Knowing about crisis

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With this brief piece, we raise some questions and suggest some alternative directions for knowing about crisis. In particular, we point to the role of core beliefs in shaping society, including the way in which those held by academics shape research and how knowledge about crisis is produced, as well as the influence core beliefs have on the everyday lives of the people with whom we work. We draw on the work of Miki Kashtan (2014), who identifies three core beliefs that have become persistent themes in our work with communities: separateness, scarcity, and powerlessness. We offer some examples of and reflections on work we have done in the Govan neighborhood of Glasgow, Scotland by way of gesturing toward how we understand core beliefs to work and how they might be engaged with. Our intention is not to denigrate the value of beliefs, but rather to point out the value in recognizing the beliefs that inform our ways of knowing and actions.

Keywords: crisis; knowledge production; core beliefs

With this brief piece, we want to raise some questions and suggest some alternative directions for *knowing about* crisis. Our own experiences working with marginalized communities who are poor in material resources lead us to what we take to be the same starting point as the other contributions to this special issue: the cultural and material structures of the present are hostile to human flourishing, and these dynamics were worsened by the most recent crisis of capitalism. We see this in the everyday lives of the people we work with in Scotland and Atlanta, as well as in the statistics regarding the crisis. For example, in the USA, the racial wealth gap intensified during and after the recession, and by 2010, whites had two times the income as non-whites, and six times the wealth (McKernan, Ratcliff, Steurele, & Zhang, 2013). In the UK, a report by Oxfam Scotland finds that suicide is correlated with deprivation, and pay inequality and work security have continued to deepen (Oxfam Scotland, 2013). While the set of papers in this special issue explore how communities cope with and respond to the crisis, we want to propose a complementary line of inquiry: how should we go about knowing about crisis?

In particular, we want to point to the role of core beliefs in shaping society, including the way in which those held by academics shape research and how knowledge about crisis is produced, as well as the influence core beliefs have on the everyday lives of the people with whom we work. A core belief is a story that folk hold about themselves/ourselves and the world that we have

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inherited from our wider culture. As engaged scholars, community workers and university instructors, we have focused on working explicitly with our own beliefs, as well as on helping students and communities to identify their core beliefs, trace their origins in broader societal contexts and rework them when appropriate. We are particularly interested in exploring how core beliefs enable and constrain the kinds of social change we and our collaborators want to see. Critical scholars might be more inclined to call these ideologies or discourses, but we wonder if such technical terms might have the effect of externalizing these pervasive and elemental assumptions from the act of producing critical scholarship.

We consider the relationship between the production of academic knowledge and core beliefs to be an urgent and relevant question based on our strong sense that cultural change must precede structural change. Without cultural change, or profound changes to the way in which we relate to one another to produce our social world, we believe, violence, marginalization and inequality will be reproduced whatever form the economic and political structures take. While we recognize the way structural relations shape and constrain social and cultural relations (i.e. the way we relate to one another), we are sceptical of politics and knowledge production that train their efforts solely, or even primarily, on institutional and structural change. To put it in the terms of this special issue, our interest is in cultivating the capacity for ethical practices of imagining alternative futures "in, against, and beyond" broken, oppressive, and crisis-prone structures and institutions.

This emphasis is born out of our deep concern that without cultural change, crisis is likely to deepen and reify, rather than challenge, the existing social formation. As many have argued, most notably Gibson-Graham (1996), the act of knowing is a deeply social and cultural process; we are not merely observing how the world works by producing knowledge about it; rather, we are calling it into being and reproducing privilege and marginalization in the process, depending on how we go about knowing. The act of knowing about communities and crisis, then, is irreducibly shaped by the core beliefs or stories societies hold about reality (what academics might call the presumed ontological foundation) of the group that seeks to know. Geographers only have to look to the not-too-distant past to the way in which the core belief in white, European supremacy shaped what and how geographers "knew" about indigenous cultures. These (core) beliefs are at the heart of cultural change; they shape what we know to be true, how we think the world works, and thus condition what we think is possible and therefore the decisions we make. In this piece, we elaborate on the role of core beliefs in our theory of change, and explore some of the meta-stories that inform radical and critical academic inquiry in general, and inquiry into crisis specifically. We then offer three examples of how we have gone about addressing core beliefs in our own work in and with communities.

These beliefs can be found in the often-unstated logic that weaves together the stories that we tell about how the world works and what is possible. In radical narratives, economic crisis operates as an opportunity for remaking the political economic structures that shape the social world. While this notion has been nuanced and complicated in an infinite number of ways, crisis remains so prominent in radical intellectual inquiry because it is so possibility-laden. Crisis, in this narrative, becomes instrumental, an assumed necessity of major political, economic and social change.

What sorts of ways of knowing and ways of being flow from a belief in the necessity of crisis as a precondition for radical change? A belief in the possibilities of crisis means that there are possibilities that emerge through conditions becoming *worse* for the most precarious amongst us (precisely what happens in crisis after crisis), and efforts to ameliorate deprivation are dismissed as conciliatory at best and complicit with exploitative structures at worst. We want to flag this belief, which, we think, shapes so much radical and critical inquiry into the possibility for producing alternative futures, for what it is: *a belief*. By naming it as such, our intention is not to denigrate the value of beliefs, but rather to point out the value in recognizing the beliefs that inform our ways of knowing and actions.

We want to suggest that academic inquiry into communities and crisis could pause to reflect on the relationship between the core beliefs of academics vis-à-vis the instrumental necessity of crisis and the material implications of that core belief for the most precarious. To put it bluntly, we could not disagree more that what this world needs is *more* crisis. The people we work with and alongside are no better off from this latest crisis of capitalism; the same cannot be said for Goldman Sachs. In pointing this out, we do not wish to minimize the contributions that some activism and organizing born in the midst of the crisis produced. Occupy Wall Street and subsequent Occupy-inspired efforts like Occupy Sandy and Occupy Our Homes Atlanta, for instance, have, no doubt, made contributions to changing how some people see the world (the 99% and the 1%, for example) and materially improved the well-being of some through foreclosure blockades and other activism.

We want to encourage academics who, we presume, share similar visions as ours – the just distribution of human flourishing – to explore the relationship between their core beliefs, the choices they take based on them, and their visions for the future, as well as ponder the needs that these beliefs meet. While there are myriad examples of intellectual interventions in, and challenges to, central tenets of a discipline – how power works, how gender is produced, what the economy is, for example – we are not proposing an alternative way of seeing the world. What we are proposing is another moment in the process of knowing, in this case, about crisis. Are there other ways, perhaps more incremental, to realize those visions? Might working in explicit ways with our beliefs start to reveal the hidden possibilities underneath the illusion of the current political and economic structures?

In her book *Spinning Threads of Radical Aliveness,* Kashtan (2014) identifies three core beliefs that have become persistent themes in our work with communities: separateness, scarcity and powerlessness. We offer some examples of and reflections on work we have done in this vein by way of gesturing towards how we understand core beliefs to work and how they might be engaged with. Throughout the book, Kahstan argues that we can choose to transform our views on human nature and that such transformation "requires us to actively seek to liberate ourselves from the thinking that surrounds us and from the habits of action we have internalized, both as individuals and in groups". The practices we have focused on as strategies for challenging core beliefs include: creating projects that practice new ways of being; framing problems; and exploring the needs these beliefs meet and the work that they do.

In what follows, we describe three projects we have been involved in[1] as a way of illustrating how such work might unfold. If we can always be understood as being "in" structures, the method of the three projects is to refuse the destructive core beliefs that shape broader society and institutions by creating spaces of learning, knowing and being that are at once "against" and "beyond" them through a variety of methods. The first is the model of GalGael, technically a charity organization based in the Govan neighbourhood of Glasgow. The name is derived from the Gaelic words for stranger (Gal) and native (Gael). The organization was born out of an environmental campaign to protest the construction of a road through a public park in the mid-1990s. The campaign itself was lost, but the learning that took place around the campfire in the midst of it served as the foundation building blocks for a very different kind of "charity" that reframes conceptions of work and practises new ways of being together.

The marquis programme of the organization is "Journey On," designed to affirm the value of all of its participants, provide tools for self-expression and self-validation through a self-directed path of learning and development. Unlike job training or job readiness programmes, GalGael seeks to offer participants a learning community and cultivate and activate the innate value in all participants, and reclaim work as a fulfilling, life-affirming practice, in sharp contrast to the alienated form it takes in capitalist modernity. By appealing to narratives of a collective and inclusive past, present and future, the work of GalGael is intended to challenge the core belief in separateness that typical job training programmes may promote and is manifest in how

many experience a society that engenders isolation. The objective is to foster a sense of interconnectedness and self-empowerment out with the capricious and revanchist capitalist job market or disciplining and punitive state programmes. The organization also seeks to challenge the core belief of scarcity by hosting shared, donation-based meals and providing "hospitality to the margins, a sense of place to the disconnected, and the right of responsibility to the disenfranchised". The approach of GalGael is not so much to ignore the myriad waves of structural crisis that have contributed to the material deprivation that many in Govan face. Rather, it is to refuse to be defined, limited and shaped by it; to find ways to recuperate the past, inhabit the present and engender the future through identities, subjectivities, social relations and cultural practices.

The Govan Folk University, a partnership of education, arts, community and social enterprise organizations, and the related Govan Together project, are the other programmes we want to highlight. The core of GFU is to surface knowledge that exists in a community like Govan (such as community-based care, resilience, solidarity, resourcefulness, etc.), do this in a way that empowers people (e.g. in the "surfacing" process, they become authors of their knowledge and get recognition for what they know and its value) and establish a bridge between grassroots-based knowledge and policy-making so that the latter are anchored in the former and designed to support community-based action. The overarching objective of the Govan Folk University is to create dialogue around the practice of knowing together, the origin and purpose of core beliefs, and exploring which needs are served through various conceptions of education and community. Learning reintegrated with civic life is thus freed from industrial degree factory to return to its original role in being fundamentally about human development. Whereas GalGael attempts to confront, rework and transform core beliefs about work, the Govan Folk University takes a similar approach to education.

The third project we have been involved in is one that sought to challenge these core beliefs, but remained haunted by them, as well. The project aimed to realign people's values and behaviours within a context of progressive community resilience in ways that would reduce carbon emissions. Unlike similar projects aimed at carbon reduction through decreasing energy consumption, the Govan Together project sought to highlight and learn from the ways in which the relatively poor already possess highly developed skills for consuming less, and by using those skills as a model for more affluent people to live in ways that consume less energy. In this sense, the project sought to reframe the discussion around carbon emission and consumption to challenge the ideal of middle-class levels of consumption as those to which the poor should aspire. To do so, the project sought to develop new forms and contexts for learning and recognise existing and old ways of learning that develop values and behaviours that reduced carbon emissions, and developing more "together" activities that involve pooling of skills and resources such as eating together, with the intention of cultivating a collective culture of "togetherness". Finally, the project sought to go beyond "awareness raising" by igniting consceintization processes in relation to rights and responsibilities in a rapidly changing world.

The intention of fostering a culture of togetherness and to re-engage the commons of the community was never properly realized as the project itself was plagued from the outset by organizational structures and practices that emphasized separateness and scarcity. While community leaders and organizational support staff faced very real challenges associated with compensation and organization resource allocation, the project itself was nearly completely derailed and often overwhelmed by the interpersonal and organizational challenges of working together and pooling resources. Project participants, by their own accounts, were not skilled enough in the practice of challenging core beliefs to shift from ways of using power in collaborative ways, and were paralyzed by a sense of scarcity and mistrust.

Working through these core beliefs, examining the work they do and the needs they serve, requires skilled dialogue and facilitation that explore the internalized stories about life, crisis

and human nature in relation to power, knowledge, scarcity, identity and so on. Tools and processes are needed to help transform the inner narrative that shapes our outer reality. Different tools will be required to work with reworking the stories of a community or region, culture, nation and people. In addition to the projects described above, we have attempted to weave this kind of reflection into our own academic and community practice. One outgrowth of the Govan Together project has been a regular meeting called the Govan Soapbox conversation. In these conversations, we begin by working to create a sense of safety amongst participants so that they feel comfortable opening up about their own core beliefs. We have found that internalized core beliefs produce shame as people try to understand their value and values in relation to unexamined core beliefs. During such conversations and exercises, we find it crucial to think carefully about the surroundings, space and dynamics that will make people feel supported and not judged when reflecting on core beliefs.

A second skill we have sought to cultivate in relation to these kinds of exercises is empathetic dialogue, or that which requires a non-judgemental approach to whatever the core beliefs are and what they mean to participants, and search for common ground amongst them. When we do find alignment, we work to examine the relationship between beliefs and action to bring about the kinds of action and change we want to see. When we do not find alignment, we explore whether there is enough commonality in the values we hold dear to attempt to find ways of working together that we can all live with.

Inquiring into, naming and reworking core beliefs are crucial to reworking social relations. As academics, community-based activists, and everyday people seek to know about how communities and regions weather crisis, exploring the core beliefs that shape how and what we seek to know is important and often overlooked. With this brief piece, we have attempted to provide some reflections from our own experiences as academics and practitioners working with communities working on core beliefs that we hope will be useful for others as they seek to incorporate such inquiries into their own practice.

We especially want to encourage academics to consider the way their core beliefs shape how to go about knowing about crisis. In the context of neoliberal universities, government austerity and ever increasing bars for tenure and promotion, beliefs in scarcity, separateness and powerlessness are regularly reinforced. And while each of us knows personally and intimately the risks that are involved in doing things differently in our respective fields, we are at once nourished, encouraged and optimistic about the promise of prefigurative approaches to ways of knowing about crisis. In the first instance, this might mean conducting research and working with communities in ways that model, or prefigure, the kinds of social relations we wish to call into being.

Through our ongoing collaboration, we have conceived of the notion of "resourcefulness" as one such way to know about communities in crisis in different ways (see e.g. Derickson & Routledge, 2014, MacKinnon & Derickson, 2013). Resourcefulness is an approach to knowing that attempts to reimagine the researcher and "the community" as not separate entities, and challenges the researchers to leverage their own resources towards the advancement of the well-being of the communities with which they work. The idea of resourcefulness as a guiding principle for scholar–activist collaboration was born out of an inquiry into our own core beliefs. We invite and encourage others to take stock of their own core beliefs, those of the communities with which they work, and generate their own strategies for knowing about crisis that prefigure the post-crisis world they desire.

Note

1. To be clear, we have not all had comparable levels of involvement in these projects. Derickson's relationship to these programmes is something of an ally, contributing time and resources where

possible from various positions in academia. This does not compare to the way in which MacLeod or Nicolas have made these projects, and other projects in and with the people of Govan, their life's work. For the sake of simplicity, we have used the term "we" in relation to the involvement of the authors, but that is not to imply a collapsing or an equation of the nature of that involvement.

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