International research collaboration in the social sciences: in the golden cage of funding or tackling knowledge boundaries? (0357)

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**Outline**

**Research focus and context of study**

The presentation will examine international research collaborations in the social sciences supported by cross-national funding amongst four countries (i.e. France, Germany, the Netherlands and the UK) representing major contributors of research in Europe. It will focus on the ways in which the epistemic choices, collaborative ties and individual strategies of academic researchers, funded by the Open Research Area (ORA), are framed and rationalised. ORA is a multilateral funding scheme which was launched in 2009, as a joint funding initiative of four national research funding councils/agencies in order to promote cross national collaborative research in social sciences outside EU funding structures.

Literature review

In a context of financing academic research increasingly through time-limited funding of projects (e.g. Steen, 2012; Ulnicane, 2014), conducting and producing research collaboratively becomes imperative. Increasingly too, the research enterprise becomes associated with expectations and measurements of international significance underpinned by norms that elevate the international beyond the ranks of the national and the local. Nearly half a century after the writings of Jencks and Riesman (1968) who argued that the local was supplanted by the national in processes of academic professionalization in the US, the 'academic revolution' continues its march of change globally with norms and allegiances currently shifting from national to international criteria of reputation and influence.

However, the largest part of research funding remains in the hands of national or local sponsors (Hennemanna et al., 2012) creating tensions between the global structure of scientific fields and the organisation of its funding within research spaces (Nedeva, 2013) as well as between policy ambition for promoting internationalisation of scientific collaboration and the territorial politics of its implementation. Although international research may have been a characteristic of life, natural, formal sciences and technology, social sciences and humanities have been anchored in national contexts and groups of reference (Rostan et al., 2014). So has funding and governance of research in those latter fields despite social science policy moving closer to science and technology research policies (Donovan, 2005).

Although epistemologically diverse, social sciences have embraced models of team research linked to funding of time bound projects within resource intensive research fields (Papatsiba, 2013). Project funding in research, broadly speaking, has been considered to aptly stimulate new fields and new themes but also to increase research quality through competition (Van den Besselaar, 2012). However, these ways of funding research result in specific ways of practising research which are not 'innocent' (Law, 2004, 143). Research *practices* have implications for all aspects of the knowledge construction processes. Lave et al (2010, p. 664) argue that 'particular regimes of science management and funding have specific and profound impacts on the character of scientific production.' Academic cultures (the tribes) are inexorably linked with disciplinary knowledge (their "territories"), and academic identities and sense of belonging to academic tribes (Becher and Trowler 2001). The presentation aims to contribute insights into the ways in which research funding elicits research practices which are not only, or simply, adaptive responses of strategic actors but are also constitutive and productive of knowledge.

**Methodology**

We identified 15 funded projects from the early calls of the ORA scheme and initially carried out a mapping of those funded projects using publicly available data such as, project presentations on the participating research councils' websites or websites dedicated to the research projects, grantees' CVs posted on their institutions' website, bibliometric information available from Scopus and Google Scholar. Alongside information about co-authorship between or among collaborating researchers, we also sought to identify more informal links that could be detected through internet search engines, such as academic invitations, participations in conferences/symposia, editorial or various advisory boards, or connections through reputed researchers in their respective fields, mentors or same institution colleagues. This method offered a glimpse into the degree of embeddedness of researchers in 'invisible colleges', research networks, and policy-driven models of partnerships and collaboration which fed into the construction of a typology of research collaborations as well as it enabled us to approach the interviews with a background regarding patterns and history of collaborations. Once this phase of data collection was completed, we carried out 18 semi-structured interviews of ORA grant holders using Skype, for all but two interviews, which were phone interviews. Our aim was to form a picture of collaborations based on perceptions and experiences which was also informed by factual information about individual careers and track records of network activity. The synergy of the two methods enabled us to undertake the analysis of more interpretative dimensions such as knowledge claims, forms of epistemic authority and control exercised through these collaborations as well as strategies of individual positioning.

## Findings

The findings will discuss a typology of research collaborations (and not of researchers). This typology analyses how collaborative research within a funding scheme in Europe is enacted in relation to three dimensions: first, the knowledge generation claims that researchers advance; second, the types of collaborative ties and relationships that they seem to develop; finally, their professional positions and status in institutional environments. The typology of collaborative practice shows that research policies and funding cannot be assumed to be a force that unilaterally impacts on academic researchers in a range of HE settings, independently of characteristics, relationships and dynamics in play within situated national, institutional, disciplinary and professional realities. How social sciences researchers approach what is worth to be studied and how do they go about studying it within international research projects, what aspects they consider when choosing with whom to collaborate for funding purposes and beyond, and finally how these choices may vary according to career stages, as well as the national and institutional frameworks they are in, prove that is important to analyse embedded logics of action of individual researchers for understanding international research collaborations.

## Implications for policy and practice

Examining academic views and behaviours in relation to collaborative research, and the ways these are shaped by 'internal' to the academy logics, and increasingly, perhaps decisively, influenced by research frameworks, policies and funding is important. Research policies have championed collaborative research on efficiency grounds. Research and innovation have become major drivers of employment and growth in economic arguments associated with the Knowledge Economy, yet spending growth is levelling off and numbers of active researchers are increasing, collaborative research is claimed to pool resources and to intensify competitiveness. From the perspective of contemporary higher education, with universities trying to 'perform well in certain areas and benchmark their performance against other universities' (Huisman, 2008, p. 1) but also competing for definite resources in the wave of reduced government funding, tapping into the monetary, material and symbolic resources attached to international collaborative research become an arguably unavoidable option. The same can be said for research careers which are increasingly driven by quantifiable indicators of research esteem and impact (Lucas 2009).

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