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CiviAct: Negotiating ‘fields of paradox’ in anti-racist university community partnerships

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Abstract

This article introduces and critically reflects upon the development of CiviAct – a multi-agency project that partners six anti-racist activist organisations and two universities in the North of England. CiviAct seeks to support and realise the benefits of youth and community-led civic action. It does this by: (i) financially resourcing the work of six anti-racist activist organisations; (ii) connecting those organisations with each other to create new opportunities for co-learning; and (iii) exploring new models of community-led university partnership. Based on insights derived from a 12-month development period (conducted throughout the first wave of the Covid-19 pandemic) we examine points of tension, manifested at the intersections between community partners, universities and project funders. Extending Strier’s discussion of university-community partnerships (UCP) as ‘fields of paradox’, we outline the complexities of collaborative working within a UCP that seeks to adhere to the priorities of anti-racism and an ethic of love. In doing so this article surfaces the burden of boundary work undertaken by both academic partners seeking to prioritise knowledge and anti-racist practices beyond the academy, and community activists, who are expected to conform with institutional standards that may have little relevance to their practice. The article contributes a series of reflections that may be of use to other activist researchers engaged in UCP.

Keywords

CiviAct, fields of paradox, co-learning, boundary work, collaborative working

Introduction

CiviAct is a coalition of community-led organisations set up to respond to the enduring social, economic and justice inequalities experienced by minoritised children and young people. Our collective experiences of the harms of inequality highlight the urgency for radically different and transformative approaches undertaken by organisations accountable to communities, on their own terms. We recognise the talent, creativity and strengths of young people and their capacity to define the future. Together we convene spaces that support young people to transcend obstacles, resist injustice and challenge the status quo. CiviAct represents our collaborative efforts to uphold our duty to defend the civil rights of our communities and to promote opportunity and justice for all those within them (CiviAct Statement of Intent, 2021)

This article introduces and critically reflects upon the development of CiviAct: a multi-agency project that partners six

anti-racist activist organisations and two Northern English universities. CiviAct is a university-community partnership (UCP) that seeks to realise what it means to be *community-led*. It is also an example of ‘anti-racist scholar-activism’ because of its commitment to anti-racist, community-based organising and practice (Joseph-Salisbury and Connelly, 2021). By *resourcing* and *partnering* organisations with a track record of local (but wide reaching) responses to the harms of racism, CiviAct seeks to establish a *community of resistance* that presents new opportunities for youth-led involvement in the civic.

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The task of anti-racism is to ‘identify, challenge and change the values, structures and behaviours that perpetuate systemic racism and other forms of societal oppression’ (Dei, 2005: 3). As academics with established histories of working with and advocating for racially minoritised communities we (Mason and Williams) have experienced a dissonance between the organisational values, structures and behaviours of Higher Education employers and the needs presented by communities, situated within the very same geographies, but defined away from the resources and opportunities to self-actualisation. In this article – written from our standpoint as academics involved in community activism – we offer a case description of CiviAct, outlining the challenges that we have encountered and negotiated throughout its development. By reflecting on our own attempts to practice anti-racist solidarity, alongside the broader challenges of UCP funding and development, this article surfaces some of the tensions and paradoxes of research activism, offering guidance for researchers interested in practicing solidarity, prioritising ‘what counts’ beyond the academy and negotiating non-profit bureaucratic fields.

It is worth acknowledging that the standpoints from which we can reflect on the development of CiviAct differ. Mason (Will) (he/him) is a white, cisgender male who grew up in an ethnically homogenous (97.2% white) town in the English East Midlands (ONS, 2011). Will moved to Sheffield in 2005 and became involved in community work in 2009, as a volunteer youth worker in an ethnically diverse and economically disadvantaged part of the city. Since 2009 Will has been involved in youth work delivery across several neighbourhoods and provisions. His 12-year history at the time of writing includes youth work delivery, bid writing for community projects, community consultation activities, participatory filmmaking projects, action research projects and creative writing classes (Mason, 2021; Mason et al., 2019; Mason with Unity Gym Project, 2021). Will is a volunteer practitioner with Unity Gym Project, a Sheffield based youth charity committed to the promotion of health and wellbeing. He is also a lecturer in Applied Social Science, specialising in critical methodologies and engaged scholarship.

Williams (Patrick) (he/him) grew up in the ethnically and religiously diverse community of Old Trafford, Manchester (England) with his eight brothers and one sister. His parents migrated from St. Elizabeth, Jamaica to experiences not uncommon to many other Caribbean migrants, who settled in Northern towns and cities during the 1950s and 1960s. Arising from his own encounters with systemic racism, alongside those of his school friends and members of his communities, his activism is centred on the topic of differential treatment, racialised criminalisation and criminal (in) justice. Patrick’s research values are governed by a deliberately interventionist critical social research (Clarke et al., 2017) which demands ‘being there’ and ‘bearing witness’ in-service to marginalised communities, to collectively document experiences of racial and economic social harms and

injustice(s) that are driven by powerful institutions (including the academy). Over the past 15 years, he has worked within and alongside community organisations, movements and collectives to expose systemic injustices and to counter the dominance of harmful state discourses (Harris et al., 2021; Smithson et al., 2013; Williams, 2015; Williams and Clarke, 2016).

As employed academics, our community organising, activism and research practices have largely been undertaken without research academy (or knowledge exchange) funding and support. This in part, is due to our understanding of the institutional demands and priorities placed upon academics that can eventuate unbalanced and extractive relationships/partnerships. Relatedly, we recognise that against ‘our duty to promote, expose, resist and alleviate injustice’ (Clarke et al., 2017: 264) the university has produced (and produces) research outputs that pathologise communities, through the production of decontextualised and objectifying knowledge (Krumer-Nevo and Sidi, 2012; Solórzano and Yosso, 2002). This position is central to our reflections and the paradoxical relationships that we surface throughout this paper.

The article is organised into four substantive parts. The first part sets the empirical scene, providing an overview of the CiviAct development project, its structure and purpose. The second part offers a more conceptual overview, introducing Strier’s (2014) conception of UCP as ‘fields of paradox’ and detailing its relevance to our discussion. The main body of the article presents three examples of the paradoxical relationships and tensions that we have encountered as academic partners in CiviAct, related the practice of anti-racist solidarity, the limits of academic funding and challenges of negotiating non-profit bureaucratic fields. In all instances these tensions are longstanding, continuing and structurally located. Our accounts, therefore, do not claim to solve these issues. What they do attempt to do is offer insights into how we, as a collective, negotiated them within CiviAct. We hope that these reflections will prompt further discussion alongside being instructive for other colleagues interested in UCP as anti-racist practice. The article closes with some final reflections on the limits and possibilities of anti-racist UCP.

The CiviAct development project

The CiviAct development project was funded by a small grant from the National Lottery Community Fund (NLCF). Our application to the NLCF sought to resource a 12-month period of partnership development between six anti-racist activist organisations in Sheffield and Manchester: Kids of Colour [Manchester], The Hideaway [Manchester], JENGBA [Manchester/London], DiverseCity Development Trust [Sheffield], MA Education CIC [Sheffield] and Unity Gym Project [Sheffield]. All six organisations were already known to either Mason or Williams through prior relationships of collaboration and engagement. It was also examples of such engagement that prompted an initial invitation to apply to the

fund. Through a combination of youth and community work, anti-racist education and training, legal representation, administrative support for the faith and voluntary sector and campaign work, all six organisations enjoy a demonstrable track record of anti-racist organising and resistance.

Our development grant was awarded in March 2020, 2 weeks before the imposition of national Covid-19 ‘lockdown’ restrictions. The associated measures, or ‘lockdown laws’, used powers in public health legislation to place limits and requirements on individuals’ behaviours and movements, to help slow the spread of Covid-19 (Barber et al., 2021). Specifically, the CiviAct development project sought to: (i) financially support a proportion of ‘core’ delivery costs for each activist organisation; (ii) connect the organisations with each other to create new co-learning opportunities; (iii) generate a larger funding application to the NLCF; and (iv) consider new models of community-led university partnership. This work was envisioned as a series of exchange visits between the community partners in Sheffield and Manchester. However, the imposition of ‘lockdown laws’ alongside the unforeseen pressures of responding to the needs generated by Covid-19 forced a number of unanticipated and remote adaptations. These pressures, that were acutely felt within racially minoritised communities, manifested in a range of new, sometimes immediate, responses to local needs, including food poverty, the closure of social infrastructure (like churches, mosques and youth services), digital access to education, mental health crises and bereavement (Nazroo and Becares, 2021).

As an example of UCP CiviAct was formed as a collective endeavour, aspiring towards principles of working in solidarity with communities and realising what it might mean to be community-led. It is worth acknowledging here that participation exists on something of a spectrum within the complex field of community engaged scholarship. Claims to participation can range from tokenistic researcher-led engagements with community members, to pre-existing community-led projects that invite academic support, on their own terms (Cook et al., 2017). Our references to community-led, in this case, represent a shared commitment to prioritise the needs and aspirations of the CiviAct organisations, irrespective of their alignment with university priorities. Solidarity, in relation to this, is something that we understand as active and imbued with an ethic of love. It is also something motivated by *feeling* and the desire to resist and challenge experiences of injustice (Hemmings, 2012). For hooks (2000: 94) realising a love ethic means utilising ‘care, commitment, trust, responsibility, respect and knowledge’ in our everyday lives. This is a framework that connotes not only interpersonal commitments but a willingness to demonstrate qualities – like trustworthiness – that need to be earned, over time (Costas Battle and Carr, 2021; Mason, 2021). As Prainsack and Buyx (2011: 49) put it, solidarity requires ‘enactments of the willingness to carry costs to assist others’. In this sense, solidarity is inherently relational

(Ross et al., 2022). It is also something that is done and sometimes at one’s own expense, not something that is just felt (Gallagher, 2020).

CiviAct, as such, is a radical coalition built upon foundations of love, solidarity and resistance. The work of partner organisations directly resist the harms of inequality visited upon minoritised communities. The formal inclusion of university partners within CiviAct exists to serve these ends, and the organisation and financing of CiviAct seeks to nurture the development of anti-racist solidarities, despite the increasingly individualised and politicised funding landscape (Harries et al., 2020). However, CiviAct is also a coalition that paradoxically benefits from the resources of powerful agencies with institutional priorities and expectations (universities and funders). This is a dynamic that generates ‘fields of paradox’ manifested at the intersection between partners with competing priorities, accountabilities and expectations (Strier, 2014). We employ the language of ‘paradox’ here to signify the contradictory features, qualities or outcomes encompassed within aspects of UCP work.

University-community partnerships as ‘fields of paradox’

‘University-community partnership’ (UCP) is an umbrella term used to signify the range of activities that see university staff and/or students work collaboratively with community partners towards ostensibly shared goals. The nature of such partnerships and the activities that they encompass can vary substantially, from advocacy work to community-based participatory research and wider co-learning and development activities. These practices often aspire towards principles of collaboration, equality and social justice (Clarke et al., 2017). Though, as Strier (2014) has acknowledged, they are also typically shot through with ethical complexity and tension at the intersections between actors with different histories of empowerment and exclusion (*see also* Smith, 2012). The noun ‘community’ requires some basic explanation in this context. This is because community could signify any group of social actors, including elites. However its use within the lexicon of UCP typically connotes minoritised or otherwise excluded groups. Hence ‘community’ is not a neutral term and it is one that remains difficult to separate from wider histories of stigma, Othering and racialisation (Young, 2008). UCPs often seek to counter what are established histories of academic extraction and harm, whilst remaining at least somewhat embroiled within them (Smith, 2012).

Critical accounts of scholar activism have questioned the nature of UCPs and the extent to which particularly research-oriented collaborations really benefit community actors (Clennon, 2020). Studies of anti-racist scholar-activism have also revealed the antithetical nature of relationships between such partnerships and the ‘neoliberal-imperial-institutionally-racist’ university system (Joseph-Salisbury

and Connelly, 2021). UCPs, alongside the associated practices of co-production, engaged scholarship and scholar-activism are contentious spaces; spaces that Strier (2014) has framed as ‘fields of paradox’. In Bourdieu’s sociology a ‘field’ signifies a social arena in which ‘struggles or manoeuvres take place over specific resources or stakes’ (Jenkins, 2002: 84). To offer an intuitive grasp of what is meant by ‘field’ Bourdieu employs the analogy of a game. This game (the structures of which can span any number of social contexts) sees actors – anchored in historical relations of power – play for what is at stake, be that intellectual distinction, financial resources, cultural status or otherwise. Hence ‘to think in terms of field is to think relationally’ and with specific reference to the ways that access to different forms of capital can influence one’s social positioning within respective fields (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 96).

Bourdieu’s field metaphor can be usefully employed to capture a number of tensions imbued within UCPs, where actors – each attempting to excel within their own contexts – seek to work collaboratively. Academia, for instance, is increasingly described as a field permeated by neoliberal logics of competition and individualised pressures to secure the resources to do funded research and benefit from the associated capital and esteem (Edwards, 2022; Mountz et al., 2015). As Mason (2021) has highlighted elsewhere, these are pressures that produce the paradoxical effect of valorising community engaged scholarship whilst undermining the conditions necessary to realise its potential (*see also* Heney and Poleykett, 2021; Williams et al., 2020).

Beyond the academy Woolford and Curran (2013) have argued that non-profit community services might be situated within a ‘bureaucratic field’; a space where actors must increasingly compete for the resources to do their work. UK austerity measures have impacted non-profit community services both disproportionately and unevenly (Jones et al., 2016). In this context, competition for scarce financial resources has intensified, alongside broader changes to the kinds of funding available and the principles associated with their acquisition (Webb, 2021). Harries et al. (2020), for instance, have reported an observed decline in the availability of more flexible local authority funding in place of narrower and more targeted government funds.

The capacity of actors to compete within this funding landscape is not evenly distributed (Woolford and Curran, 2013). UK sociologists have demonstrated the extent to which the structure of this game is rigged along the lines of race (Harries et al., 2020). It is larger typically white-led organisations for instance – who often enjoy no, or weaker community ties – that tend to have readier access to the forms of capital necessary to identify funds and appear compliant before resource gatekeepers (Harries et al., 2020; Woolford and Curran, 2013). Conversely, local community-based organisations – who are more often experientially connected to and representative of the communities they serve

– continue to perform their work with very limited resources. Changes to the principles and politics of government funding also raise specific challenges for anti-racist organisations (Hargrave, 2022; Harries et al., 2020). This is an issue exacerbated by contemporary denials of systemic racism, as evidenced by the 2021 Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities report (Sewell et al., 2021). Increasingly narrowing and depoliticised funding parameters raise moral dilemmas for activist organisers. Studies with UK youth workers, for example, have evidenced the ethical tensions practitioners face when they are forced to compete for funding whose perquisites demand a level of complicity with government priorities (Pope, 2016; Williams, 2015).

The complexity outlined here creates a set of conditions in which actors involved in UCPs have to negotiate the competing pressures, compromises and expectations associated with their respective fields. Facer and Enright (2016), for instance, have outlined the complexity of managing priorities across partners that are accountable to different communities, funders or institutions. Barbour et al. (2017) have examined the temporal challenges associated with UCPs, where actors experience competing time pressures and expectations. Tuck and Yang (2014) have examined the need to temper academic predispositions towards researching (with) communities when ‘knowledge exchange’ or research might not actually be the intervention that is needed. UCPs, as such, are ‘fields of paradox’ characterised by tensions, ‘conflicts, contradictions, and competing identities, interests and agendas’ (Strier, 2014: 162).

Experiencing and negotiating paradox in anti-racist UCP

In the discussion that follows we present three examples of the paradoxical outcomes, tensions and constraints that we have experienced and negotiated throughout the development of CiviAct. These examples are organised under three headings: (i) practicing anti-racist solidarity; (ii) prioritising *what counts* beyond the academy, from the academy; and (iii) negotiating non-profit bureaucratic fields. Under each heading we offer a reflective account of the paradoxical relation itself, before detailing our (imperfect) attempts to negotiate it. The examples chosen derive from remote group discussions (undertaken monthly between March 2020 and March 2021) with all the CiviAct partners. These examples are illustrated further by extracts from six reflective telephone interviews, undertaken by Mason with representatives from each of the anti-racist CiviAct organisations (Sturges and Hanrahan, 2004). These discussions (lasting between 45 and 70 minutes) took place after the 12-month development period and presented an opportunity for CiviAct partners to look back on progress and explore plans for the future. All work received ethical approval from the CiviAct coalition, and the research ethics committee at the University of Sheffield.¹

Practicing anti-racist solidarity

Ross et al. (2022: 11) have described solidarity as a relational praxis ‘anchored in love and mutual recognition’. Solidarity can take numerous forms. It is also something that can be complicated by relational histories of power and exclusion. Curnow and Helferty (2018) have examined the paradoxical nature of racialised solidarity, where claims to solidarity have been co-opted by white settler movements (in the United States and Canada) as strategies for navigating asymmetrical power relations and relieving experiences of ‘white guilt’. Enactments of solidarity then, can have the paradoxical effect of reinforcing the power asymmetries they seek to dismantle.

As CiviAct partners our approach has been driven by a commitment to anti-racist solidarity, enacted through ‘being there’, ‘staying’ and responding to the needs of the collective (Clarke et al., 2017; Mason, 2021). One of the ways that we attempted to demonstrate this was by taking on the administrative duty of scheduling group meetings, synchronising diaries and organising collective events. Our development period involved remote CiviAct meetings, conducted on a monthly basis via the teleconferencing platform, Zoom. Given the manifold difficulties facing each partner organisation – all of whom were responding to an unprecedented increase in local needs – it did not feel feasible or appropriate to share responsibility for the coordination or administration of meetings. Given that most of the CiviAct organisers were also women, who have historically been at the fore of anti-racist work and community activism (Elliott-Cooper, 2021), we also recognised that the imposition of additional administrative tasks could itself be experienced as oppressive.

Taking on this work meant circulating prospective meeting dates, following up responses, proposing agenda items, chairing sessions, circulating minutes and gathering critical reflections on a rolling basis. At the time, this felt like the most appropriate response to the demands facing the collective. However, it also generated a level of ethical discomfort because fulfilling this role maintained institutional control over the coordination of the development process. For Mason – who conducted the bulk of this work – that discomfort was compounded by the racial politics of his own positionality as white. Following the international Black Lives Matter demonstrations (May, 2020) there were explicit calls for anti-racist movements to resist the institutional appropriation of racial justice, encapsulated by the slogan ‘nothing about us, without us’ (Scott, 2018). Implicit here, is the acknowledgement that universities too ‘are active (re)producers of the unequal power relations that make up the matrix of domination’ (Joseph-Salisbury and Connelly, 2021: 179). The paradox outlined here then, lies in the risk of reproducing (white) institutional privilege, as a consequence of taking on anti-racist administrative work.

It is worth staying with this discomfort for a moment (Haraway, 2016). Chadwick (2021) has offered an important

commentary on the politics of discomfort. Resisting the urge to smooth over or ‘iron out’ discomfort, she argues, generates possibilities to recognise and counter the reproduction of ‘harmful and systematic ignorances’ (Chadwick, 2021: 9). We confronted and negotiated our discomfort in two ways. First, we chose to acknowledge and share our experience with the collective, reflecting openly and purposefully on the politics of our positionality as academics (racialised as Black and white) within CiviAct. We did this during monthly meetings, and in ways that made our roles and identities visible and open to scrutiny. Our second action, resulting from the first, involved a commitment to organising meetings in a way that was adaptive to the needs of the collective. Throughout our development period, for example, it was not uncommon to adapt previously agreed agendas in favour of the collective need for listening and mutual support, related to the unfolding consequences of Covid-19. Indeed, there were moments of tears and sharing the collective burden of responsibility that CiviAct members felt towards their teams and their communities. In these moments, meetings gave way to unprompted acts of care and the facilitation of a space to give voice to the visceral and storied accounts of the pandemic. As such, meetings ranged (sometimes unpredictably) in content, structure and purpose from therapeutic dialogue to pragmatic and future oriented matters, like the development of funding applications to secure core organisational costs. Holding this space meant balancing a commitment between flexibility and purpose, alongside occasionally *getting out of our own way* to the extent that our academic inclinations to organise, formalise or define were resisted and surpassed by the collective need to generate an open and responsive space. The following reflection from MA Education CIC is illustrative:

You and Patrick let the space open up which was good. Because I think, if the two of you just had your academic hats on, if the two of you came in and said, “This is our working definition of CiviAct, what do you think of it?” it could have been problematic. But you both just took a step back and said “Let’s have a conversation about it. Let’s unpack it”. So yeah, I was honestly paying attention to what you and Patrick would do because I was thinking they’re going to want to change it and find meaning and find a definition, particularly because you’ve got the evaluation to do, and you do all the direct links to the funders. So, I was sensing the pressure that you might have been under to find a way of just making sense of it for the funders, but I think you resisted which was good. . . otherwise you probably would have caused more harm (MA Education CIC).

These comments present an important and telling juxtaposition between ‘academic’ ways of working (imagined as prescriptive) and the more flexible and generative nature of dialogue. Dialogue, in this account, is positioned in opposition to ‘academic’ work because exploring the development of CiviAct meant taking our ‘academic hats’ off and demonstrating a willingness to adapt and change with the group.

This sentiment was also shared by other CiviAct partners. A representative from DiverseCity Development Trust, for instance, recounted how ‘academics can be very, you know, clear about what they want, and it doesn’t always fit with what you’re going to get’. Despite the increasing popularity of collaborative scholarship (Smith et al., 2022) our experiences suggest that academic work is still very closely associated with rigid, extractive and sometimes harmful research practices (Smith, 2012; Zuberi and Bonilla-Silva, 2008). Doing anti-racist UCP requires a commitment to critical methodologies that resist these harms (The Critical Methodologies Collective, 2021). In our case, this meant resisting the will to define, organise or formalise meetings whilst (paradoxically) keeping sight of the collective goal, to generate funding.

For researchers then, interested in anti-racist UCP, practicing solidarity means recognising and negotiating the risk of academic co-optation. Participation in the ‘craft of activist organising’ can also mean striking a balance between flexibility and purpose, so that partnerships can remain adaptive without losing focus and resolve (Joseph-Salisbury and Connelly, 2021: 76). We managed this by realising a commitment to dialogue, hosting sessions flexibly, responding to the needs of the collective and negotiating a common purpose, over time. This, we argue, is also ultimately the ground from which solidarity might be constituted (Ross et al., 2022). As the next example demonstrates, these are commitments that can mean working beyond the confines of the academy.

Prioritising what counts beyond the academy, from the academy

UCPs characterised by anti-racist commitments necessarily centre the needs of communities over and above the needs of the academy (Joseph-Salisbury and Connelly, 2021). As academics who identify as being in but not of the universities that employ us, realising these commitments can mean prioritising what counts for the communities we serve over and above institutional priorities (Mason, 2021). Despite growing institutional commitments to ‘public engagement’ and ‘knowledge exchange’, activist scholarship is still routinely experienced as a praxis in tension with ‘conventional’ academic standards and expectations; priorities that are increasingly measured by the acquisition of research income (Edwards, 2022).

Facer and Enright (2016) have usefully located a number of tensions between collaborative scholarship, research funding and administration. Research council funding, for instance, carries the most institutional value within university systems; value that can be exchanged in academic processes like applications for promotion. However, these funds also carry perquisites. For instance, research council funding must be: (i) led by academic partners; (ii) administered by universities; and (iii) assessed by an academic panel,

according to strict academic criteria. These are processes that we argue: (i) systematically deny community leadership; (ii) trap funds within bureaucratic university systems; and (iii) prioritise academic research outcomes over ‘more than research’ processes that may be more beneficial for community partners (Bennett and Brunner, 2020).

The duration of project-based funding also often sits in tension with the slower and more iterative pace of UCP working, which commonly exceeds fixed administrative timeframes (Mason with Unity Gym Project, 2021). Reflecting on the large-scale Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) *Connected Communities Programme* Facer and Enright (2016) surmised that funds, mediated by universities in this way, undermine equality in UCPs. The paradoxical relationship here exists within the tension between institutional pressures to secure (research academy) funding and the inequitable consequences of managing to do so.

To negotiate this tension CiviAct purposefully circumvented research academy funding and situated activist (not university) partners as the lead applicants. The collective rationale for this approach was simple; CiviAct sought to offer a direct response to the needs of its members. Our knowledge and experience of disinvestment in the non-profit community field prioritised the acquisition of core funding for all six anti-racist activist organisations. Unlike project funding, which compels organisations to reinvent ‘new’ and ‘innovative’ practices, core funding respects and invests in the work that organisations already do, enabling them to continue and strengthen their foundations. Money matters, and in this instance, working beyond the academy allowed us to prioritise what counts, as defined by the collective, placing core financial needs at the centre of the funding process. For the CiviAct organisations core funding was also associated with higher levels of autonomy, compared with project funding. This was an unusual, but welcome resource:

I mean we’ve got quite a lot of autonomy really, haven’t we, with what we can do with the funding. Originally, I thought that maybe we should have had less of that. More of a signpost to what to do with it. But then again, now that we’ve got it and we’re spending it, it’s becoming very useful and we know what we want to spend it on, that autonomy’s good (JENGbA).

For us as university partners, the prioritisation of core funding meant committing to a 12-month development period – alongside future partnership work – without any additional resources. We managed this by working CiviAct into our personal and professional lives, which necessarily meant making sacrifices in other areas, like participation in more conventionally recognised academic research projects. As Edwards (2022) has pointed out, unfunded research can be understood as a form of resistance, to the extent that it allows academics to maintain intellectual creativity and autonomy over their work. Paradoxically though, it is also somewhat complicit

with neoliberal values of entrepreneurship, productivity and work. Academics committed to UCPs routinely give (or steal) time from otherwise busy research, administrative and teaching schedules to accommodate such work. This is a practice Joseph-Salisbury and Connelly (2021) have referred to as reparative theft. A further paradox then, exists within the tension of an academic system that valorises ‘civic engagement’ yet fails to remunerate its practices. Where university systems are implicated within histories of institutional racism, extraction and harm (Smith, 2012; Zuberi and Bonilla-Silva, 2008) the logic of reparative theft offers a political justification for breaking this tension by taking back and redistributing resources – like finances, time and energy – in solidarity with communities of resistance (Joseph-Salisbury and Connelly, 2021). These are practices that, we argue, can also usefully extend ongoing debates about the reconfiguration of ‘impact’ within engaged scholarship (Pain et al., 2016). Social scientists are compelled (and trained) to compete for resources within their respective fields; resources whose prerequisites reproduce methodological orthodoxies and academic standards. However, if the measure of success in community engaged scholarship is determined by the difference it makes *for communities*, then research councils positioning themselves as sympathetic to these ends need to take a view beyond research. This might include, for example, renumerating core costs for partner organisations. Equally, if universities hope to incentivise the civic engagements that they profess, it is important they begin to more systematically recognise the value of community-based funding and grant capture (Steer et al., 2021).

Negotiating non-profit bureaucratic fields

Given the limits of research council funding and wider university processes (Facer and Enright, 2016) it is convenient to assume that the acquisition of community-based grants might resolve some of the tensions associated with UCPs. With respect to the development of CiviAct, there were certainly advantages to the NLCF, which we experienced as less bureaucratic, more expedient and suitable than research council funding. However, it is also important to acknowledge that funders in the non-profit community sector have their own bureaucracies, priorities and systems that can compromise the radical aims of activist organisations or at least necessitate a level of reframing in order to perform legitimacy and fit. UK research on local non-profit coordination has shown that cultures of risk aversion and bureaucracy can pose barriers to responsive and collaborative forms of community working (Cook et al., 2021). Sociological studies of anti-racist community organising have also expressed the tokenistic abuses of Black and minority ethnic led organisations, to tick boxes to fulfil funding mandates (Tilki et al., 2015) and the need for some organisations to strategically frame activities in ‘order to stand a greater chance of receiving funding even at the risk of depoliticizing inequalities and

entrenching the idea that race can or should be ignored’ (Harries et al., 2020: 33).

Collectively, our experience of applying for funding beyond the 12-month development period reflected a similar practice of *tempering the radical*. Paradoxically, it was the radical and hyperlocal focus of the minority-led organisations that attracted funders to CiviAct. Yet, it was still necessary to somewhat downplay the explicitly political nature of our activist priorities in order to remain eligible for funding. CiviAct partners recognised this as a routine feature of applying for funds within the non-profit community sector, where the requirement to strategically frame projects in line with funding priorities was commonplace (Smithson et al., 2013).

... it’s like that’s how I get the funding. I’ll use their language because I don’t have a choice, I have to use their language to get the money and then I swing it around to do it the best way (Hideaway)

For CiviAct this meant emphasising the politically neutral language of ‘youth leadership’ and ‘youth employment’ over and above the anti-racist priorities of resisting systemic injustice. Though this framing did not preclude the participation of youth leaders in paid anti-racist work, the need to *play it safe* is a reflection, we argue, that speaks to a larger systemic problem in which funding processes *temper the radical*, operating as strategies of moderation and control. In this instance we considered our reframing of CiviAct as a form of performativity enabling the acquisition of resources for anti-racist youth leadership practice, whilst adhering to ‘rules of the game’. The fact that downplaying activist priorities remains a prerequisite for much grant capture is indicative of the conservative structure of the bureaucratic non-profit and community field (Woolford and Curran, 2013). Academics working in solidarity with activist community partners should understand the limits and coercions that exist within these fields, alongside their own.

Project evaluation is another area in which community partners may be expected to conform with institutional standards that at times have little relevance to their practice. Doherty and de St Croix (2019: no pagination) have acknowledged that ‘while evaluation can be an opportunity for mutual learning and practice development, it is also a practice of neoliberal governance in which organisations must compete to survive’. Evidence of ‘measurable outcomes’ and ‘value added’ holds growing weight within the bureaucratic field of non-profit community services (Woolford and Curran, 2013). As Harries et al. (2020) have argued, this is a system that tends to undermine anti-racist activist organisations because their outcomes can be difficult to quantify and divergent from the mainstream. Ironically, it is in the area of evaluation that our (Mason and Williams’) contribution as university partners appeared to hold the most weight within the funding application process for a larger CiviAct grant. It is also an

area in which some CiviAct partners expressed the value of UCP. As one representative from DiverseCity Development Trust put it:

... you're bringing all your practical stuff, you know, all your expertise and evaluation and monitoring and all that stuff that you do (DiverseCity Development Trust)

Integrated methodological expertise in the area of project evaluation was deemed by reviewers to be an important – and ‘value adding’ – strength of the partnership. Inadvertently therefore, our contribution as university partners may have been read in a way that reproduced conventional bureaucratic traits and conceptions of universities – not communities – as the legitimate sites of knowledge production (Joseph-Salisbury and Connelly, 2021).

Conclusion

This article has contributed to the literature on UCP by offering a reflexive case description of CiviAct. Extending Strier's (2014) conception of UCPs as ‘fields of paradox’, we have documented and explored some of the tensions we encountered as academic partners who share activist commitments and accountabilities. The term ‘paradox’ connotes a combination of contradictory features or qualities within a person, situation or practice. In the context of CiviAct, we have made specific reference to four paradoxical relations. These include: the tendency for universities to valorise community engaged scholarship, whilst undermining the conditions necessary to realise its potential; the institutional pressures to secure (research academy) funding for UCP work, and the inequitable consequences of doing so; the attraction of non-academic funders to radical hyperlocal organisations with the concurrent demands not to be doing political work; and the paradoxical outcome of enacting anti-racist solidarity that risks maintaining (white) institutional privilege.

Lorde (2017) famously argued that ‘the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house’. There are, as such, serious questions about whether or not the deep rooted antagonisms between universities and anti-racist activist organisations preclude any real chance of anti-racist UCP. That said, it is also true that many of the people who find themselves working in universities do seek to engage in such work. Many also span and negotiate university *and* community priorities and accountabilities.

With this article, and by offering a reflexive account of CiviAct, we have sought to surface both the limits and the possibilities of anti-racist UCP. Given the nature of UCP work, which is necessarily contingent upon the relationships it encompasses, any fixed recommendations for practice would be inappropriate. There are, however, some general principles that colleagues, interested in this work, might consider (*see also* Joseph-Salisbury and Connelly, 2021). In particular, our account has emphasised the need

to *go beyond* conventional academic research parameters in order to work in ways that respond to the needs of community partners. Our approach to this has been explicitly *relational* and shaped by long-term inter-personal commitments to ‘being there’, ‘staying’ and ‘bearing witness’ to communities of resistance (Clarke et al., 2017; Mason, 2021). It is also *demonstratable* in its focus on actively *doing* anti-racist work, be that practical (delivering services) or administrative (organising meetings and bid writing). In UCP work the contribution of researchers should be *recognisable* to community partners. To this end we have also emphasised the potential of circumventing academically prestigious research funding in order to secure more timely and appropriate resources (like ‘core’ funding for organisations). These priorities do however raise at least two questions for anti-racist researchers interested in UCP. (1) If UCPs are so fraught with tension, are they ever an appropriate response to community needs? (2) If the value of UCP *for communities* is often derived from *non* or *beyond* academic contributions, what ultimately do academics bring to the table? In this final section, we offer some closing reflections.

Our account of CiviAct affirms prior assertions that, when it comes to UCP, research is not always the most suitable intervention (Tuck and Yang, 2014). Communities have established understandings of their own circumstances and it is often inappropriate (or harmful) for academics to document that understanding and ‘speak it back’ to communities, or other audiences (Smith, 2012). However, there are also instances where research evidence can and does constitute a powerful tool in service to anti-racist organising. Clarke et al. (2017), for instance, have documented how their collaborative research with JENGBA (one of the six CiviAct partners) evidenced the racial disproportionality of Joint Enterprise laws in ways that enabled the campaign organisation to mobilise against it more effectively (Williams and Clarke, 2016). That work is ongoing and extended through CiviAct. The work of *Resistance Lab* in Manchester also presents an example of how research partnerships can operate in service to anti-racist organising. Their recent report (Resistance Lab, 2020) has evidenced the increasing and racially disproportionate use of tasers by Great Manchester Police.

It is important to recognise however, that these partnerships do not spring from nowhere. Each of these more established examples were preceded by considerable *non* or *beyond* academic engagement, generating spaces for deliberation, relationship building and *subsequent* action. Academic researchers have valuable resources, networks and skills, but in our experience, these qualities are best employed in response to the needs of communities of resistance, as established by them. Academics need to *be there* in *dialogue* with communities for these relationships to develop and *dialogue* is an act of love predicated upon respect, commitment and trust (Clarke et al., 2017; Freire, 1970; hooks,

2000). It is exactly this kind of engagement that can feel difficult to justify for academics compelled to compete under pressures associated with the academic field (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992). To realise the civic commitments they commonly espouse, we argue that universities should revisit what it means to work in solidarity with communities and to move with an ethic of love (hooks, 2000; Ross et al., 2022). At the very least this would require a broader and more tangible commitment to the activist scholarship that already takes place at the boundaries of these institutions but fails to fit established conceptions of ‘good research’ (Joseph-Salisbury and Connelly, 2021).

Where UCP does extend beyond institutionally recognised forms of research design and knowledge exchange, we argue that it can work in service to anti-racist organising. Throughout the development of CiviAct, despite the tensions that we have described, it was by ‘giving time’ to organisations, through the coordination of meetings and the writing of bids, that we were able to collectively build our partnership and develop the potential for further anti-racist work. In July 2021 – and resulting from the development work reported in this article – the CiviAct coalition was awarded a larger NLCF grant, resourcing a proportion of core funding alongside paid youth leadership opportunities for all six partner organisations, over a 2 year timeframe. This is an opportunity that generates great potential for the CiviAct coalition. Notably, it is also a new phase of the project that is being led and administered by the CiviAct organisations themselves. We (Mason and Williams) are honoured to participate in this work, though we acknowledge that doing so requires both an ongoing commitment to navigating the priorities of contrasting fields and confronting the practical and ethical complexities of doing so (Chadwick, 2021).

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1. In line with the public nature of the CiviAct partnership, the identity of partner organisations have been included within

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