Walls, Cracks and Change: The Challenges and Opportunities of Critically Engaged Research Within Current Academic and Refugee Research Structures

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Abstract
Many consider academic research an important means to address societal inequality of marginalized groups, such as refugees. However, transformative research arguably requires critically engaged practices that consider and transform dominant exclusive structures permeating both society and knowledge production. This paper discusses challenges and opportunities of such research practices, especially given power and (neoliberal) politics around knowledge production within Dutch academic and refugee research structures. Based on 14 researchers’ narratives, the results reveal how critically engaged refugee research is challenged by its marginalized position, academic pressures and culture as well as the recently emerged ‘refugee research business’. However, the paper also uncovers various ways in which researchers manoeuvre within challenging and facilitating structures by operating outside or in the margins of academic structures, making use of facilitating spaces and strategically employing dominant discourses. Finally, researchers arguably transform academic structures by challenging dominant research paradigms and transforming the institution of academics itself.

Keywords
critical research, engaged research, exclusion, neoliberal university, power, public sociology, refugees, transformation

Introduction
As a solution to academia’s crisis of relevancy, legitimacy and public confidence in the past decades, various scholars have been advocating for more critical, public and engaged scholarly practices, among others in the social sciences. Mills (1959) advocated for sociology to live up to its
promise by stimulating ‘sociological imagination’, a capacity that helps people better understand what is going on in the world by connecting their ‘personal troubles’ to ‘public issues’. His call was ahead of its time and served as inspiration to a social justice oriented and critical sociology (Meekosha et al., 2013). Burawoy (2005a) argued for a critical and public sociology, a more reflexive and transformative type of sociology engaged in social change. He inspired energetic debates about the ability and responsibility of academic scholarship, and sociology in particular, to be socially transformative (Fairbairn, 2019). Feminist scholars, critical race scholars and other critical scholars have also played a historically important role in introducing engaged scholarship practices, providing much constructive critique to public sociology and pushing sociology more toward leftist or even radical publics (Burawoy, 2005b; Fairbairn, 2019).

Scholars identifying as ‘engaged’ generally have a social justice orientation; they aim to address societal inequality of marginalized groups by collaborating more closely with them in research and action (Beaulieu et al., 2018). Their research starts with the community’s needs and aims to use academic knowledge and resources to produce sustainable and beneficial outcomes for both the community and the university (Beaulieu et al., 2018).

However, achieving societal transformation is not that simple. In late modern societies, power is often present in liquid and invisible, rather than visible, forms of domination (Bauman, 2000). This kind of power cannot simply be taken, shared or consciously and intentionally controlled (Foucault, 1978). It works through taken-for-granted dominant discourses that are internalized and that shape people’s knowledge, judgment and actions (Hardy and Leiba-O’Sullivan, 1998). In a system with multiple, longstanding structural inequalities, people are thus often unconsciously influenced by dominant exclusive discourses and unjust power relations (Young, 2001). Deliberate, autonomous, controlled resistance is therefore not easily achieved.

Considering the invisible, taken-for-granted and all-encompassing way in which power works, scholars are not immune to its influence and therefore might not be able to resist reproducing exclusive structures (Kajner, 2013; Muhammad et al., 2015). Moreover, academia and mainstream research are themselves entrenched with exclusive structures (e.g. regarding gender, race, sexuality and class), conceptualizations (e.g. regarding normality/abnormality, sameness/difference and agency/structure) and assumptions (e.g. regarding which groups are considered vulnerable or agential) (Shuttleworth and Meekosha, 2013). This all might inhibit critical and reflexive research, thereby diminishing its potential contribution to and transformation of our sociological understanding (Shuttleworth and Meekosha, 2013). Consequently, without considering and addressing the power dimensions that permeate academia, knowledge production and research relationships, engaged scholarship may reproduce instead of transform existing dominant and exclusive structures of academia and of society as a whole (Muhammad et al., 2015; Saltmarsh et al., 2009).

Some scholars argue that for engaged research to live up to its transformative potential, a more critical form of engagement is needed ‘to reveal and transform the relations that constitute the social contradictions inherent in knowledge production’ (Kajner, 2013: 13). They claim it is not enough to investigate how marginalized groups are excluded; researchers must also examine how these groups’ lived histories, experiences and knowledge are excluded (Kajner, 2013; Shuttleworth and Meekosha, 2013). Such critical engagement requires researchers to reflect on the historical development of their own thinking as well as to stay open to and dialogically engage with ideas that emerge from communities themselves (Meekosha et al., 2013). Thus, such critical forms of engagement constitute a move toward more collaborative or democratic practices of knowledge production that unsettle mainstream research ontologies, epistemologies, methodologies and knowledge use (Edwards and Brannelly, 2017; Kajner, 2013). Examples can be found in alternative research practices, such as collaborative, creative, critical or radical research, to name just a few.
Critically engaged research potentially disrupts ‘both the academy and the wider social system because it challenges the binary logic underlying exclusionary and oppressive practices’ (Kajner, 2013: 9). Rather than simply helping marginalized groups gain access to rights and privileges, critically engaged research aims to investigate and transform ‘structures that enable privilege and exclusion in the first place’ (Kajner, 2013: 12). Critically engaged research thus promises the production of knowledge that has more potential to transform dominant exclusive societal structures precisely because it addresses the power dimensions that permeate academics and knowledge production.

The question is whether this type of scholarship can actually live up to its potential, especially considering the power and (neoliberal) politics influencing knowledge production nowadays. In this paper, I discuss the challenges and opportunities of critically engaged research within current academic and refugee research structures, on the basis of narratives from 14 critically engaged researchers studying refugee issues in the Netherlands.

I begin by discussing the power and politics around academic and refugee research structures, particularly in the Netherlands, as well as possible spaces for resistance within those structures. I then elaborate on my research approach in the methodology section. Finally, I discuss how academic and refugee research structures challenge the practices of the critically engaged researchers in my study and the various ways in which these researchers manoeuvre within and thereby arguably transform those structures.

**Power, Politics and Possible Spaces for Resistance Within Academia**

Recent years have seen an increased interest in relevant academic knowledge that can help solve societal problems (Bourke, 2013; Kajner, 2013). This certainly opens up spaces for community collaborations, including engaged practices that may disrupt hierarchies and traditional approaches to knowledge production (Edwards and Brannelly, 2017). However, this renewed interest also appears to be closely connected to neoliberal developments of states and academia (Bourke, 2013). In fact, in the current context of austerity, universities seem increasingly pressured to attract external (government, private or third sector) funds and a preference has emerged for knowledge and community collaborations that are policy driven, have market value and can increase economic prosperity (Bourke, 2013; De los Reyes and Lundström, 2020; Edwards and Brannelly, 2017). This risks that the benefit and validity of research ‘is increasingly cast in terms of its practical utility and policy applicability, wherein the benefits of research collaboration, participation and engagement are tied to research deliverables, outcomes and products’ (Bourke, 2013: 501). Such developments then ‘may marginalise alternative, democratic, qualitative research approaches or co-opt them for instrumental effectiveness’ (Edwards and Brannelly, 2017: 274).

Neoliberal productivity is further fuelled by global university ranking and reward systems. The assignment of research grants, evaluation of academic excellence and considerations of internal reward systems today rely primarily on scholars’ publication records in ‘international’ (usually US or European) high-impact journals (Burawoy, 2016). This not only discourages researchers from engaging with national or local communities and frames but also pushes them towards mainstream theories and methods (Beaulieu et al., 2018; Burawoy, 2016; De los Reyes and Lundström, 2020). Consequently, critically engaged research and interventions are marginalized and neither appreciated nor rewarded in current academic structures (De los Reyes and Lundström, 2020). Nowadays, ‘a counter-hegemonic strategy has great difficulty in surviving, and pursuits in this direction are likely to doom its advocates to irrelevance’ (Burawoy, 2016: 956). A commitment to social justice
Critical Sociology may thus marginalize both the scholar and their work exactly because it violates dominant discourses and research frameworks (Essed, 2013).

Refugee research in the Netherlands is an especially interesting case because academic minority research (including refugee research) there is characterized by a historically strong research policy nexus (Entzinger and Scholten, 2015; Essed and Nimako, 2006). This intertwined connection between research and policymaking resulted in a preference for research that is instrumental, data driven and policy-serving (Entzinger and Scholten, 2015). This ‘Dutch minority research industry’ had a marginalizing impact on the development and acknowledgement of alternative paradigms, research(ers) and topics, among which are critical research(ers), community engaged research(ers) and research initiated by ethnic communities themselves (Entzinger and Scholten, 2015; Essed and Nimako, 2006).

Consequently, mainstream – mostly quantitative – research in the Netherlands generally problematizes ethnic minorities by focusing on ‘their successes or failures (socially, culturally, economically, politically) to live up to Dutch norms and western democratic standards’ (Essed and Nimako, 2006: 297). In the dominant discourse, refugees are often portrayed as having different (sometimes even problematic and incompatible) cultures or as being victims with deficits in human capital and resources who depend on the host society’s help (Ghorashi, 2005, 2018). This leads to hierarchical differentiations between ‘progressive’, ‘resourceful’ and ‘self-reliant’ Dutch natives and refugees, who are seen as deviant ‘others’ (Ghorashi, 2005, 2018; Rast and Ghorashi, 2018).

Consequently, mainstream – mostly quantitative – research in the Netherlands generally problematizes ethnic minorities by focusing on ‘their successes or failures (socially, culturally, economically, politically) to live up to Dutch norms and western democratic standards’ (Essed and Nimako, 2006: 297). In the dominant discourse, refugees are often portrayed as having different (sometimes even problematic and incompatible) cultures or as being victims with deficits in human capital and resources who depend on the host society’s help (Ghorashi, 2005, 2018). This leads to hierarchical differentiations between ‘progressive’, ‘resourceful’ and ‘self-reliant’ Dutch natives and refugees, who are seen as deviant ‘others’ (Ghorashi, 2005, 2018; Rast and Ghorashi, 2018).

Considering all of the above, the question emerges whether and where there is space for scholars to ‘research otherwise’ and resist or even transform these structures (De los Reyes and Lundström, 2020). As established in the introduction, deliberate, autonomous and controlled resistance is not easily achieved when power works through invisible, unconscious and taken-for-granted mechanisms that permeate all our knowledge and acts (Bauman, 2000; Foucault, 1978; Young, 2001).

Yet, individuals are usually partially knowledgeable and reflexive about the structures around them, and their (to some extent reflexive) acts also shape those structures (Giddens, 1979). Individuals are, thus, to a certain degree able to resist, manoeuvre through or even transform structures (Den Hond et al., 2012). Moreover, resistance does not necessarily have to be strictly rational. Creative expressions of agency can also have transformative effects. Creativity holds the potential of self-creation, which breaks the grip of determinism and enables critical re-imagination of normative conceptualizations of, for example, difference and inclusion (Shuttleworth and Meekosha, 2013). Such creative expressions of agency may take place in novel – and sometimes marginalized – spaces, and they may even be unintentional. But they nonetheless might challenge and unsettle conventional boundaries and make room for new imaginations, thereby potentially transforming academic and societal structures (Björkdahl and Selimovic, 2015).

It is therefore not surprising that collaborative, creative, activist, inter-institutional and intercultural research practices are considered especially promising spaces for transformations (De los Reyes and Lundström, 2020; Meekosha et al., 2013). These approaches can constitute ‘cracks’ that allow scholars to open up and explore alternative research spaces, defy and breach boundaries and even transform academic structures despite their own marginalized position within current academic structures (De los Reyes and Lundström, 2020). Resistance therefore seems to be possible by finding those spaces in the margins, across academic disciplines, and working together with allies within and outside the academy (Muhammad et al., 2015). From within these spaces, resistance to hegemonic (neoliberal) practices can grow (De los Reyes and Lundström, 2020). Of course, operating in the margins also comes with limitations regarding time and resources, as well as the risk of exclusion from rewards, privileges and belonging within academia (De los Reyes and Lundström, 2020).
Methodology

This paper is part of a larger research project in which I explore the challenges and opportunities of critically engaged scholarship, especially in the social sciences, striving to address refugees’ societal exclusion in the Netherlands. My aim is to investigate and contribute to more transformative collaborations between the academy and society. I do so by exploring three sub-questions: namely, critically engaged scholarship’s challenges and opportunities regarding (1) its aim of influencing normalized exclusive societal structures, (2) its own marginalized position in academia and (3) knowledge co-creation in interaction with refugee participants. Methodologically, I strive to co-create knowledge with critically engaged scholars and refugees involved (as co-researchers or participants) in critically engaged research projects, although not all participants are equally involved regarding all three sub-questions. In this paper, I discuss challenges and opportunities regarding the second sub-question solely on the basis of the perspectives of critically engaged scholars.

To map engaged scholarship and connect to scholars in a democratic way, I put out a call to scholars in January 2019 in various academic networks. Scholars researching refugee issues in the Netherlands and identifying as ‘engaged’ were asked to fill in a short form with open questions about their view on and approach to engaged research.

Out of the 92 responses, I selected 23 scholars who explicitly mentioned that they aimed at improving refugee justice (in the broadest sense) through their research, reflected on power (in society or knowledge production), or adopted critically engaged methodologies (such as collaborative or creative research methodologies). The selected scholars were interviewed between March 2019 and February 2021. All interviews were audiotaped and transcribed in the language they were conducted in (Dutch or English). For this paper, quotes from interviews in Dutch were translated and are indicated as such with an asterisk (*).

During interviews, the following topics were addressed: the scholar’s academic development; their view on refugees’ inclusion/exclusion; their view on engagement; their engaged projects; their aims; the challenging and enabling structures encountered and the strategies and lessons learned (focusing on several societal levels: personal, interpersonal, community, academia and society). These topics were informed by my research questions and existing literature, allowing me to investigate engaged scholarship’s challenges and opportunities regarding all three sub-questions mentioned above (societal structures, academia and co-creation with refugee participants).

Regarding the challenges and opportunities in academia, scholars were asked to reflect on their aims, how they experienced their position, how their engagement was challenged or enabled, how they dealt with challenges, what helped them and what lessons were learned. This allowed me, first, to investigate how academic and refugee research structures challenge and enable these researchers’ practices and, second, to acknowledge the various ways in which the researchers manoeuvre within and thereby arguably transform those structures. However, the topic list was not followed rigidly. In an attempt to democratize the interview, the scholars were encouraged to tell their own stories, while questions were asked along the way.

Of the 23 scholars interviewed, 14 could be categorized as critically engaged researchers (CERs) because they met all three characteristics discussed in the introduction: they aimed at improving refugee justice through their research and critically reflected on power (in society and knowledge production) and adopted critically engaged methodologies. In their research, they aimed at challenging various exclusive paradigms (regarding refugeeness, otherness, vulnerability, deficits, resourcefulness, resilience or agency) that permeate society and knowledge production. Although the other nine scholars reflected on and tried to transform exclusive societal structures, they did not necessarily consider power during knowledge production or adopt critically engaged methodologies.
The 14 CERs were connected to a university (12 researchers) or a university of applied sciences (two researchers) in the following positions: two (external) PhDs, one researcher, one senior researcher, four post-docs, five assistant professors and one full professor. While five were of Dutch origin, six had a migration background (first or second generation), two had a refugee background and one had a partner with a refugee background. Two CERs were male; the others were female. They worked in various academic disciplines (social and behavioural sciences, arts, geosciences, humanities, business and economics, management, law, theology and religious studies). Many of them had interdisciplinary backgrounds, including social science, and used interdisciplinary and social science approaches. Though they were not all located within social sciences, I included all 14 CERs in this study because exchanges between disciplines and interdisciplinary approaches are crucial to public and engaged scholarship (Beaulieu et al., 2018; Fairbairn, 2019). Moreover, many of these disciplines can be considered allies in sociology’s struggle as an intellectual critical tool (Burawoy, 2016).

The CERs focused on various research topics involving refugees (such as refugees’ inclusion/exclusion, migration experiences, media literacy, sexuality and identity, transcultural care, social entrepreneurship, solidarity initiatives and politics of knowledge production) and took diverse critically engaged approaches (such as action research, focus groups, creative/arts-based research, participatory research, learning networks, expertise labs and master classes). Finally, although this article focuses on their research-related engagement, these scholars also engaged (critically) through teaching and service and even in their private lives.

To analyse the data, I combined topic- and data-driven approaches to coding, using the qualitative analysis software ATLAS.ti. I then allocated each code to a societal level (macro, meso, micro). This allowed for a very detailed illustration of the scholars’ aims, approaches, challenges, strategies and contributions on the societal level, within academia and in interpersonal relations between researcher and participants. To democratize the analysis, I discussed and further developed the most important findings in a focus group consisting of five of the interviewed critically engaged researchers and five members of the broader project’s research team in July 2019. To acknowledge all scholars’ contributions in my work, I offered to cite their full names when quoting them in this paper. Four scholars wanted to make use of this possibility. All others preferred to stay anonymous, several naming their insecure appointment as reason for not wanting their critique to be traced back to them.

Throughout the entire research process, I strove to stay reflexive about the power issues permeating my own research, including my own positionality as a young, White, Swiss female – increasingly critically engaged – scholar working in the Netherlands on refugee inclusion. To increase my reflexivity, I kept a reflective journal during fieldwork, followed a summer school on how ethnographic narratives are affected by the ethnographer, participated in several reflective meetings with the broader research team, wrote a blog (Rast, 2020) about my own positionality and, as described above, tried to democratize my research (process) in various ways.

Walls Within Academic and Refugee Research Structures

The CERs mentioned various hurdles – or walls – within academic and refugee research structures that impede their critical engagement. In this section, I elaborate on the most important walls, namely, critically engaged research’s marginalized position, academic pressures and culture, and the recently emerged ‘refugee research business’.
Critically Engaged Research’s Marginalized Position

The first and most determining finding was that CERs feel marginalized within quantitative and policy-oriented mainstream refugee research in the Netherlands. Several said they often received critiques that they were too political or not scientific enough, and they had to defend their approaches to their colleagues, funding bodies and societal partners. Then again, CERs also criticize mainstream research(ers) for reproducing exclusive societal and academic discourses and structures. They feel their alternative approaches, knowledge and solutions that start from a critical stance are difficult to integrate into mainstream academic and societal institutions and discourses.

But it is also difficult because [governmental research institute] actually always does quantitative research. Thus I notice that what they expect is absolutely not how I would like to do research. So it is a bit of a quest. They always say this is much too vague, this is way too much, it should simply be about language, employment and labor, and education [. . .]. They would really like to keep to their kind of structure.* (Ilse van Liempt, Assistant Professor, Utrecht University)

According to participants, critically engaged research’s marginalized position is also reflected in academic reward structures. Despite increased pressures on universities to produce relevant and impactful knowledge, engagement is not considered a compelling assessment criterion for academic performance. Therefore, universities may use engaged projects as showcases of their societal relevance, but CERs themselves may not be rewarded with promotion or tenure.

There is a rhetoric in the universities of supporting impact, and you have a rector say, ‘We want to shift the metrics that we use. We don’t just want to rely on ASA A-journal publications, we are going to focus on valorization etc., etc.’ But I think in the reality, in the tenure track, I know my tenure decision is not going to be decided on how much of this engaged scholarship I do. [. . .] Yeah so I have been nominated for different impact awards here, they always want to do news articles on this work on refugees. So it is recognized, but whether it’s rewarded, that’s the other issue. (Participant 19)

In sum, while the recent increased interest in relevant knowledge creates attention for (critically) engaged projects, it does not necessarily transform the position of and reward for critically engaged research(ers). In fact, the CERs mentioned various ways in which recent developments within academia put a strain on their engagement. These developments are discussed in the following section.

Academic Pressures and Culture

A challenge that many academics share is juggling teaching, research, service and management responsibilities. Additionally, recent neoliberal developments, such as increased pressures to publish, obtain external funding and valorize research findings, can be burdensome. While these pressures affect all academics, they can be especially challenging for CERs, considering that they have to conduct these already demanding tasks in a critically engaged and thus possibly even more time-consuming manner. Moreover, according to the participants, their marginalized position and critical approach make it especially difficult for them to publish in mainstream journals and to receive funding from mainstream governmental and academic funders. Limited resources and time were thus among the biggest challenges mentioned, especially considering that sustainable collaborations actually require more intensive and long-term engagement.

In addition, while academic pressures can inhibit sustainable engagement, engagement can also keep CERs from investing enough time in tasks that are necessary for their academic advancement,
especially because (critically) engaged research is not rewarded within academia. According to participants, engagement may therefore inhibit their academic career.

Ultimately, neoliberal pressures can tempt CERs to turn each community interaction into a fundable research project or data for a publication.

Now with all the funding things, you are now forced to appropriate something to raise money or . . . but maybe now everything is becoming project based and the whole financialization of the university is also maybe putting pressure on us to say, ‘Okay now your relationship with [societal initiative], can you make it into a project? And let’s apply for funding.’ (Participant 18)

Finally, academic culture was mentioned as a challenge. Individualism and competition prevent CERs from collaborating with and learning from others. More importantly, structural overwork, short-term contracts, hierarchical relations and even harassment were mentioned as challenges.

It is a postdoc, hey, so I actually have no position at all [laughs]. [. . .] I have never had a permanent job in academia [. . .]. Academia, and certainly our institute, is very hierarchical, so this means that I actually can exert very little influence on how these sort of decisions are made [. . .].* (Participant 20)

Altogether, CERs perceived academia as a rather unsafe environment. Many said they sometimes feel vulnerable, alienated, lonely or tired. Moreover, as Participant 20’s quote shows, there often seems to be little room for transformation, especially because it is difficult to change one’s situation or to transform academic structures if one is in this vulnerable and marginalized position.

**Refugee Research Business**

Participants also described how the involvement of refugees as participants or co-researchers needs to be treated with caution in current refugee research structures. CERs were concerned that refugee research has become hyped up and even a business in recent years, especially since the influx of asylum seekers in 2015. While that certainly led to increased opportunities for CERs (such as the mobilization of money for refugee research and even employment of refugees), it also meant that researchers started competing with each other for funding, spaces and participants. This led to some researchers perceiving refugees as a funding opportunity and refugees being (mis-)used as showcases to praise or sell the research project in order to acquire funding or other benefits.

You also see a lot of instances of how this is dealt with opportunistically. That people are used as showcases to be able to benefit from it in all sorts of ways. And I don’t like that. [. . .] But also, the difficult part about it is that it is also easy to become cynical about it – and that is also another danger, that we, indeed, do not acknowledge the work we do because we are too critical about what we do.* (Koen Leurs, Assistant Professor, Utrecht University)

This situation can put CERs in the dilemma that if they do not participate in ‘selling’ their research, they might render themselves invisible and miss out on resources for realizing their projects.

The section above has described the various challenges that affect CERs ability to do critically engaged research within academic and refugee research structures. However, the next section discusses the ways they have found to get around or deal with such obstacles.

**Operating in the Cracks**

CERs’ narratives included numerous examples of how they managed to realize their research projects by ‘operating in the cracks’, as Participant 18 called it.
There are walls for sure, but there are cracks, and I think now we are operating in those cracks. It’s like the plants that grow in the cracks, and as opposed to the real soil, there is no fertile soil there welcoming you and saying ‘do this, this is the best way to do it’. But I think there are cracks. (Participant 18)

The following section discusses examples of how CERs operate in the cracks: operating outside or in the margins of academic structures, making use of facilitating spaces and strategically employing dominant discourses.

**Operating Outside or in the Margins of Academic Structures**

An important way to realize critically engaged projects is to not wait for funding but to just do it by engaging during one’s free time, taking some time off or by fulfilling only the minimum conditions for academic or funding requirements to then focus on engagement. While most CERs tried to link their engaged projects with their academic research, others decided to sometimes split engaged activities from their academic appointment completely. Doing so gave them a lot of freedom to shape their engagement without having to adhere to academic requirements. However, if it is not possible to integrate engagement in one’s academic appointment, at some point one might be forced to choose between the engaged project and the appointment.

And at the end of the year, I gave that up. Not because I was totally frustrated, but I was of course pregnant and I was offered a job so I thought, ‘Alright, a bit of security’. (Marieke van Houte, Postdoctoral Researcher, Erasmus University Rotterdam)

While operating in the margins or outside of academia offers certain freedoms, it also comes with limitations regarding time, resources, academic advancement and opportunities to transform academic structures.

**Making Use of Facilitating Spaces**

Though critically engaged research is generally marginalized within academia, its underrepresentation and appreciation seem to vary in different universities, disciplines or departments. Universities of applied sciences, for example, are by definition more applied, and therefore engaged research (although not necessarily critically engaged research) is more common there.

I’m allowed to be a bit less scientific here [in a university of applied sciences] and that makes it easier. Thus, also the way in which I collect data via a learning network, I think you don’t normally see this in universities. [. . .] But I think I am generally more free. (Participant 12)

Participants also recognized that in some disciplines, alternative ontologies, epistemologies or methodologies were more common than in others. Examples mentioned were anthropology, gender studies, women studies, postcolonial studies, Islamic studies, Arabic studies, migration/refugee studies, organizational science, human geography and art.

Putting inclusivity central, putting equality central, that is something that many colleagues around me do as well. [. . .] Theoretically, but indeed also societally. Ehm, my colleagues also make films and documentaries. And engage with the art world [. . .]. And it’s not only within anthropology, but a bit broader, in gender and sexuality studies. (Participant 23)
Participants also said that, especially recently, some departments were somewhat more supportive. For example, they rewarded engagement (although not with advancement) by providing facilities, financial support, more research time or student assistantships.

Yes, lately quite reasonably. That is with time, by simply making it possible that the project can take place here. There always has to be some additional money. There have to be new computers and everyone has to sit somewhere else because my 6 people will come here [. . .]. But also centrally, the dean sometimes says, ‘Oh yes, that is indeed quite interesting what you are doing’. And then there is willingness, for example, with a student assistant [. . .] for one or two days per week to support with the things we do. (Participant 7)

These spaces where critically engaged research is more common or supported seem crucial in facilitating the implementation of critically engaged projects. Some CERs switch to these spaces, take an interdisciplinary approach or work with researchers in those spaces.

Finally, there are also some journals or funding agencies that are more open to alternative and unsettling research practices.

Not all journals are so strict. And we have actually in that paper mixed French, a few words from Kannada, my mother tongue, and okay, it’s predominantly in English. But for the question of multilingual texts, some journals are okay. If you push it, bilingual texts are coming in now. (Participant 18)

The existence and awareness of those facilitating spaces enables CERs to manoeuvre through academic structures to get their critically engaged projects realized, acknowledged, funded or published.

**Strategically Employing Dominant Discourses**

In addition to facilitating spaces, even dominant academic structures and discourses leave some room for CERs to manoeuvre. CERs can, for example, frame their engagement as a way of utilizing knowledge to achieve societal impact, thereby referring to the (dominant) discourse on valorization. By doing so, even CERs situated in a more constraining space where engagement is less common can get some acknowledgement for their work.

So I think that this is one of the ways to overcome this obstacle. That you really invest in showing that [. . .] it is not that [. . .] in addition to the work you do, you also do valorization. Instead, valorization is your work.* (Koen Leurs, Assistant Professor, Utrecht University)

Some CERs, however, were hesitant about framing their activist or critical engagement as valorization. They associated valorization with neoliberalization, which treats societal impact as a commodifiable product, and therefore feared that framing engagement as valorization simply reproduced neoliberal discourses instead of challenging them.

Still, strategically employing specific (dominant) discourses seems to be a crucial strategy. For example, framing research in a certain way – according to the specific terminology and requirements of a funding agency or journal – is imperative to get research funded or published.

I also learned that definitely, in such a funding application, you need to think in terms of a project instead of in terms of arguing in an article or such. Ehm, but in describing a project, you actually always have to distance yourself a bit from what you actually want to do.* (Participant 23)
The section above has shown how CERs manoeuvre through academic structures by operating outside or in the margins of academia, making use of facilitating spaces or strategically employing dominant discourses. This leaves the question of whether and how CERs can actually change those structures.

**How to Change the Game?**

Most CERs in this study perceive engaged scholarship as being more than just engaged research, teaching or service. They also see it as a responsibility to change academic structures, or as Participant 19 said, to change the game:

> So that’s the juggling act. Figuring out how you play that game of publishing those papers as well as doing something that you think is meaningful. And then hopefully, in the broader sense, trying to change the game in a sense that [it] does recognize those things in the future. (Participant 19)

In this section, I focus on how CERs arguably transform academic structures by challenging dominant research paradigms and transforming the institution of academics itself.

**Challenging Dominant Research Paradigms**

Arguably, implementing a critically engaged project transforms academic structures, given that critically engaged approaches challenge dominant research paradigms. For example, taking a political stance challenges the idea that academic research can or should be neutral.

> The law people were the most tough ones [laughs]. They say: ‘Why should I come to [societal initiative]?’ ‘It’s too far away!’ ‘I need to cycle 10 minutes, it’s too far away from my building!’ ‘It’s too political!’ ‘It’s too engaged!’ Via the university, we distance ourselves from positions that are too political. (Participant 18)

Another transformation is that refugees (and possibly also other knowledge co-creators) take a more active part in knowledge production. Considering participants as knowledge-holders and co-producers of knowledge and solutions challenges dominant research paradigms that privilege the academy as the centre for knowledge production and distribution. Moreover, establishing mutually beneficial and empowering relationships with research participants unsettles traditional hierarchical research relationships.

> We began, for example, by the four of us telling a part of our life[story], a whole session long, and that was really intense. And to question each other about it. That was of course super scary because that’s really not how you interact with each other in universities of applied sciences or universities. [. . .] Research is not something that stands as a sort of intellectual stronghold or institute or that requires expertise that you don’t have as an ordinary person.* (Hanke Drop, Researcher, HU University of Applied Sciences Utrecht)

Negotiating knowledge in collaborations between the researcher and the researched also has consequences for the content of the knowledge produced. It might enrich interpretations, reveal nuances or allow for completely new perspectives to be integrated. The knowledge produced might then challenge dominant societal and academic discourses on refugees.

> So writing with Colleague 3 [with a refugee background] brings, like, this huge perspective that is totally missing within the professional, academic, cutting edge, nodding migration scholars. Not to say. . ., of
Both the content and the kind of knowledge produced are transformed by critically engaged, and especially creative, research approaches. By taking such approaches, CERs can establish spaces that allow for emotional, embodied and sensory ways of experiencing and knowing.

You do exercises and then you ask: ‘So how was this?’ ‘What did it do for you?’ ‘Does it have a specific link to the real world?’ [ . . . ] And I find this very valuable because then you [ . . . ] can understand each other on a certain level. [ . . . ] So one person talks about mechanisms of exclusion that are very frustrating. And in that, people find each other. And you also have strategies and resourcefulness in which other people find each other.* (Marieke van Houte, Postdoctoral Researcher, Erasmus University Rotterdam)

Thus, critically engaged research challenges dominant research paradigms in various ways, such as by taking political stances, unsettling traditional hierarchical research relations and diversifying knowledge and ways of knowing.

Transforming the Institution of Academics

By implementing critically engaged projects, CERs arguably also change the institution of academics itself. For example, CERs open up, connect and employ academic structures in the search for solutions to societal issues. They unsettle traditional boundaries between the academy and society by either bringing academics into community spaces or inviting refugees and other societal actors into university spaces.

It’s not like a centralized system now that is really officially there, but informally, through our networks, people just know that [university] courses are open [to refugees] and then you can informally contact saying, ‘Okay, I have someone who would like to join in this course’. (Participant 18)

Within academic structures, CERs’ interdisciplinary backgrounds enable them to introduce new insights, theories and methods that unsettle disciplinary boundaries and might pave the way for critically engaged approaches.

And also keep reflecting along the interface of media and gender, and feminist theory in relation to field work, how we can sort of rethink that in relation to new technologies. So how you can use [ . . . ] new digital methods, but in a sort of critical and reflexive manner.* (Koen Leurs, Assistant Professor, Utrecht University)

CERs also transform the institution by employing refugees as co-researchers within academia. Co-researchers’ presence alone can bring diversity, inspire new discussions and stimulate reflection, not only within the research team and during knowledge production, but also on the work floor.

The dynamic and exchange is so very refreshing and innovative for a department where otherwise usually only White Dutch people in their 50s and older [laughs] are.* (Participant 7)

Finally, CERs unsettle boundaries by forming alliances with like-minded or more influential people, which can be considered a transformation of exclusive (individualistic, competitive and even neoliberal) academic structures.
Everybody was actually busy with one goal: to get as much as possible, in terms of money, people, refugees, to do their thing. And I said: ‘That is not good, so, we have to learn from the past, and from each other.’ So that’s the reason why I thought – we need an infrastructure that brings people together and creates the possibility to make connections. So that was actually the rationale behind the [engaged project]. (Participant 21)

Eventually, such alliances might develop into a ‘critical mass’ that can fight for transformations within academia.

But in the meantime we have sort of a ‘critical mass’ [. . .] that is much more concerned with diversity and inclusion. [. . .] It is also about policies in your own organization.* (Participant 20)

To conclude, CERs arguably transform the institution of academics by unsettling boundaries (both between the academy and society and within the academy), paving the way for critically engaged approaches, diversifying the work floor and forming alliances.

**Discussion and Conclusion**

This paper has shown that CERs feel marginalized within mainstream refugee research structures in the Netherlands. It indicates that traces of the historically strong research–policy nexus with its preference for instrumental, data-driven and policy-serving research (Essed and Nimako, 2006; Entzinger and Scholten, 2015) are still present in today’s Dutch minority and refugee research context. Moreover, it seems that it is exactly CERs’ critical stance that makes it difficult for them to get their research realized, funded, published or rewarded. Their counter-hegemonic strategy thus marginalizes themselves and their work (see also Burawoy, 2016; Essed, 2013).

The findings also underline that neoliberal developments within academia may further marginalize or co-opt critically engaged approaches (see also Edwards and Brannelly, 2017). Although neoliberal pressures affect all academics, the marginalized position and critical stances of CERs make it especially difficult for them to publish in mainstream journals or obtain funding from mainstream institutions. Neoliberal pressures might therefore push CERs to turn community interactions into a fundable research project or data for a publication. In recent years, the increased interest in refugee research has mobilized some funding streams and opened possibilities. However, there is a danger that this ‘refugee research business’ might tempt researchers to (mis-)use refugees to achieve funding or other benefits. Finally, academic culture itself may inhibit critical engagement, especially because it is difficult for CERs to change their situations, not to mention transform academic structures, from the lonely, vulnerable and marginalized positions they often find themselves in.

Current (neoliberal) academic structures seem to impede critically engaged research in several ways, and such research again impedes CERs’ academic advancement (see also Beaulieu et al., 2018). This leads to the paradoxical situation that due to the renewed interest in relevant academic knowledge (Bourke, 2013; Edwards and Brannelly, 2017; Kajner, 2013), (critically) engaged research projects are often used by universities as examples of their societal relevance, while CERs themselves are not rewarded and dominant academic structures remain unchanged.

Having established how power and politics around refugee research structures challenge critically engaged practices, I now turn to the question of whether and where there is space for CERs to manoeuvre within and transform these structures. As this paper has shown, CERs certainly are able to manoeuvre within challenging and facilitating academic structures. Some CERs, for example, realize their projects in the margins or outside of academia. While this may not directly
challenge or change dominant academic structures, it still enables CERs to explore alternative research practices and paths of resistance (see also De los Reyes and Lundström, 2020).

Another strategy is to make use of facilitating spaces where (critically) engaged practices are more common, such as universities of applied sciences, certain disciplines, specific departments as well as some journals and funding agencies. These examples imply that there are indeed some ‘open spaces’ (Muhammad et al., 2015) or ‘cracks’ (De los Reyes and Lundström, 2020) that allow CERs to manoeuvre through academic structures to get their critically engaged projects realized, acknowledged, funded or published.

Additionally, CERs sometimes strategically employ dominant academic structures, for example by framing their research in terms of valorization or according to the specific terminology and requirements of funding agencies and journals. Of course, employing these discourses also means reproducing them. However, this paper has revealed that many CERs are reflexive about sometimes strategically reproducing certain dominant structures in order to realize their projects, and sometimes resisting those structures and thereby marginalizing themselves (see also Essed, 2013). In fact, persisting in academia as a CER may require this balancing act of playing the game while also trying to change it.

The question then remains to what extent can CERs actually transform academic structures. This research has not revealed any grand transformations of academic structures enacted by CERs. However, CERs’ narratives included various examples of how they implement practices that challenge dominant research paradigms, for example by taking a political stance, unsettling traditional hierarchical research relations and diversifying knowledge and ways of knowing. Moreover, CERs arguably transform the institution of academics by unsettling boundaries (see also Beaulieu et al., 2018), forming alliances, diversifying the work floor and paving the way for critically engaged research approaches. These examples can all be considered expressions of creative agency (Björkdahl and Selimovic, 2015) that unsettle conventional boundaries, take place in novel – and sometimes marginalized – spaces, make room for new possibilities, imaginations and ways of knowing and thereby challenge and transform academic structures. Moreover, by finding, exploring and connecting such spaces of resistance, CERs may build a ‘critical mass’ through which resistance to dominant academic structures can grow (see also De los Reyes and Lundström, 2020). Finally, it is important to acknowledge refugee participants and co-researchers as agents within academic refugee research, given that they diversify academia and co-create knowledge and solutions.

In conclusion, notwithstanding these examples of CERs’ manoeuvring and transforming capacities, this research has illustrated how critically engaged research is jeopardized in current (neoliberal) academic research structures, including those focusing on refugees. Considering the danger and marginalizing effect of power and (neoliberal) politics, critically engaged research practices are crucial now more than ever to reflect on and transform power dimensions that permeate not only society but also knowledge production. I therefore advocate for more acknowledgement and reward of critically engaged research in the future.

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