar competences [Fremdcompetenz].³ (Sloterdijk 2009, 593/4)

While Sloterdijk does not invoke Spinoza explicitly, his 'passivity competent conduct' is conditional on Spinoza's 'power to be affected'. Hardt's rendering of Spinoza's premise may clarify its connection to Sloterdijk's conception:

The greater our power to be affected... the greater our power to act [and] every increase of the power to act

and think corresponds to an increased power to be affected - the increased autonomy of the subject, in other words, always corresponds to its increased receptivity. (Hardt 2007, x)

Our increased receptivity manifests as passivity competent conduct: we can now register and respond to subtle and rapid changes in our environment and relationships.

The rationale for this receptivity and passivity-competent conduct is found in the rising complexity of contemporary existence (Beck 1992; Giddens 1990; Castells 2000; Sloterdijk 2013). Our interest in affect, receptivity and passivity competent conducts, and researchers' interest in participative social science, thus mark the contemporary intensification of change, pace and movement that is increasingly apparent across identities, practices, communities and cultures.

Implications for (social) science

Science has met the demands of rising contemporary complexity by expanding its data remit, speeding up the pace of feedback, and compressing the distance between knowledge and life. Expanding its remit is achieved through multiplying data points. Speeding up feedback is achieved through the automation of data processing and results deployment. Compressing the distance between science and life occurs through colonising growing swathes of life as data sources and feedback domains.

These developments notwithstanding, their progressive technologisation risks reifying their operations and response modes, denying them input from relevant unanticipated perturbations and unsuspected developments. While science is increasingly able to keep abreast of rapid and subtle changes in its target domains, its exponential automation decreases its ability to attain the power necessary 'to be affected' for it to open up to more than that which it has pre-determined to be of scientific interest and importance.

A power to be affected, by contrast, manifests in science's openness to the concerns of an expanding set of people, and broadening feedback about issues affected by it and by what it brings forth. Here, the aim of progress is balanced against the aim of re-

ceptivity to life world experiences of impact. This is what defines Stengers' slow science: a science that considers its effects on people and places, and one that alters its assumptions, processes and outcomes accordingly.

When it comes to studying social life, social scientific endeavours are now prioritising deliberative engagement with complex forms of life over adherence to methodological schemas and programmes. One example of this trend is 'post-qualitative inquiry' (St. Pierre, 2018; Lather and St. Pierre 2013). Post-qualitative inquiry calls into question the priority given in qualitative research to scientific rigour and pre-determined methodology in a world that is increasingly complex and therefore increasingly entangled:

... entanglement makes all the categories of humanist qualitative research problematic. For example, how do we determine the 'object of our knowledge' – the 'problem' we want to study in assemblage? Can we disconnect ourselves from the mangle somehow (Self) and then carefully disconnect some other small piece of the mangle (Other) long enough to study it? (Lather and St. Pierre 2013, 630)

For these scholars, the principle of rigour and the constraint of methodology, instead of legitimising the research that is conducted following their rules and procedures, are reframed as the researcher's taken-as-given attachments that serve to buttress researcher identity:

The ethical charge of our work as inquirers is surely to question our attachments that keep us from thinking and living differently. (Lather and St. Pierre 2013, 631)

This critique then homes in on the following convention: science defines the phenomena, including any complexities, that warrant being analysed, and it frames these phenomena in ways that at once accommodate and consolidate researchers' 'attachments': their training, practices and theorisations. Questioning these conventions as arbitrary attachments, the post-qualitative critique insists that

... we have to ask whether we have become so attached to our invention – qualitative research – that we have come to think it is real. Have we forgotten that we made it up? Could we just leave it behind and do/live something else? (Lather and St. Pierre 2013, 631)

It is here that the post-qualitative critique meets the argument developed above for research to assume 'the power to be affected'. The post-qualitative critique refuses to sweep the 'mess' that is social research (Law 2004) under the carpet, and resists attempts to render invisible the whole 'hinterland' of complexities that is the full intensity of social life. Put differently, this critique prioritises sensitivity and responsiveness to the complexities it encounters over the methods promoted within research disciplines. Here is Law articulating similar convictions almost 20 years ago:

Method, then, unavoidably produces not only truths and non-truths, realities and non-realities, presences and absences, but also arrangements with political implications. It crafts arrangements and gatherings of things – and accounts of the arrangements of those things – that could have been otherwise. But how to think this? How to move away from the idea that method is a technical (or moralising) set of procedures that need to be got right in a particular way? How to move from the legislations that we usually find in the textbooks on method? Away from the completed and closed accounts of method? (Law 2004, 143)

As does Law, post-qualitative critique charges contemporary social science with failing to be sufficiently affected by the social complexities it studies when such science requires a predetermined methodology for encountering life. Post-qualitative enquiry's insistence on relaxing social scientific attachments to the invention of qualitative research, like Law's argument in favour of moving on from method, help clarify the implications of contemporary complexity for social science research. Here we see an inversion from research as knowledge-building endeavour to research as community generative dynamic. The latter can be called 'spherogenic'

(Iedema and Carroll 2015) in that such research gathers stakeholders around a problem and initiates forums for their deliberation. It does this not simply to produce pragmatic outcomes, but also to experiment with its own methodological strictures and scientific assumptions.

Research and the power to be affected

One such spherogenic research modality is video-reflexive ethnography or VRE. VRE researchers prioritise the relational dynamics that ensue with participants – those interested enough to partake. Researchers arrive with some sense of what their study entails, but negotiate the interpretation and execution of their study with participants. VRE uses open-ended deliberation and video footage as more-or-less neutral meeting points. In generating, choosing and showing back footage, the researcher puts themselves at risk as their choices may be questioned, their interpretations corrected, and their conclusions challenged (Carroll 2009). For these dynamics to occur, footage of *in situ* practice is used as minimally-processed and publicly-accessible representational resource. The act of generating data (footage) that may be questioned and challenged sets up a productive tension between participatory social science – the dynamic that manifests when distance is created between observer and observed – and life.

Specifically, footage of *in situ* practice reveals what Ingold refers to as the experimental dimension of everyday life: “for the people who live there, quotidian life is experimental through and through” (Ingold 2011, 15). Social scientific analysis tends to gloss over the uncertain dynamics of *in situ* experimentation and prioritise a more general perspective that foregrounds regularities (cf. ‘discourses’, ‘practices’, ‘ethnomethodologies’, etc.). When negotiated with those who populate the footage or are familiar with the practice portrayed, such footage brings its affective, embodied, enspaced, political and situational dimensions to the fore. People’s habits and assumptions are bared, revealing the delicate character of *in situ* existence.

In this way, footage perturbs ordinary observer-observed configurations for both participants and researchers. On the one hand, the individual as the centre of agency becomes dispersed across affects, habits, moves, discourses, events. This decentring throws light on

the practised and habituated aspects of behaviour. It also reveals the delicate affective-pragmatic negotiations that take place 'under the radar', as these are now visible. This may produce defensive responses to problems, but it may also lead to actors exploring how they may be able to move forward into the future together. On the other hand, the footage renders the researcher(s) immediately accountable to participants for their data (footage) choices and feedback reasoning (the reasons for selecting situations for video-filming and for deciding on clips for feedback). Their accountability to participants is no longer dealt with purely in the abstract realm of the ethics application, but is now also rooted in the complex dynamic life world where their research, research relationships and research outcomes unfold.

It is here that research participation serves not in the first instance the pre-meditated interests of the researcher, as it now pursues the flourishing of all life. This pursuit of everyone's flourishing is also a Spinozan conception dictating the enhancement of people's agency, or to use Deleuze's expression, the creation of 'a world that is increasingly wide and intense':

It is no longer a matter of utilisations or captures, but of sociabilities and communities. How do individuals enter into composition with one another in order to form a higher individual, ad infinitum? Now we are concerned ... with a symphony of nature, the composition of a world that is increasingly wide and intense. (Deleuze 2005, 60)

This priority of life enhancement skews research towards the becoming of life without pre-empting or confining its methodology, quality, scope or directions. It also confirms the defining role of experimentation in life and this renders experimentation the *raison d'être* of participatory social research. It is now participants' and researchers' capacity to be affected, and its impact on their agency and life world, practically, methodologically and theoretically, that matter. Only once life has a chance to become more 'wide and intense' for participants and researchers, kicks in another but always secondary research intervention: the capture, or scholarly description, of how the relational and communicative dynamics of this endeavour have made life more 'wide and intense'.

Conclusion

This paper has engaged with the question of participative social science from the perspective of a research modality that prioritises its 'power to be affected'. This modality conceives of participation not as a means to satisfy pre-determined scientific goals, but as a dynamic that may render life more 'wide and intense'. The route that led to this position visited the slow science arguments articulated by Stengers, Spinoza's ethics that prizes our power to be affected, Ingold's caveat that everyday life is experimental through and through, and Sloterdijk's view on contemporary complexity as necessitating the capacity on the part of actors to recognise that making a move means being moved. The paper touched on critiques of social science that called into question its prioritisation of pre-determined methodologies and programmes. Lather, St Pierre and Law were mentioned as proponents of relaxing the rules governing social science research in order for such research to become more responsive and receptive to contemporary complexity, and become more flexible and learning-capable towards its own approaches deployed to apprehend social life.

The paper finished with a description of a research approach that instantiates these latter values. Video-reflexive ethnography was presented as example of research that invests first in enhancing life for and with those choosing to participate in its dynamic. No doubt, other approaches are similarly invested and focused on the enabling dynamics of social inquiry. For now, the argument in favour of research participation concludes like this: the novelty that springs from people being enabled to strengthen their practical and relational agency is of significance not just for life generally, but also for that unique modality of social science that chooses to engage with life's complexity. This modality of social science treats (a chosen dimension of) life not as fixable, accountable and describable object, but as a space where participants and researchers interact to enable their worlds and activities to become increasingly 'wide and intense'.

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Notes

- 1 <https://www.nihr.ac.uk/explore-nihr/campaigns/supporting-patient-and-public-involvement-in-research.htm>
- 2 For reasons of space, this article will not deal with the adverse ‘post-truth’ consequences of this emancipation which are eloquently detailed elsewhere (Fuller 2017; Higgins 2016), other than to investigate the effects of technologization on the practices of social knowing and communicating.
- 3 My own translation since the official English translation of Sloterdijk’s book (see bibliography) is suboptimal. The original German reads: “In Wahrheit gehört das passivitätskompetente Verhalten zur Spielintelligenz von Menschen in einer entfalteten Netzwelt, in der man keinen eigenen Zug machen kann, wenn man nicht zugleich mit sich spielen läßt. ... Sich-Massieren-Lassen symbolisiert die Lage all derer, die auf sich inwirken, indem sie anderen erlauben, auf sie einzuwirken ... Teilhabe an Fremdcompetenz.”