



Developing 'process pragmatism' to underpin engaged research in human geography

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Abstract

This paper explores the contribution that pragmatist philosophy can make to the way that we do research and teaching in human geography. It provides a historical overview of the key ideas in the tradition, their influence on the Chicago School of Sociology and community organizing, and the implications of this work for epistemological practice. The paper then looks at the variety of ways in which human geographers are using research as a means to engage in the world today, focusing in particular on the contributions of participatory action research (PAR), before making the case for 'process pragmatism' as a framework for doing this kind of research. To illustrate the potential of this approach, the paper outlines current research, teaching and organizing activity being undertaken by geographers at Queen Mary University of London. The paper suggests that pragmatism provides a theoretical and methodological foundation for research and teaching which can facilitate the creation of new publics, and can help to build power and democratic capacity with the aim of remaking the world.

Keywords

Chicago School of Sociology, community organizing, democracy, epistemology, participatory action research (PAR), pragmatism, public engagement, publics

1 Introduction

As we write, the academy is in the grip of a shift in thinking. Our institutions, funders and (some of our) colleagues are calling us to work with multiple publics as an integrated part of our research and teaching. There are new agendas called 'impact', 'public engagement' and 'co-production', all of which urge us to use our knowledge for social benefit and to produce knowledge through collaborations with the wider community (for a geographical example see Gregson et al., 2012). Our discipline has long been partial to this kind of work. Geography has

always been seen as applied, and this was to empire, civic education and citizenship before it became more associated with radical thought (Wills, 2014). As part of the radical turn that emerged during the late 1960s, academic geographers were urged to change the discipline as well as the world. Subsequently, there have been disciplinary debates about the politics of

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teaching, our engagement in policy, public geographies, the place of activism, the potential of action research and the political performativity of all kinds of research (Blomley, 1994; Martin, 2001; Dorling and Shaw, 2002; Ward, 2006, 2007; Castree, 2006, 2008; Kondon et al., 2007). In relation to the latter, the prominent work of Gibson-Graham (2006, 2007, 2008) has been particularly important, using the lexicon of post-structuralism to proselytise the role of community-based action research in a process of re-subjectification.

Since 2001, a number of staff and students at the School of Geography at Queen Mary University of London (QMUL) have been practising public engagement through a long-term collaborative relationship with Citizens UK, a broad-based community alliance which seeks to build people's capacity to participate in democratic processes. Over the past ten years this relationship has encompassed a range of collaborative undergraduate, postgraduate and staff research projects, the school's participation in political campaigns, such as the demand for a Living Wage, and the development of a Masters in Community Organizing.

This model of engagement between the university and civil society is a contemporary manifestation of the broad-based community organizing that was first developed in Chicago in the 1930s. The model practised today by groups such as Citizens UK has its origins in the work of a number of academics based at the Chicago School of Sociology during the first three decades of the 20th century. Those sociologists used pragmatic philosophy to guide a research agenda that distanced sociology from abstract metaphysical discussions and grounded the discipline in collaboratively formulating solutions to the problems faced by communities across the city and beyond. This approach to research was to have a decisive influence on the development of community organizing. Indeed, a key early figure in community organizing, Saul Alinsky, trained as a sociologist in Chicago

during the 1920s, and worked closely with Ernest Burgess, Robert Park and George Herbert Mead.

Examining the influence of pragmatism on the ethnographic methodology and the interventionist approach developed by the Chicago School has helped us to understand the philosophical underpinnings of the ideas and techniques associated with the community organizing tradition, which focuses on face-to-face listening and relationship building, plural forms of knowledge, the creation of publics, a deep commitment to democracy and political engagement. Attention to this history has also allowed us to reflect on the potential of pragmatic philosophy for guiding our discipline as we respond to the call for greater engagement today. While increasing numbers of geographers are now deploying various forms of engaged research and related activity such as participatory action research (PAR) (Mrs Kinpainsby, 2008; Kondon, 2010), citizen science (Haklay, 2013), militant research (Halvorsen, 2014), and civic geographies (Philo et al., 2015), we argue that a focus on pragmatism can help to clarify and extend this kind of research. In particular, we suggest that pragmatism helps us to focus attention on the *processes* of knowledge production that can be constructed to simultaneously make a contribution to democracy, civic education and building power to produce social change. As such, pragmatism provides intellectual scaffolding for thinking about epistemology as part of a wider project to build new publics that are interested in and able *to act* on the knowledge produced. While geographers have adopted new methods in order to engage with various publics and to undertake action research, we are advocating the adoption of 'process pragmatism' to capture the way that such methods can be embedded in an ambitious approach that combines knowledge production with the creation of publics which can facilitate action. As such, this approach to epistemology can allow geographers to contribute to the development of

democracy at a range of spatial scales (see also Barnett and Low, 2004; Barnett and Bridge, 2013; Barnett, 2014).

In the rest of this paper, we outline how process pragmatism provides a framework through which ongoing research and knowledge production have the potential to facilitate the generation of new knowledge, the formation of pluralist alliances, education and self-development, the building of democratic capacity and the power to drive political action. This approach has significant implications for the place and role of the university, its academics and students. In this model, academics and students can be seen as part of broader social alliances whose members work together to explore shared concerns, formulate solutions and act upon those ideas. Rather than being the disinterested expert or the useful outsider who is able to help an existing cause, the ‘process pragmatist’ is an engaged practitioner skilled in the art of relationship building, listening, collaborating and acting with others. Research becomes part of an ongoing process of sustaining a local alliance of organizations working together for the common good. While pragmatism’s open and non-ideological approach has long been seen as a problem (e.g. Mumford, 1926; Russell (2004 [1938]), see also MacGilvray, 2000; Barnes, 2008), we argue that this can also be a great strength. As its name implies, pragmatism is a philosophy focused on practice, and in what follows we make the case for using this approach as a way to think about our epistemological and political practice as geographers.

In this paper, we flesh out this argument by telling the story of the relationships between pragmatic philosophy, the Chicago School of Sociology and the development of community organizing, alongside the ways in which such ideas have already influenced geographical scholarship, before going on to summarize the parallels and differences with the variety of forms of engaged research already being practised in the discipline. From there we outline our

own emerging application of a process pragmatist approach to research and teaching at the School of Geography, Queen Mary University of London. As such, the paper also contributes to a small but growing strand of scholarship inspired by and/or deploying pragmatic ideas in the discipline of geography (Smith, 1984; Sunley, 1996; Barnes, 2008; Jones, 2008; Barnes and Sheppard, 2010; Barnett and Bridge, 2013; Bridge, 2014) while also reflecting a wider resurgence in pragmatism across the humanities and social sciences (Rorty, 1979; Bernstein, 1992a, 2010; Joas, 1993; Putnam, 1995; Dryzek, 2004; Unger, 2007).

II The core pragmatic ideas

Pragmatism is not a unified school of thought and it has developed in various forms through debates between its key figures over many decades (Menand, 1997; Talisse and Aikin, 2011: 1). Among the thinkers who shaped the development of classical pragmatism, Charles Sanders Peirce [1839–1914], William James [1842–1910] and John Dewey [1859–1952] have been the most influential. These scholars argued that meaning cannot be determined through abstract theorizing, but requires examining the ‘habits’ that are produced by a concept and questioning the effects that the concept has in the world. As James famously put it: ‘the true is the name of whatever proves itself to be good in the way of belief, and good, too, for definite, assignable reasons’ (James, 2000 [1907]: 42; Gunn, 2000 [1907]).

Influenced by but moving beyond the ideas developed by Peirce and James, Dewey did not consider the main focus of pragmatism to be clarifying the meaning of statements or ‘settling metaphysical disputes’ (Talisse and Aikin, 2011: 2). His primary concern was to highlight the extent to which problems are formulated in particular social and historical contexts, thus aiming to ‘socialize’ the problems of philosophy. Just as Darwin argued that species are

constantly evolving and adapting to a changing environment, Dewey advocated for a philosophy that could be practically applied to solve problems in the changing social environments where human beings live (Hickman, 2009: 6).

Despite their differences, these thinkers had a common dissatisfaction with the dominant philosophical approaches of the time, and the thread of an 'anti-foundational' epistemology runs throughout their work (Barnes, 2008: 1544). This can be summed up as the refusal to believe that truth 'rests upon foundations of any certainty' (Bernstein, 1992b: 813). It comprises the notion that ideas emerge 'continently and experimentally' in a specific place and time, and the truth of an idea is judged by its usefulness in that particular context (Barnes, 2008: 1544). As a result of this epistemological stance, pragmatism has been subject to harsh critique as an 'anything goes' philosophy characterized by 'crude epistemological relativism' (see Barnes, 2008: 1543). However, far from holding the view that every idea is as good as any other, Dewey argued that truth is not discovered (as absolutists claim) nor is it invented (as relativists claim). Rather, it is 'constructed as the by-product of a process of solving problems' (Hickman, 2009: 14) undertaken by people in particular places and times. Furthermore, the belief that knowledge is fallible does not mean that 'anything goes', but rather that all assumptions and beliefs should be thoroughly examined and critiqued in the context of the present, with potential for revision where necessary (Hepple, 2008: 1531). If ideas can garner support, and generate solidarities around action, they become 'implements to accomplish particular tasks' rather than 'transcendent truths' (Barnes, 2008: 1544).

Inspired by these ideas, Dewey stressed the need to involve a 'critical community of inquirers' in the processes of knowledge construction (Hepple, 2008: 1531). He saw this as central to the functioning of processes of knowledge production in democratic societies, where

people work with others to identify shared problems and develop solutions to them (Cutchin, 2008). For such a process to thrive, three conditions must be met: the free association of people, free inquiry, and free communication (Bernstein, 2010). This process flourishes when people are able to work together to identify solutions to problems, have the skills and resources to conduct scientific investigations, and can communicate effectively with others in order to share experiences and develop creative solutions. In this sense, Dewey highlighted the importance of communication, not just as a means of conveying information but as a 'process of world-making' itself (Neubert, 2009: 23).

In his 1927 book *The Public and Its Problems*, Dewey translated his ideas about the role of critical inquiry in the maintenance of democracy. He developed the argument that a public is defined as a community of affected interests whereby people gather together to form a common understanding and will to act around an issue of shared concern: 'The public consists of all those who are affected by the indirect consequences of transactions to such an extent that it is deemed necessary to have those consequences systematically covered for' (Dewey, 1954 [1927]: 15–16). In forming publics, he argued that the people were able to contribute to and improve everyday life as well as democratic culture.

Yet doing this effectively is not easy, and Dewey was a strong advocate of education for democracy that would cultivate people's skills and capacities to engage in this kind of public work. He saw the social sciences as having a key role to play in training people as effective citizens by facilitating processes of inquiry amongst communities on the issues that concerned them (Boyte, 2003; Dewey, 2011 [1939]). Indeed, this education was viewed as a means of expanding a democratic way of life by cultivating positive attitudes towards participation, respectful debate and consideration of a wide range of dissenting views. Unlike many

others of his time, Dewey recognized the inevitable nature of conflict within society and sought to harness this in a productive way to produce social reform (Bernstein, 2010: 84). As such, the pragmatists argue for a pluralist politics in which multiple publics, each with their own truths, are able to engage in dialogue, negotiation and argument with others as they seek to address their specific problems (Bernstein, 2010).

This cultivation of a ‘reflective intelligence’ was also important given the pragmatist belief in ‘radical contingency’ and the influential role of chance in human life (Barnes, 2008: 1545). As the conditions of human life were constantly changing, often in unpredictable ways, this required an ability to ‘change our mind, to accept that truths are only ever makeshift, and to be willing to refashion ideas for the new circumstances’ (Dewey, cited by Barnes, 2008: 1545). While these ideas had a major impact on philosophy, for at least some of the 20th century, the implications for the more applied social sciences were best illustrated by the work of the Chicago School of Sociologists. Dewey worked at the new University of Chicago between 1894 and 1904; he and James also had close contact with Robert E. Park [1864–1944] before the latter took up an academic position in the new School of Sociology in 1914, and they had a significant influence on the scholarship of George Herbert Mead [1863–1931], who worked at the University of Chicago for most of his career (moving there with Dewey from Michigan in 1894). As such, the key practitioners of pragmatism had a particularly strong influence on the emergent School of Sociology at the University of Chicago, as is outlined further below.

III Pragmatism, the Chicago School of Sociology and community organizing

In 1892 Albion Small [1854–1926] was recruited to establish a new Department of Sociology in

Chicago. Reflecting the sentiments of the Progressive Era, he wanted to create an academic department that focused on *doing* alongside *knowing*, and to produce research that aided the creation of democratically self-governing local communities more able to oppose the hegemony of large corporations and the centralized federal government (Small, 1895). Such ideals were grounded in concerns about the impact of mass urbanization, industrialization and immigration on local democratic culture and practice (Joas, 1993). Subscribing to John Dewey’s and George Herbert Mead’s understanding of pragmatism ‘as a way to help people and institutions in a rapidly urbanizing, industrializing, and ethnically diversifying society act to overcome the multitude of problems facing them’ (Cutchin, 2008: 1562), Small and a number of his colleagues at Chicago (including Mead, Park, William Thomas [1863–1947], Ernest Burgess [1886–1966], Roderick McKenzie [1885–1940] and Clifford Shaw [1895–1957]) sought to research life in their city with a view to making change.

They investigated the ways particular communities made their home in the city, responding to new circumstances by grappling with their existing frameworks of meaning, and examining how social interaction allowed recent arrivals to generate new ideas to overcome the common problems they faced. In this regard, George Herbert Mead’s approach to meaning and interpretation in social life was particularly important (Mead, 1913; see also Gross, 2007). Mead argued that the way an individual responds to any situation is closely tied to the meaning they ascribe to that situation, and that such meanings are generated through a process of intersubjective communication with others who share that situation.

Mead (1967 [1934]) developed a theory of ‘symbolic interactionism’ from this premise and his ideas were later further developed by his student at Chicago, Henry Blumer (1986 [1969]). Blumer applied Mead’s theories to critique the

practice of social science, arguing that if academics want to know the truth of a social world they must practise a form of 'naturalistic inquiry' in which every stage of the process is validated by those whose world is under investigation.

Seeking to situate this approach to research within the tradition of his predecessors at the Chicago School, Blumer argued for a form of highly engaged participant observation where academics would get as close as possible to other worlds in order to reveal their truths. Consciously avoiding the a priori imposition of macro-theoretical frameworks to their case study work, researchers were encouraged to focus on the experiences, processes and actions that characterized everyday life and social change.

In tandem with this ethnographic work, a more interventionist approach to inquiry was being developed at Chicago. In his 1916 article 'The Social Survey', Burgess set the tone for democratic innovation in sociological methods by arguing that researchers could use the process of research to provoke processes of democratic social change. This required organizing the community through the creation of 'research committees' comprising all local civil institutions and supporting them to carry out their own studies 'under the direction of the expert in the technique of surveys' (Burgess, 1916: 496). Local residents were to be trained to conduct a survey in order to find out about the social problems facing their community, but in doing the research they also generated the capacity to promote the 'programme of constructive social advance proposed by the survey' (Burgess, 1916: 498). Reflecting a number of pragmatic ideas, Burgess's vision of the social survey sought to provide the means through which communities could make sense of their problematic situations *and* re-organize themselves with stronger democratic capacity to gain control over their lives. In the language that Dewey (1954 [1927]) later adopted, the social survey

provided a tool to generate 'a public' around which people developed the capacity to act.

Following this lead, Clifford Shaw's (1929, 1930) research developed into a coherent programme of democratic institution-building, which in turn provided the context in which Saul Alinsky developed a new model of broad-based community organizing in Chicago during the 1930s and 1940s (Horwitt, 1989). In 1931 Shaw met Alinsky, then a graduate student from the School of Sociology, and recruited him to the Institute of Juvenile Research. By this point Alinsky had progressed through undergraduate and graduate studies in sociology at Chicago, spending the majority of his time learning from Burgess, rather than Park (Engel, 2002). Alinsky became the survey specialist conceived within Burgess's model by working for Shaw. He was employed to recruit civic leaders, teach them survey skills, and enable them to become advocates for the reform programme that emerged from the survey.

In 1938 Shaw assigned Alinsky to the Back of the Yards area of Chicago to conduct a social survey about youth delinquency, and to organize the community's response to this problem. Expanding on his brief, Alinsky quickly recognized the need to build a broader alliance between the most powerful institutions in the local community, recruiting leaders from the Catholic Church to work with the local trade unions and a plethora of other local organizations under the umbrella of the Back of the Yards Neighborhood Council (BYNC). As such, he applied the philosophical and methodological ideas of the Chicago School of Sociology to the political challenges faced by communities that sought greater power over their futures, and this nascent model brought success; Alinsky's community organization helped to win a campaign for improved wages and conditions for workers in the local meat-packing industry as well as securing better welfare provision for children (Alinsky, 1941; Horwitt, 1989).

Alinsky developed a process for allowing new publics to form around issues of common concern. His first step was to build relationships between individuals and groups who inhabited a specific place to create an alliance of ordinary citizens. These relationships laid the basis for dialogue between diverse groups around issues of common concern, in which the practices of listening and story-telling were employed to create shared meaning about local issues and the common good (Reitzes and Reitzes, 1992). Alinsky then worked to build the power of his alliance to make the changes it wanted to see. He did this by building relationships between groups, and by developing links between the alliance and key decision-makers in the state and market, as well as organizing collective action when necessary. This secured ordinary citizens a position at the negotiating table where they could shape the agenda to meet their interests. A key part of this work was the education of citizens in the skills and capacities needed to engage in democratic politics. Through experience, they learned about the power of relationship-building, listening, negotiation, tolerance and the development of political tactics.

This process of community organizing involved the process pragmatism we outline in this paper. As outlined in the penultimate section, a partnership between the School of Geography at QMUL and Citizens UK, a UK-based organization that applies the same model of community organizing, has exposed us to these ideas and approaches to building community, identifying issues, conducting research and taking action. Over the past decade, we have come to appreciate the importance of sustaining relationships across a diversity of civil society organizations and being part of those relationships *before* identifying shared concerns for research and action. Rather than having to build relationships from scratch in order to conduct any form of participatory research, being part of a permanent alliance means that the

relationships out-live any particular project. Moreover, the concern to build power and foster civic education ensures that our engagement in the alliance and any research work we do can help to effect social change in individuals, their organizations and the wider community. This experience has alerted us to the importance of embedding research in a network of relationships which facilitate the creation of publics that are able to act. As outlined in the following section, process pragmatism has similarities and differences with the variety of forms of participatory action research currently being deployed in our discipline.

IV Pragmatism and research practice in human geography today

Geography has yet to be strongly influenced by the wider revival of pragmatism that was stimulated by the work of Richard Rorty in the 1980s, with subsequent impact across philosophy and the social sciences (see, for examples, Rorty, 1979; Bernstein 1992a, 2010; Joas, 1993; Putnam, 1995; Unger, 2007). Pragmatism is given brief coverage in many of the major 'key ideas' and 'how to' handbooks and textbooks of the discipline (see, for example, Cloke et al., 1991; Kitchen and Tate, 2000; Gregory et al., 2009; Elwood, 2010; Castree et al., 2013), but it is rarely used as a philosophical approach towards framing or conducting research. While some of the core ideas were revisited as a by-product of a rediscovery of the Chicago School undertaken as part of the development of social geography during the 1980s (Entrikin, 1980; Jackson, 1983, 1984; Jackson and Smith, 1984; Smith, 1984), it is only more recently that a handful of geographers have sought to trigger disciplinary interest in pragmatism with powerful interventions in relation to geographical theory (see Barnes, 2008; Hepple, 2008; Jones, 2008; Wood and Smith, 2008) as well as efforts to highlight the application of pragmatic ideas to understand urban democracy (Barnett and

Bridge, 2013; Barnett, 2014; Bridge, 2014), economic geography (Sunley, 1996), geographies of power (Allen, 2008) and questions of health (Cutchin, 2008).

Pragmatism is particularly resonant with current debates about the geography of democracy, the generation of publics and the role and impact of public engagement. Indeed, since the 1980s, geographers have developed a variety of ways in which research seeks to engage with different publics, either through traditional forms of public scholarship and public policy debate, or through more radical methods associated with a variety of 'participatory geographies' (Ward, 2007). Academics employing these latter approaches to engagement seek to work closely with non-academic communities to produce knowledge that is aligned to meeting the goals of ordinary people and/or creating new worlds in the here and now through projects that aim to have an immediate impact on participants and the wider world. In this vein we have seen the development of activist geographies (Pickerill and Chatterton, 2006; Autonomous Geographies Collective, 2010), militant research (Brown, 2007; Mason, 2013; Halvorsen, 2014), and participatory action research (PAR) (Cameron and Gibson, 2005; Gibson-Graham, 2006; Cahill, 2007; Torre, 2009).

In order to explain how process pragmatism can contribute to this evolving field of geographical research, we have come to see these existing approaches along something of a continuum with more ideologically-oriented or pre-committed approaches at one end and more open-ended approaches at the other. The former are characterized by advancing a pre-defined political project, such as those influenced by feminism or critical race theory in which the 'scholar-activist' can 'bring together their academic work with their political ideas to further social change and work directly with marginal groups or those in struggle' (Autonomous Geographies Collective, 2010: 246). Such scholar-activists are found to be committed to a range of

political persuasions including anti-capitalism, feminism and anti-racism, and their research is designed to pursue their personal political goals and those of the groups that they work with.

Developing in the wake of post-positivism, these approaches reflect a radical tradition of politically motivated work that seeks to mobilize the resources of the academy, and geography in particular, in order to change the world. Indeed, recognizing that academics and their research have something unique to offer those struggling to make change, the Autonomous Geographies Collective (2010: 246) acknowledge that scholar-activists occupy 'privileged positions' from which they can support specific groups and causes. Inquiry is aligned closely to action, with academics working in collaboration with other 'world-makers' to produce useful knowledge that can help to meet their needs and solve their problems. From this angle, scholar-activism and process pragmatism appear to be closely linked.

However, process pragmatism adopts a distinct ontological position which differentiates it from more ideologically-oriented research and associated activity. As outlined above, pragmatism was developed within the framework of an anti-foundationalism that understands the world to be radically contingent. This ontology requires an open epistemology that is alert to the contingency of time and place, and the dangers of a-priori assumptions about what is important at any one time and in any location. Given that this ontology has underpinned a commitment to the power of social inquiry to generate new understandings of a world that is always open to new interventions, process pragmatism is necessarily focused on the *process* of such inquiry and related knowledge production rather than a-priori commitments to particular truths.

We are not arguing that feminism, critical race studies or Marxism are redundant or unimportant; these traditions of thought and practice have generated new ideas that have facilitated

powerful political action. As such, they demonstrate the performative power or ‘future-forming’ nature of knowledge production (Gergen, 2015). However, if the aim of knowledge production is to produce ideas that facilitate action led by a particular group of participants (Dewey’s notion of an emergent public who are engaged in social inquiry), the processes of knowledge production have to reflect a more open ontological position. Indeed, if action research – or any research – is conducted on the basis of a-priori commitment to a particular cause, the process will reproduce existing ideas. Conducting action research according to a set of pre-conceived assumptions about any given reality shuts down opportunities for *new* problems, ideas and solutions to be identified through the process of doing research.

Thus, in contrast, process pragmatism does not start with a pre-determined problem in mind. Instead, the academic engages in socially-embedded inquiry on the basis that many potential problems exist, before proceeding to identify issues, ideas and potential solutions *through* participatory inquiry. Moreover, whereas scholar-activists will necessarily have to work with pre-existing publics that are already assembled around the pre-existing agendas that the academic is able and willing to endorse, process pragmatism seeks to use the process of research and knowledge production to construct *new* publics, *new* understandings and *new* capacity to act. Working in the spirit of pragmatism involves bringing together diverse groups of people with differing worldviews, to find common ground and to create new publics united around issues of common concern. Moreover, in a world of multiple truths, it may be valuable to work with as diverse a range of people as possible, facilitating projects that allow all participants to develop as effective, skilled citizens, even if their beliefs, traditions or politics clash with each other.

As process pragmatism is focused on the production of performative knowledges that can

then remake the world they purport to describe, there are other overlaps with existing forms of PAR being developed in geography today. Most obviously, the work of J.K. Gibson-Graham and the Community Economies Collective (CEC) is designed to generate knowledge that can then produce change. Drawing on the Freirian (1970) tradition of radical pedagogy and working in a Foucauldian vein, academics within the CEC use PAR to facilitate processes of re-subjectification whereby participants embrace a more hopeful post-capitalist subjectivity that is able to envisage and enact alternatives to capitalism (Cameron and Gibson, 2005; Gibson-Graham et al., 2013). As such, the CEC have a-priori commitments to post-capitalism (see especially Gibson-Graham, 2006), and a theory of change that is based on a particular form of re-subjectification. In contrast, process pragmatism would remain open to the knowledges and solutions generated in any particular time and place, regardless of the scale of their ambition for change, without such firm expectations of the new subjectivity arising from the research.

In this regard, however, the CEC approach and process pragmatism are both focused on cultivating a range of ‘world-making’ skills in their participants. In both approaches, research projects are seen as a means to an end, going beyond generating knowledge to produce effective citizens and/or political actors as well.

This idea of developing people as leaders for change is central to community organizing. Drawing on Dewey’s calls for ‘education for democracy’, Boyte (2003) argues that for people to engage in politics as a form of collective problem-solving they must learn a variety of civic skills and capacities. Such an education would develop people’s ability to negotiate diverse views, interests and power relations and take action to turn ideas into reality by cultivating ‘political citizens’ (Boyte, 2003). In this regard, Fung (2003) distinguishes between two aspects of this kind of political education: the

cultivation of civic capacities, including habits of cooperation, toleration, self-confidence, and respect for others, and the cultivation of civic skills, including making speeches, constructing arguments, conducting interviews and building relationships (Boyte, 2003). Community organizing alliances seek to cultivate these skills and capacities by training and experiential learning through doing.

There are striking parallels here with the work of the geographical expeditions co-organized by Bill Bunge during the 1970s in Detroit. Alongside Gwendolyn Warren, a professional community organizer operating with the same organizing vision and tools that were developed by Saul Alinsky (Heynen, 2013), Bunge facilitated research with local residents to explore pressing issues and develop ideas for solutions. Although Bunge was avowedly Marxist in his personal ontology and political views, the knowledge generated through the Detroit Geographical Expedition and Institute (DGEI) was concerned with the everyday problems of rat infestations and a lack of safe space for children to play (Bunge, 1969). By conducting research, the DGEI produced the knowledge that was needed to widen public support for political change. Such work was taken up by the DGEI's sister organization, the Fitzgerald Community Council (an alliance of civil society groups in the Fitzgerald neighbourhood in Detroit), that successfully campaigned on a number of fronts and achieved victories by building productive relationships with local decision-makers (Merrifield, 2011). As such, Bunge's expeditions reflect three key characteristics that we associate with process pragmatism: facilitating open and democratic inquiries into social problems; developing ordinary citizens as leaders for change through their experiences of grass-roots campaigning and civic action; and building relational power – as we explicate further below.

Community organizers in the Alinsky/Chicago tradition use the concept of 'relational

power' to guide a form of politics that allows ordinary citizens to make change. Relational power is about civic alliances relating to *existing* forms of power (policy-makers, business leaders) if they want to make change, but also generating their own power through relationships with each other. By bringing together a broad and diverse set of people around an issue to generate change, community organizing aims to build a new power base which gives people a voice and the capacity to act (Warren, 2001).

Applying the concept of relational power to geographical research suggests that any project seeking to make change in the world needs to generate the relational power to achieve its goals. This will demand that any research is focused and sustained enough to identify the actually existing relationships and interactions that give rise to any particular issue or problem as well as generating the relationships needed to secure any change.

In this regard, process pragmatism has more in common with those who advocate the creation of the 'communiversity' (mrs kinpaisby, 2008) than it does with other forms of action research being practised in geography today. Sarah Kindon, Rachel Pain and Mike Kesby, writing under the pen-name of mrs kinpaisby, advocate practising a form of PAR 'that supports the joint construction and conduct of geographical research, teaching and other activities, with the goal of pursuing social change leading to greater social justice and equality' (mrs kinpaisby, 2008: 292). Echoing Blumer's ideas outlined above, this form of PAR aims to involve the active participation of research 'subjects' in each stage of the research process from start to finish, with a concern for achieving the 'priorities and needs of communities as *they* define them' (mrs kinpaisby, 2008: 294, emphasis added).

The communiversity is about gearing research practices and resources to serve the needs of non-academic communities by allowing them to produce knowledge and take action

around the issues that matter to them. With strong echoes of Dewey, this form of knowledge production is about ‘empowering agents to bring about transformations in their own lives’ (Kesby, 2005: 2050) and, as such, the academic becomes a facilitator of knowledge production with non-academic actors, rather than producing theories and ideas for or about other people (Kindon, 2010). This reflects a theory of social change that sees ordinary people as being best placed to identify their own problems and generate the critical knowledge needed to generate practical solutions. However, taking a process pragmatist approach to this kind of research would prime academics to pay more attention to the wider challenges of relationship building, educational outcomes and political action that are also central to people-led action research.

Whereas PAR is often seen as a particular approach to research – or a research method – taking a process pragmatist perspective allows us to locate the research process in a wider argument about the nature of ontology, the power of epistemology in relation to democracy, and the importance of sustaining the relationships from which people can act. Indeed, in their honest account of a PAR project, carried out in the vein of the ‘communiversity’, Pain and Francis (2003) highlight the challenges of doing action research without this wider framework. After producing a report about young people’s experiences of victimization from crime, which challenged dominant discourse in policy circles, the authors were unable to use the research as a springboard for change, and as they suggest: ‘participatory research demands more in terms of achieving change than simply presenting the findings into the public domain, and moving on to the next project’ (2003: 49). Without a stronger community base and fuller control over the work that is done, PAR projects will fail to build and sustain the relationships needed to have a significant impact on the world beyond the research. To remedy this, process pragmatists

would advocate expanding the remit of research activities to include a focus on building lasting relationships so that knowledge can remake the world more effectively.

It is important to acknowledge that such relationship building takes time and in most areas organizations like Citizens UK do not exist, implying that academic researchers need to find a way to create a network of local organizations that can be sustained beyond any particular project.¹ Administrative barriers may exist to doing this work. Universities may not prove willing to support such alliance-building and what can be perceived as social or political activity. In addition, research funding is usually dependent upon identifying comprehensive research aims, objectives and questions in advance of securing the money. However, the move to encourage ‘impact’, knowledge exchange and public engagement is helpful in this regard. Many universities are revisiting their civic inheritance and exploring ways to reposition themselves in their local community (Goddard, 2009). As such, there are major opportunities to develop the sustained community relationships from which to develop new forms of research that deploy process pragmatism. Given the history of our discipline, Geography is well-placed to lead in this field.

V Geographical research at Queen Mary University of London

A number of staff and students at the School of Geography at Queen Mary have been experimenting with different forms of public engagement for many years. Our activities range from disseminating ideas and developing collaborative research alliances to community-based action research. Over the past decade, a small group of us have been exploring the intersection of pragmatism, research and teaching practice as part of our work as institutional members of the broad-based community organizing alliance Citizens UK (CUK). Working in the spirit of

Saul Alinsky, CUK is a national network of place-based civil society alliances that aims to develop people's capacity to actively participate in democracy. By building networks of community institutions, such as schools, mosques, churches and trade unions, diverse groups of people are able to work together for the common good (Wills, 2012). Utilizing the methods of community organizing, CUK take a pragmatic approach to politics that seeks to secure the conditions for geographically-based publics to form around issues of shared concern, by forging relationships between citizens and developing people's civic and political skills. The school has been a member institution of CUK since 2005, when it joined the local alliance during a campus Living Wage campaign, but relationships go back to the launch of the Living Wage campaign in 2001.

As part of the ongoing activities of CUK, local organizers facilitate meetings between representatives of different civil society organizations in the area with a view to fostering long-term relationships between them. As we have described in relation to process pragmatism, these relationships are grounded in identifying shared problems, ideas and exploring possible solutions. As members of CUK, participants from the School of Geography have taken part in these conversations, and in recent years students have led inquiries and taken action to improve access to shared space on campus, enhance the quality of lighting in the local area, identify solutions to the housing crisis and demand better road safety. This work has been done with local community groups including a Muslim centre, the Salvation Army, a Catholic Church and a housing association that all belong to the local alliance. As part of this activity, staff and students from Queen Mary have worked with members of the alliance to develop relationships with the Mayor of Tower Hamlets and some local councillors, and with representatives from Transport for London and the Mayor of London.

At times, our membership of the alliance has prompted us to secure the resources to provide additional research capacity to support particular ongoing campaigns. Most obviously, in relation to the Living Wage campaign, we secured research funding to help supply the information required to establish the extent of low pay and the numbers and types of workers who were falling below the living wage rate as well as to map the impact of the living wage on workers and their employers (see Wills, 2001; Wills and Linneker, 2014). While much of this research was conducted in a traditional way – being led by a pre-existing set of questions and pre-agreed goals – the alliance was instrumental in setting these goals. As low pay had been identified as a pressing issue for the wider community, CUK needed the research to support the campaign, using the findings to strengthen the work that was done. In this regard, the idea of the living wage has now become part of mainstream political discourse and it is sustained by the work of a new arm's-length organization, the Living Wage Foundation, which is funded by KPMG, Aviva and Nestle as well as QMUL. In this sense, pragmatism's concern for respecting the truths of others has brought us into surprising, yet productive, relationships with organizations that many in our discipline would put in the 'enemy camp'. The need to build relationships with these actors in order to effect change has led us to question our academic assumptions as critical geographers. In addition, our experience of working with other people in our local community and the wider campaign has led us to re-think political possibilities. Rather than shying away from this, we have moved with the alliance and the campaign, recognizing the new opportunities that can arise from this form of community building and its political possibilities. This has also allowed our work to have a more tangible public benefit.

Going further, however, a more recent research project into the issue of housing in Tower Hamlets has used process pragmatism

as a way to conduct research while also developing the civic capacity of those taking part. Rather than taking a local concern, housing, and then raising funds to do some academic research – as has been done in relation to the Living Wage campaign – this project remained rooted in the local community throughout. Once identified as a problem in need of a solution, the research project was conducted as a means to generate knowledge while also building the capacity of the volunteer community researchers. As such, these volunteers were then able to lead and promote the political action that was necessary to enact the changes proposed.

It is well-known that Tower Hamlets, in common with other inner London areas, has long faced challenges in relation to housing. Over the past decade, these problems have got worse and include rent increases and the unaffordability of new build developments in the borough, overcrowding, unethical private sector landlords, and damp that causes health problems for children as well as their parents. In 2014 one of us (Harney), facilitated a team of volunteer researchers from the local CUK alliance in order to work on this issue and he subsequently wrote this up for his Master's degree. Harney recruited and trained 22 volunteers from the local area who interviewed over 300 residents within a three-week period. The data gathered by the survey was translated into statistics quantifying the extent of problems like damp and rent increases in the borough, as well as providing case studies and stories that explained the scale and impact of the crisis in housing provision. The findings were used to generate a number of proposed solutions that included a registry scheme for private landlords, a mechanism to set rents at an affordable level and a tax on empty homes to fund solutions to the problem of damp. These proposals were presented to the main candidates for local Mayor before the UK local elections in May 2014 at the alliance's borough accountability assembly – held at QMUL – where at least 300 local people got together to put forward

their agenda to the candidates seeking to win the election. The eventual victor – Lutfur Rahman – agreed to all the proposals and he was subsequently expected to implement these ideas.²

The housing survey thus acted as a tool for the community to attempt to resolve its own problems by generating credentialed knowledge that was mobilized at the accountability assembly in order to ensure local change. In addition, the participation of local residents in the data collection, analysis and report-writing ensured that the narrative produced was grounded in common-sense terms and framed around the stories and issues that most resonated with members of the wider community. The report was picked up by the Bangladeshi and Islamic press, which have wide coverage amongst local residents, as well as nationally in the *Guardian* newspaper (Harney, 2014; Tower Hamlets Citizens, 2014). By combining a common-sense narrative with statistical data, and engaging local people, the research helped to build the power needed to make political change.

Drawing on Dewey's calls for 'education for democracy', Boyte (2003) argues that universities have a particularly important role to play as 'mediating institutions' of democracy by providing opportunities for people to cultivate their skills as 'political citizens'. Reflecting on the experiences of volunteers in the housing survey, it is clear that by working *with* people to research their problems in the way described, researchers can contribute to the development of people's civic skills and capacities and the re-invigoration of an active, engaged polity. The volunteers for the housing project spanned an age range of 16 to 38, and included sixth-form students, full-time carers and unemployed people from six different national backgrounds (including people of English, Bengali and French heritage). Although it was necessarily uneven in relation to where they started and their commitment and capacity, these volunteers underwent a process of personal transformation through their participation in the

project. The 22 individuals grew in confidence and skills as they tested their ability to communicate with strangers, work as part of a team, create narratives of shared problems through participating in the data analysis work and then speak publicly at the assembly.

Pursuing this kind of educational role as a researcher comes with its own challenges. It demands a shift in focus to ensure that we place the development of participants on an equal par to the generation of knowledge. A whole series of difficulties arise in relation to people's time to work on such projects, their long-term commitment and the need to manage diverse world-views to achieve a common goal. There are also challenges in ensuring that projects function effectively with efficient time management, team work and organization, not to mention the need for them to be enjoyable. Whilst direct and sustained work with people is rewarding, it brings other challenges to the researcher on top of those experienced in academic life. Balancing the imperative of process pragmatism to be more engaged in the work of relationship building, as well as the traditional academic requirements for solitary reading and writing, can be physically and emotionally demanding. There is no way round these challenges, but by conducting research through established relationships it is possible to reduce some of these demands and sustain work for the much longer term.

VI Conclusion

While geography has always sought to engage in the world, the contemporary juxtaposition of funding priorities that emphasize 'impact' alongside the pressing social, economic, political and ecological challenges that afflict our world means that geography has a renewed opportunity to demonstrate the value of this engagement via research and teaching. Our experience points to the value of being embedded in strong reciprocal relationships that

allow us to ask genuinely challenging questions and produce new ideas by working as part of an alliance of active citizens and institutions. This also suggests that geography has the potential for subversive influence inside universities, challenging the dominance of market-led competition by developing a civic relationship with the people and communities with whom they share space. Working within the pragmatic tradition, which stretches back to the ideas of Peirce, James and Dewey, to the ethnographic research by Chicago School sociologists, and to the community organizing of Saul Alinsky, gives such work firm intellectual foundations from which it is possible to advocate for this kind of research to be done.

What we are describing as process pragmatism speaks to many of the issues that are already preoccupying geographers – the nature of ontological contingency, the importance of research relationships and the formation and capacity of publics. Indeed, pragmatism helps us to think about the role and place of the academy in relation to democracy, as well as debates about the sociology of knowledge-production and socio-political agency. Pragmatism highlights that working alongside other citizens allows us to produce knowledge, solutions and action. This can help us to realize the geographic ideal of not only understanding the world, but changing it too.

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Notes

1. At the time of writing, Citizens UK has alliances in Birmingham, Cardiff, Leeds, London, Nottingham and Milton Keynes. While it would be possible for a School of Geography to join one of these alliances (and the School of Geography in Nottingham has already engaged), in other places, the school and/or the wider university would need to sustain its own alliance of civil society organizations in order to work together over shared interests and concerns. This is the kind of work that sociologists at Chicago University were doing 100 years ago and it led to the creation of broad-based community organizing that remains strong today.
2. Since winning the election, Lutfur Rahman has been removed from his position as Mayor of Tower Hamlets by a Court of Law for charges of corruption. This has had an obvious impact on the council's delivery of the proposed changes to housing. A second election in June 2015 saw the election of John Biggs, the Labour Party candidate, and CUK are lobbying him to make the changes that were agreed by his predecessor.

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