

Transcript

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Speaker 2. Lecturer in International Public Policy, School for Policy Studies, University of Bristol.

Speaker 3. Bentley Crudginton. They/Them. Deputy Head of Public Engagement. University of Bath

Speaker 4. Siân Aggett. Project Manager. National Co-ordinating Centre for Public Engagement (NCCPE)

Speaker 5. Dean Veall. Head of Engagement and Exhibitions. UCL. Former Deputy Head of Public Engagement. University of Bath

Speaker 6. Helen Featherstone. She/Her. Head of Public Engagement. University of Bath.

Speaker 7. Vibhor Mathur. Lecturer. Dept Social and Policy Sciences. University of Bath

Speaker 8. Jen Grove. She/Her. Senior Programme Manager – Public Engagement. UKRI

Speaker 9. Stacey Pottinger. She/Her. Octopus Impact.

Speaker 10. Jude Fransman. Head of Collaboration and Learning. Research on Research Institute (RoRI)

Speaker 11. Rob Cooper. He/Him. Upstream Engagement Manager. University of Bath.

Speaker 12. Laura Steen. She/Her. Community Engagement Producer. University of Bath

[01:00:08:14 - 01:00:10:13]

(Gentle Music)

Title: Relational Practice – looking after ourselves and others

Subtitle: While there's growing research on welfare and wellbeing in universities, the experiences of professional and support staff are still being overlooked.

[01:00:11:23 - 01:00:14:14]

Jill Cornforth

Nothing happens without relationships.

[01:00:14:14 - 01:00:18:14]

Tigist Grieve

That work was often invisible or described as soft skills.

Subtitle: Public engagement is the intentional practice of opening research to the public, enabling people to inform, challenge, and shape its direction.

[01:00:20:00 - 01:00:23:09]

(Gentle Music)

[01:00:26:14 - 01:00:30:03]

Bentley Crudgington

I want us to think not about resilience, but about resistance.

[01:00:30:03 - 01:00:33:20]

(Gentle Music)

[01:00:37:03 - 01:00:43:00]

Siân Aggett

It is those individuals that carry a lot. They carry everything.

[01:00:43:00 - 01:00:48:05]

Bentley Crudgington

I want us to think about being hard on systems and soft on ourselves.

[01:00:48:05 - 01:00:50:03]

Tigist Grieve

Once we named it, people immediately recognized themselves in it.

Subtitle: Section One: What is Relational Practice

[01:00:56:20 - 01:01:01:01]

Dean Veall

So we are talking about this work, Helen. What are we talking about? What are we talking about when it comes to this project?

[01:01:02:05 - 01:01:08:23]

Helen Featherstone

So we're talking about relational practice and in public engagement with research and the welfare and wellbeing aspects of that.

[01:01:08:23 - 01:01:14:17]

Dean Veall

We were constantly listening to our community members outside of the university of what they wanted and what they needed.

[01:01:16:09 - 01:01:24:00]

Dean Veall

One of the things they told us was that they wanted a person. We're not really a person, a front door, I think was the phrase.

Helen Featherstone

It was a perennial kind of cry from communities outside of the university. I think one of the things that was important about those listening exercises though, it wasn't just that people wanted an access point into the university and they wanted that to be a person. The key

thing is that it's the relationships that come out. So, in some of those listening exercises, we heard that people had quite difficult relationships with the university and they were often short term, a bit extractive, a bit toxic. And what people were saying was, how do we build up that longer term relationship with the research, with people within the university? And so that informed, yeah, the creation of a role within our team.

[01:02:01:01 - 01:02:24:18]

Tigist Grieve

We kept hearing people describe their work as deeply relational, but without having a language for it necessarily. And the term therefore helped us to distinguish between output driven approaches in our sector. And it allowed us to say that this isn't incidental, it is a skilled and deliberate practice.

[01:02:24:18 - 01:02:51:04]

Jill Cornforth

It feels like it's a term that's having a bit of a moment, I suppose, particularly in grant making, actually, in the grant making landscape, there's a lot of conversation about relational practice, relational grant making, the ways in which we can just be much more human with the people that we work alongside, the partners that we fund, the projects that we award grants to. How do you do the human bit and make that as important as everything else?

[01:02:51:04 - 01:03:14:23]

Siân Aggett

It's a term we're using now because of this work that Bath is doing. And we find it incredibly useful because it encapsulates so much that we were approximating at and talking around in certain ways. We were talking about emotional labor, invisible labor, and finding a way of saying it all in one term is really helpful.

[01:03:14:23 - 01:03:52:02]

Vibhor Mathur

I think more than a set of skills, a relational practice is a way of being, it's a way of doing. That I actually think is much more natural, it's much more innate in us as human beings. We are deeply interconnected in the lives we live to other people, and there's no reason that our work should be any different. And I think the first step therefore is that recognition, that you're not alone, you're not working in a silo, your goals, your targets, your work is perhaps not meant to be linear. It's meant to be a bit messy, it's meant to have paths crisscross with other people, and it's strengthened by the connections that you make.

Subtitle: Section 2. What are the positives of this practice.

[01:03:54:15 - 01:04:19:13]

Helen Featherstone

Once we've got some language around what we're doing, one we'd identified that this thing that we do is called relational practice. Lots of public engagement professionals, and not even people who would always necessarily identify as a public engagement professional, but other people who recognise they're in this sort of relational work, saying, "Oh, thank goodness, yeah, okay, that's a, I do that." I do that, that's a name now for what I do, and I can, and being able to articulate that means that you can advocate for it better.

[01:04:19:13 - 01:04:35:15]

Vibhor Mathur

For me, the beauty of relational practice or a commitment to relationality is that what you get at the end is always just richer and better, not least because the outcome in and of itself is of better quality, but the journey to that outcome has been so much better, so much richer.

[01:04:35:15 - 01:05:16:15]

Jill Cornforth

It feels like the work doesn't happen without somebody fostering that warmth and fostering that connection, and we've seen that really beautifully in the things that we've funded where the relationship has built, people really trust each other, people really like each other, they can then bring all of themselves to a piece of work, and that gives them the freedom and the confidence to say, "This isn't working for me," or, "I know this wasn't what we planned, but I've got an idea," and sometimes that's where the most exciting, the most

innovative work can happen, and sometimes a colleague of mine always talks about going slow to speed up.

[01:05:16:15 - 01:05:36:23]

Jen Grove

The skills needed to do this work are not just, quote unquote, soft skills. These are really vital, important skills that people can develop and need to develop to do this work well and ethically, and those skills can be just as important as academic or research skills that might be involved in this way of working.

[01:05:36:23 - 01:05:49:19]

Stacey Pottinger

Working in a relational way is absolutely essential. I think the only way that we will really thrive and flourish as a society is in relation with each other.

Subtitle: Section Three. How can the practice be complex? What issues are there?

[01:05:52:09 - 01:06:26:11]

Jude Fransman.

I think participatory research and the idea of relational work is often seen as something which is universally good. It's very virtuous, and so I think our report draws attention to the risks, the quite substantial risks that this type of work carry in terms of the emotional investment that you put into it, the burden, the responsibilities that you take on, the risk of burnout and other type of vicarious traumas, potentially if you're working with vulnerable people.

[01:06:26:11 - 01:06:35:00]

Siân Aggett

We provide services that support public engagement professionals in their roles, so I feel able to make generalizations about this. And

[01:06:36:01 - 01:06:48:10]

Siân Aggett

so often it is those individuals that carry a lot, they carry everything, they're under-resourced, there's often one or two of them for a school for an institution, they have a huge workload as well, and it's a relational workload. And so there's a lot that comes with that. There's the fact that you can't predict the directions things will take, there's the sense of responsibility you have for individuals and people, and that's not always recognized and supported. And so sadly, it ends up being the personal time or the cost of the mental and physical health of that individual that ends up paying the price.

[01:07:21:05 - 01:07:25:08]

Bentley Crudgington

I think talking about wellbeing can be tricky.

[01:07:26:13 - 01:07:48:08]

Bentley Crudgington

We live in a society and a culture across many forms it's felt to improve a system, you must improve yourself, and that goes for health and wellbeing. So if we think of quite a lot of the systems that perhaps all initiatives at the university offer, these are about improving your resilience, which I think is trash. And I want us to think not about resilience, but about resistance. So I want us to think about being hard on systems and soft on ourselves.

[01:08:04:12 - 01:08:20:04]

Rob Cooper

Doing relational work means not only you're going to be much slower at getting that, it's going to look very, very different and how you measure it's going to look different, whereas if you've just delivered a service, conducted an evaluation for someone, that's much easier to measure it fits into your sort of established processes and way of doing things.

[01:08:20:04 - 01:09:04:22]

Jill Cornforth

I think time is one of the really critical factors in this work, in relational working, in the ability to kind of convene communities and researchers together in a way that is kind of impactful, in a way that feels authentic, in a way that feels safe. This stuff doesn't happen very quickly. Sometimes there's a lot to be undone before you can move forward. There's mistrust and bad experience and kind of a worry about extractive practice that kind of has to be unpicked sometimes before you can move forward in a more positive direction. And that takes time. That's not always built into somebody's like 18 month research plan.

[01:09:04:22 - 01:09:16:13]

Tigist Grieve

Choosing to practice relationally feels risky. That's one of the points that was coming out of our work is people can be misunderstood or seen as less productive or often left unrewarded. So that creates a well-being tension for those who choose to practice relationally. So we are aware that many people despite this continue to live out their values and choose to practice relational practice at the cost of career progression.

[01:09:43:14]

Vibhor Mathur

The barriers to relational practice are often systemic. The fact that we have to work within management systems that are often chasing different kind of indicators of success. And therefore groups or people adopting relational practice have to almost recognize that commitment to their process and recognize that they might be in the short run losing out on some of those indicators. But I think the key component of that is also actively reframing what counts as success. Reframing that it's not just numbers or speed that you're chasing, but the process itself matters. The quality of output and process matters. The quality of relationship matters.

[01:10:19:16 - 01:10:25:17]

Laura Steen

If you're trying to put the emphasis on working in this way, then it needs to be funded properly because relationships are delicate. And if people have put their trust in you and then you're just like, yeah, I'm off now, don't know what's going to happen. Don't know if you have a point of contact again. Or like, especially if you're working on project specific stuff as well, like what you're just leaving in the middle of a project. Because again, projects always take longer than you think if you're working relationally.

[01:10:47:18 - 01:10:51:10]

Helen Featherstone

The one example that really stood out for me was someone who was talking about how they're holding relationships in a professional capacity, but it's within their own community. So then when they're out walking the dog or in the swimming pool, the voluntary and civil society organizations, it's the same person. But you know, and so you're kind of constantly on and that can be difficult.

[01:11:11:00 - 01:11:51:00]

Subtitle: Section Four. How can people protect themselves within this work?

Bentley Crudgington

There's a quote by James Baldwin, he says, "I truly believe if we understand ourselves better, we will damage ourselves less." 2025 was a very difficult year, but we still delivered pretty much most of the program that we wanted to, that we needed to, and kept the relationships going. Because we had these ways of thinking and working and responding already in place, it allowed us to do that in a way so we could adapt and we can respond. So it wasn't just work as normal, carry on as normal, it was working differently and adapting, but still able to respond and deliver.

[01:11:51:00 - 01:12:14:02]

Rob Cooper

A key part of working relationally is able to be reflective and reflective about you and what you were bringing into those relationships and how it impacts you. And I think we've got a

really fortunate team where we're able to do things like, oh, this has been a really difficult week for a whole host of reasons, I'm going to take some time to recover for myself, and that's part of work time, because that's the work that's been causing those problems.

[01:12:14:02 - 01:12:36:02]

Vibhor Mathur

One needs to have a sense of awareness of what is happening in a relational journey, in an emergent journey, when you don't always know what that end goal is going to look like. And that means attention to the well-being of others, respect for others, power dynamics, and inclusion, representation, but also obviously self-preservation, your own voice, your own well-being, your own boundaries.

[01:12:36:02 - 01:12:46:13]

Helen Featherstone

You've said to everyone, you've got a small budget to spend on something that's gonna improve your life at work, and so people within the team have spent different things, and then giving people that permission to do that within work as well. So very much certain that weekends, holidays, out of work hours are not recovery time from work. If your work is causing you problems, you should have recovery time within the working week.

[01:13:06:10 - 01:13:10:09]

Subtitle: Section Five. What needs to change?

Tigist Grieve

Ultimately, relational practice invites us to imagine institutions that value interdependence over competition, and that feels critical if you want kinder and more connected futures.

[01:13:24:10 - 01:13:25:22]

Stacey Pottinger

Haste excludes.

[01:13:27:00 - 01:13:30:08]

Stacey Pottinger

So you try and do anything too quickly, you're putting barriers in people's way. Relational practice transcends time, so the more time and space we can give it in terms of resource, I think that's really important.

[01:13:44:00 - 01:14:11:00]

Jill Cornforth

Sometimes people see the success of a program that's working really well in a flexible, relational way, and they want to adopt some of that. Sometimes there's a sense of, we really like what you're doing, how do we do it, but fast? And the answer is you can't. So I think it's maybe that growing appreciation that it's all right for stuff to take time. Sometimes that means you need to specifically invest in the time as distinct from the work.

[01:14:11:00 - 01:14:46:12]

Jen Grove

If we want to support sustainable relationships, we need to provide longer-term funding and also be able to fund flexibly. Secondly, we've been really investing the non-financial support for grantees, for projects that involve relational ways of working. So these support packages, they might provide opportunities for developing the right kinds of skills and expertise from everyone involved, and that includes both the grantees, but also their partners, might be community partners, other partners involved. Also opportunities for them to share learning, to share that best practice between peers is really important.

[01:14:55:15 - 01:15:23:00]

Siân Aggett

I would encourage a sense of shared responsibility across the institution, from the top down and the bottom up. People are one element of that, but the processes around those

people, the support structures, the ethics structures and processes, all these things are part of what enables relational practice to happen well, not just those individuals.

[01:15:25:09 - 01:15:55:04]

Subtitle: Section Six. What does the future look like?

Tigist Grieve

For me, it is both a methodology and quite a form of resistance, insisting that how we work matters as much as what we produce. If more of us align with around these sets of values and push for structures that support them, then relational practice becomes less of individual burden, but more of a collective way of working for cultural shift.

[01:15:58:17 - 01:16:26:18]

Jill Cornforth

It feels like these ideas about relational practice, about really human practice, are kind of gaining traction, and it always was really exciting when other people are saying the things that we feel really strongly about, that we're trying to put into practice and convince other people to put into practice, and when others are popping up and saying exactly the same thing, that always feels really exciting, it feels like lots of little lights in the dark.

[01:16:26:18 - 01:16:50:22]

Siân Aggett

It's been general consensus that we're at a tipping point for the higher education sector, and underpinning that is the need for a systems change, and that systems change is a values change, moving from something that is transactional, that is exclusive, that champions the individual towards something that is collective, agile, relational.

[01:17:01:17 - 01:17:20:00]

Helen Featherstone

So if we want communities, publics, people to be involved in research, we've got to do all that relational work, because we cannot be putting research grants together, pulling people together in a short term and extractive way, actually we've got to be building that capacity within our communities across the region, so that when the time comes, we're ready to go and they understand what research is, we understand what their needs are, and we can make that happen.

Film Credits

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(Soft Music)