

Experimental collaborations: An invocation for the redistribution of social research

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Adolfo Estalella

Manchester University, UK

Tomás Sánchez-Criado

Open University of Catalonia, Spain

Abstract

This position article argues in favour of a research programme for the exploration of experimental collaborations, a methodological approach whose epistemic engagement with the empirical work is experimental and whose relational mode is collaborative. Digital technologies have effected a process of redistribution of social science research by which non-experts and lay people are increasingly using and developing tools for the production of sociological knowledge. Under these circumstances, we argue that such a redistribution of social science research is an opportunity to renew the epistemic practices of social scientists. With the proposal of experimental collaborations, we invoke a twofold displacement for social research: from a merely observational mode of research to an experimental one and from individualistic or merely engaged conceptions of research to a collective exploration of problems yet unknown.

Keywords

Collaboration, co-production of science, devices, experimental collaborations, experimentation, hybrid institutions, Internet, methodology, methods, redistribution of methods

Redistribution

In the last decade, there has been an intense debate in the social sciences on the transformations that digital technologies are introducing in the production of social knowledge. Those formerly known as non-experts or lay are increasingly using tools to extract social data from the Internet,

Corresponding author:

Adolfo Estalella, University of Manchester, 178 Waterloo Place, Oxford Road, Manchester, M13 9PL, UK.

Email: jestalellaf@uoc.edu

crafting instruments to analyse information and elaborating visual systems to represent this knowledge. For some authors, digital technologies are bringing with them a crisis for the empirical social sciences (Savage and Burrows, 2007), and for others, this transformation might be entailing a redistribution of social science methods that opens up an opportunity for their critique and reinvention (Marres, 2012). In this article, we argue that such a redistribution of social science research is an opportunity for the renewal of the epistemic practices of social scientists.

The elaboration of research methods by non-experts brings into existence forms of social research that destabilize the expertise and authority of the social sciences. However, we do not consider it a threat of any kind, for if methods are being developed here and there by non-experts, perhaps social scientists could interpellate these others as collaborators rather than as research subjects. Henceforth, in this positional paper, we argue in favour of a research programme for the exploration of what we call experimental collaborations, for example, methodological devices that allow us to intervene in social research through an experimental gesture in collaborations with our counterparts in the empirical work. A collaboration of this kind involves reconsidering the role of the social scientists as experts, a risky situation that however offers the opportunity for the renewal of social science.

Digital technologies are only one aspect of a wide process of transformation of knowledge production in our societies. A situation that in the last decades has brought into life hybrid institutions, non-academic organizations for knowledge production that are part of a large reorganization in the nature and distribution of expertise in our societies (Nowotny et al., 2001). This has been intensified by civic organizations, other groups such as associations of concerned patients and activist movements that have in the last decades taken part in a more pre-eminent way in the co-production of science (Jasanoff, 2004). We could aptly characterize our research in the past years as enmeshed in this epistemic transformation.

Collaboration

Between 2011 and 2014, we have undertaken two different research projects in sites strongly influenced by the imaginary and the practices of free/digital culture. Both took place in two Southern European cities (Barcelona and Madrid), in urban contexts populated by well-educated professionals and activists whose work and activities require specialized skills and whose modes of sociality are heavily mediated by forms of knowledge production. Adolfo Estalella's ethnography was intended to be a conventional ethnography of two renowned architectural guerrillas (*Basurama* and *Zuloark*) of Madrid but it turned into a project of collaborative contours (developed together with Alberto Corsín Jiménez). The project sprang from an interest in the practices of material urban intervention and grass-root urbanism and, after 2 years, ended up as a project of open-source urban pedagogy that took residence in the Reina Sofía Museum of contemporary art.

Tomás Sánchez Criado's ethnography started as a conventional participant observation on disabled people in Barcelona, advocating for new forms of user-led services and collaboratively designed technical aids. However, conventional ethnographic modes were deemed utterly inadequate for such a context in which 'nothing about us without us' (the Independent Living Movement's motto) is the very starting point for any research project with them. Searching for common objectives, in terms of research and practical intervention, ended up bringing into existence a collective called *En torno a la silla* (around/on the wheelchair), a group for the joint exploration of open-source urban and personal devices for disabled people. This process brought together independent living advocates, craftspeople, architects, documentary film-makers and an

ethnographer–Tomás, who has become the ‘community manager’ of the digital infrastructures of the collective.

Anthropologists Douglas Holmes and George Marcus (2008) have extensively discussed the implications for ethnographic practice of entering into expert sites, populated by individuals with similar reflexive skills and practices of knowledge production to those of the social sciences. They argue that under these circumstances, people can no longer be treated as mere informants but as collaborators. We contend that this argument might be generalized for other methods. It could be extended not only to expert sites but also to any other site of empirical research if we took seriously the forms of expertise and the knowledge production practices of people formerly known as lay. If this is so we could start thinking of collaboration as a crucial part of our methodological device for our endeavours. In both our research projects, the research design shifted from conventional forms of ethnographic practice to more collaborative modes of common exploration that forced us to re-elaborate our methodological assumptions, the kind of relationships we established in the field, the sites for the production of knowledge and the temporality of our research as well as its outcomes and representational modes.

Experimentation

In the case of *En torno a la silla*, this became very explicit. The ethnographer-cum-community manager was no longer participating in order to write. Rather, Tomás Sánchez Criado had to turn into an orchestrator for the digital self-representation and online documentation of the open design practices and urban interventions of the collective, for example, gathering pictures and drawings, taking notes for writing blog posts, disseminating their free license how-to tutorials, assisting in giving context info, acting as an interviewer and helping in the production of an ongoing interactive documentary. That is, he had to help in the composition of a process of collaborative exploration of what was being done and how to account for it. This process of collective groping (Latour, 2004: 238) that informs our relational modes of knowledge production resonates with a broader characterization of experimental cultures. Drawing on them, we wish to call the mode of research we have unfolded as experimental collaboration; that is, a research approach that is collaborative in its relational form and experimental in its orientation to the production of knowledge.

Whilst experimentation has often been invoked in the social sciences since the 1980s to describe the exploration of new modes of writing and representation, here we would be suggesting a displacement of experimentation to the empirical work of social scientists (Marcus, 2013). Despite the fact that the *imaginaire* of experimentation has been dominated by the physics laboratory and the idea that experiments are systems for contrasting theories, history of science has shown that experimentation is much more diverse. There are different styles of experimentation that cannot be reduced to a process of contrasting hypotheses in the laboratory (Klein, 2003). A different account of experimentation has been elaborated by Hans-Jorg Rheinberger (1997), who characterizes experimentation as the sociomaterial craft of devices that could enable us to pose new questions. With experimental collaborations, we aim to problematize the all-purpose notion of collaboration and at the same time use this figure as a distinctive style of experimentation for the social sciences. That is, social sciences articulated around the collaborative production of new problematizations, a particular way of finding questions that we are still not able to articulate.

John Law and Evelyn Ruppert have recently proposed to think of our methods as devices, that is, patterned teleological arrangements that ‘assemble and arrange the world in specific social and

material patterns' (2013: 230). We draw inspiration from this conceptualization in order to deploy experimental collaboration as a methodological device, a mode of assembling material and social conditions for the production of knowledge in our empirical work. Conceptualizing collaboration in terms of a device makes visible the different heterogeneous entities that have to be mobilized so as to bring into existence this relational mode in the empirical work as well as its epistemic conditions. Thus, collaboration not only consists of a set of methodological rules or a social effect of our presence but also implies a carefully designed methodological device that requires particular infrastructures, locales, languages and rhythms.

A research programme

Therefore, experimental collaboration would be a methodological device whose epistemic engagement with the empirical work is experimental and whose relational mode is collaborative. Experimental collaboration is a way of problematizing both the empirical world and our epistemic engagement with it. Through this figure, we want to elaborate a descriptive account of our empirical engagement and at the same time propose a research programme to intervene in social research. In doing so, we invoke a twofold displacement in social research: (a) from a merely observational to an experimental mode and (b) from individualistic or merely engaged conceptions of research to a collective exploration of problems yet unknown. For experimental collaborations unfold other forms of knowledge production different from the heroic and lonely individual research that social science research methodologies have sanctioned for decades, but also different from the engaged, militant and interventionist approaches of social research that invoke collaboration as a political articulation for the social sciences.

In sum, experimental collaboration should be understood as a methodological device assembling traditional methods that are nevertheless put under tension within collaborative aspiration. Its starting point is an invocation for the dismantling of the monolithic distinction between experts and non-experts; under these circumstances, the conventions of our methods that treat others as informants or research subjects have to be suspended, and the social researcher is forced to explore how to articulate his/her knowledge production anew. We believe that in exploring this displacement we might contribute to new modes of political articulations for the social sciences in years to come, that is, ones where the secure place of expertise is traded for an experimental practice that asks us to try things out to risk collaborative encounters of uncertain outcomes for the production of knowledge.

Whilst this experimental collaborative mode might indeed make us social scientists more vulnerable, it would also help to craft new promising avenues for joint research, forcing us to re-elaborate our methods, to renew the questions we can pose and to establish the conditions for new significant relations in the production of social knowledge. If we talk about forms of experimental collaboration, what we are longing for is a space of shared knowledge production, in which everyone involved engages in 'inventive and careful experiments' (Mol, 2008: 56), that is, attending to everyone's strengths and limitations; sharing their know-how, skills and experiences; and accepting to become other to be changed by collaborating in an experimental way.

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Author biographies

Adolfo Estalella is an Anthropologist and he was a postdoctoral researcher at the Centre for Research on Socio-Cultural Change (CRESC) of the University of Manchester at the time of writing this paper.

Tomás Sánchez-Criado is an Anthropologist, Lecturer in social sciences at the Open University of Catalonia, and a member of the Barcelona Science and Technology Studies (STSb) group.