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Response to protecting research participants: in defence of Citizens Advice

Response from: Professor Jane Holgate, Professor Anna Pollert, Dr Janroj Keles and Dr Leena Kumarappan.

The author of the above article makes a number of quite strident allegations attacking the methods we used to gather information from interviewees with knowledge or experience of problems at work. While it is tempting to address or refute each accusation in turn, we think it might be more fruitful to focus on what seems to be the main criticism—that of responsibility to research participants—and the ‘inaccurate’ portrayal of interviewees’ experiences and understandings of Citizens Advice. Though before doing this we wish to make two brief points. Firstly, it is important to state that the researchers on this ESRC-funded project did not claim that Citizens Advice was a ‘failing organisation’, and we were highly critical of the austerity measures that had already started to impact on the organisation when the article was written. Indeed, the article concluded by making the case that more money should be invested in organisations such as Citizens Advice to provide employment advice, particularly as evidence has shown this to lead to overall savings for the state. Secondly, given the title of the paper, ‘in defence of Citizens Advice’, it should be noted that a senior staff member at Citizens Advice HQ sat on the Advisory Board of the research project and read all the materials produced from this work and had no problems with the way any of data were generated or interpreted. The end of award conference, held at the TUC and open to anyone to attend, hosted a guest speaker from Citizens Advice who spoke about the difficulties the organisation had in providing assistance for those facing problems at work.

So let us turn to the issue of research ethics, responsibilities to research participants and critically engaged research, where the hope is to have some influence on policy and practice. A critical/radical social science approach to research has, as its objectives, a commitment to investigating social injustice and the effect of power relations, particularly on those most vulnerable in society. In particular, it is concerned with challenging exploitation generated as a consequence of ‘race’, class, gender, sexuality and other subordinated positions. The authors of this article generally adopt this epistemological approach and have made this explicit in much of the research they have been involved in over the years and this is evident in a number of books and articles where this has been made explicit (see for example, Holgate 2013; Holgate et al. 2006; Pollert 1981). So while

the author criticises us for having a ‘hidden agenda’ in our support for collectivisation as the probable best means to ameliorate the problems faced at work, we would argue that this is not hidden, but explicit. Yes, we do advocate this, but do not consider this affects the rigour of our investigation, analysis or reporting. We would align ourselves with other critical scholars who have argued explicitly for a form of engaged-research that aims to provide research-based evidence to support the struggles of the most marginalised in society. In doing so, we reject the notion that there is a form of research that is *not* influenced by the world in which we live and the knowledge we acquire as a result. The critical/radical social research agenda we adopt challenges claims about ‘objective’ truths that are sometimes advanced by those who place themselves within a positivist tradition. Instead, we assert an alternative perspective claiming that all knowledge is created by social processes and is thus dependent on the positionality of the researcher and the researched. We think Elizabeth Grosz summarises this standpoint well:

The conventional assumption that the researcher is a disembodied, rational, sexually indifferent subject – a mind unlocated in space, time or constitutive interrelationships with others, is a status normally attributed only to angels (Elizabeth Grosz quoted in McDowell 1997: 107).

In other words, this perspective acknowledges that, as individuals, we are influenced and changed by our material circumstances. Our ‘knowledge’ is thus categorised using often unconscious assumptions based on society’s constructed norms, dominant ideologies and our own lived experiences, rather than merely accumulated as data reflecting an objective reality. Brook and Darlington (2013), in a piece in this journal, argue for what they term ‘an organic public sociology of work’ which is explicitly partisan, but at the same time is both scholarly and rigorous in a way we would expect of academic research. Working with research participants the aim of this research approach is to provide evidence and voice that may help vulnerable and marginalised peoples. There is no reason to expect the author who criticised our paper has read our other articles based on our research, but if she had, she would have seen that much of our work, and research approach, consists of ‘oppositional form of critical study’ (Watson 2010: 926) and the participatory research methodology talked about by Brook and Darlington in their article.

To return, then to the critique of our paper, we argue it is thus too great a leap to assume, as the author does, that a conclusion can be drawn that we think advice agencies such as Citizens Advice or Law Centres are not required—indeed we make the case in the article that more community-based employment advice is required for those without union representation.

It is claimed that our research was unethical and had methodological flaws in that we recompensed the workers we interviewed. Given that individuals were giving up a couple of hours of their time to talk to us, some of whom were unemployed and had incurred travel costs to meet with us (even though we offered to meet wherever was most convenient for them), we felt it only fair to offer a token appreciation for participants' help and expertise. This amounted to a £20 voucher to be used at a supermarket. It is an accepted practice (within guidelines) recognized by funding councils and universities and it was cleared as appropriate by the university research ethics committee.

The author responding to our article makes the assumption (wrongly) that all our interviewees were clients of CABx—many were, but others were not— and that we inaccurately represented their views. We strongly dispute the allegations of inaccuracy. Interviewees were asked about their experiences, knowledge *and* perceptions of the CAB and we deliberately chose to present those experiences using interviewees' own words as far as was practically possible in an article of journal length. Our concern was to find out to where people turned when they had problems at work. The impression people had of advice agencies in their area was important—regardless of whether they were accurate in their understanding of what was available or the type of advice they would receive. This is why experiences and impressions are included. Word lengths in journal articles often constrain the detailed reporting of method used in research and we sought to assist the reader by providing a full report that was referenced on page 777 of the article.

We concede that there are two typographical errors in our paper that crept in the final version, which are unfortunate, but do not explain or justify this critic's attack on our paper. Our main finding is the isolation and powerlessness of our subjects, and the under-resourcing, declining capacity and consequent inadequacy of the available organisational supports to help resolve our research subjects' difficulties. We stand by this conclusion. Our findings endorse previous broad research on the non-unionised, isolated worker. Our reference on p.776 to 'in-depth interviews with 50 CAB clients with

employment problems' should be Pollert 2010, not 2005. We did not manipulate findings in the literature, but made an error in referencing. Pollert (2010: 69) concludes that:

'The most salient experience demonstrated here is that worker vulnerability lies in isolation and powerlessness, while attempted individual resolution to grievances by an external agency, such as the CAB, is extremely weak. This is both because of the limitations in the applicability of many statutory employment rights in the UK to employees (and not all workers), but more generally, because external support – particularly if it is under-resourced – lacks the 'insider' workplace insights and relationships of union representation necessary for the support of workers' grievances, as well as the weight of collective organization'.

Our reference to CAB client dissatisfaction is again based on Pollert (2010: 78) who found that:

'Although half the respondents were satisfied with CAB help, this includes those who were grateful for support but lost their jobs, suffered indignity and ended with paltry or no financial settlement (see Table A1). Only two people received more than a few hundred pounds. Almost half of the respondents (12 people) found the CAB inadequate and incapable of confronting the greater power and sophistication of the employer, particularly in constructive dismissal and more complex cases. Most continued to feel angry and cheated, despite the efforts of this underfunded charity'.

Had the author of this attack on our work pursued other references in our paper, such as Genn (1999) she would have found similar conclusions. And had she read Tailby et al (2011) fully, she would have found that the main finding was that CAB and Law Centre advisers experienced underfunding, under-staffing, under-resourcing in staff training and the difficulties in facing increasingly complex employment legislation. Tailby et al provide a sympathetic account of the impoverishment and inadequacy of these voluntary sector organisations in attempting to provide a professional service in the face of austerity. Nevertheless their conclusions endorse the institutional difficulties of the CAB, which our own paper reflects:

'We have given voice to the strains and frustrations of operating in a threadbare resource environment. Advisers cope, but at the cost of compromises they are forced to make because of inadequate funding and funding rule changes among

those working within the Legal Aid contracting system. The evidence shows work intensification, extra hours for unpaid volunteers and unpaid overtime for earners' (Tailby et al 2011: 287).

To return to research methodology and ethics, we used different ways to engage with the research participants specifically in order to 'decrease the power differentials that are often evident in the research process' (Holgate et al. 2012: 313) and one of the methods we used was the participatory research methodology to empower the research participants and 'minimize the traditional power imbalance of researcher and participants as well as to generate new types of knowledge' (Holgate et al 2012: 314). In this way we attempted to minimize the role of researchers in data collection and give the opportunity to those who are marginalized and subordinated to talk on behalf of themselves. We believe, as other critical social scientists do, that removing barriers between researchers and research participants is essential to democratize the research process and the relationship between researchers and research participants (Stewart and Martínéz Lucio 2011).

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