



# Working Knowledge

*Working Together*

## The Price of Agreement

by

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**'The Price of Agreement'**

**A Project Short by Britt Dahlberg, Robbie Duschinsky and Sophie Reijman**

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# The Price of Agreement

*Think assailable thoughts, or be lonely*

*- Jane Hirschfield*

In 2009, one of us (BD) sat in the back of a one-room meeting space in the late industrial neighbourhood of West Ambler, Pennsylvania in the southeastern United States. An anthropologist, doing fieldwork, I sat, a short walk from one of the largest asbestos-waste dump sites in the United States, while in front of me residents, business owners, and government officials discussed the current techniques being used to assess whether the park – the waste site – posed a current or future environmental risk. The group debated the best methods for assessing potential health threats – which microscopes and analytic techniques would give them the information they were after. Staff from the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) were required to include affected and interested citizens in their risk assessment and planning processes under the Superfund Program and worried about how to create solutions that reflected the desires of “the community,” and these meetings aimed to generate plans that took into account the views of those most affected. But another challenge began to appear.

It looked like the focus of this eclectic group was clear: here was a citizen science group focused on risk assessment. Then, on this particular night, a woman got up and said, “what about the flooding that has been affecting residents here?” She told stories of an increase in hazardous floods that had washed through the waste site into low-income homes bordering the site, destroying precious heaters, damaging homes, and threatening families. She also asked about the rumours that the clean-up was part of an effort to usher in high-cost housing and displace long-term African American residents from the area. She highlighted that what was at stake was not just access to clean air, but safe inclusive spaces for kids to play, and families and communities to gather: when the park had been abruptly closed less than twenty years prior, a central space in the African-American neighbourhood had been lost and never replaced.

A newer resident, leading the asbestos-clean-up efforts, stood and replied: “we aren’t here to talk about that, we are here for the asbestos.” To which the first woman said, “I thought we were supposedly here for the community.” The boundaries of what it was we were here to talk about were being directly contested. This moment changed the direction of my own research project, leading me to investigate how and why certain matters managed to captivate concern and attention as issues worth of “public” interest and government response, while others remained positioned as issues of particular – race and class based – communities, and were not taken up in mobilizations to intervene in the neighbourhood.

## The REACH Ambler Project

This exchange would later resonate with my own experiences as I began to collaborate on an interdisciplinary research and public humanities project in Ambler (the “REACH Ambler Project”). Working with colleagues from environmental and occupational health, science and technology studies, history of science, public health, and theatre at the University of Pennsylvania, the Science History Institute, and Act II Playhouse, and with residents from the neighbourhood, and later sharing findings with government officials and public officials. I wondered: what would our own group’s object of study become? How tight or loose would we make our focus? In a town – and current moment – in which so much seemed at stake in defining the scope of what people would pay attention to, and where it seemed that an appearance of consensus had been settled too quickly (leaving many people out in the process), it felt particularly important to me that we create a project whose scope could attend to what residents as well as government scientists saw as important, and which intertwined the technical questions of asbestos health studies with issues related to urban redevelopment. These phenomena surpassed the boundaries of any

particular disciplinary purview. Tracking and fully understanding the issues arising on site called for a more emergent approach: I did not want to rule out some issues – that were urgently important to residents – as “off topic” or “irrelevant,” simply because my field of study did not typically focus on them. Valuing insights from people outside the academy called for us to also form links across different disciplines, and figure out ways to work together even when we did not – or did not yet – share a single object of study, or set of methods. But this left a large and ongoing question for our team: what then was our shared object of study? *Did we share one? Was it just one or a multiplicity? If multiple, how did the pieces hang together? How did we work together as a team without agreement on object of study or key methods?*

In their research group in the School of Clinical Medicine at Cambridge where they study attachment theory, RD, SR and colleagues face similar questions. While we operate on a basic agreement that research and practice in the area of children’s mental health would benefit from further conceptual questions, in practice we have found so many unanticipated ideas and opportunities emerge from the intersection

“ *How did we work together as a team without agreement on object of study or key methods?*”

between history and developmental science in which we work, that we have stopped making predictions on where this work will take us. Instead we try to ensure that the team has available high-level skills in perspectives that may prove useful, though the disciplinary tumble is extreme as colleagues go together to training in advanced statistical approaches to big data on one day, and pursue a Derrida reading group together the next.

In both our teams, holding open the parameters of the research project contributes both to creativity, and to inefficiencies and identity-confusion: it is not a quick or clear path to getting research outputs. The lack of settledness has been felt especially by some researchers trained in disciplines that generally operate with a high degree of agreement, whereas other researchers appear to have experienced this way of working as a kind of freedom, even if it can also be anxiety-

provoking. For some disciplines, among them the medical humanities, premature closure is the greater evil, and there is always some movement around the question of the nature of the research object; for other disciplines, resources are expected to go directly towards the set output, and time spent moving by the more direct route to that path takes on a symbolic meaning as a worker’s value.

Neither approach has it wrong, we think. Keeping key decisions about object of study, definitions, or method open for longer can deplete resources and time. Yet quality of outcome and scope of possible value and opportunity can all be improved if agreement is sought after thinking about the issues in the round. This would suggest the relation between output quality and openness unfolds as a U-shaped curve, where the best outcomes appear when agreement neither comes too early or too late. But how can we judge when, and with respect to what, agreement should arrive? One common model of agreement is simply that of seeing the same thing about the world. We may work hard to match horizons in agreeing in our teams on method, roles, scope of the research study, and the nature of the research object. Such work generally, though not necessarily, assumes a stable reality without internal contradiction that it is the task of researchers to describe. Agreement on this view comes when each person sees the same thing accurately and consistently; it can be important, for example, for the reliability process in psychological coding, something SR and RD have done in their work at times. But matching horizons with others is especially unlikely to be so clean about things that are not readily observable, like the mission of a series of meetings or the wider ambitions of a research group. Agreement is often about states of affairs. However, agreement is also something in itself. Both the presence and the absence of agreement can function as a ‘boundary object’, something that allows different institutional domains to communicate, work together and even grant authority to one another without the need to see eye to eye. A boundary object can be ill-structured even while it is used by different groups, who give it meanings responsive to local needs (see Star 1989; Hornstein & Star 1990). A group can seek strong literal agreement – on defined terms or scope, for instance – or can agree to agree enough – feeling oriented at least in a similar direction, and valuing a multiplicity of priorities as well as ways of interpreting phenomenon under study.

## Case Study: Consensus Statement

An example comes from work by RD and SR. In 2017, together with Pehr Granqvist from Stockholm University, we led work on a Consensus Statement on the applications of the infant disorganized attachment classification in clinical and social work practice. The Statement was co-authored with 40 leading researchers and clinicians in the area of infant mental health, and a few months after publication is the fifth most read article online in the 18-year history of the journal. On the one hand, the group of authors of the consensus statement generally aimed to provide guidance to practitioners, and were above all concerned to identify and reduce practice directly contrary to the available evidence. On the other hand, contributors were engaging less with the state of current evidence, than with their estimation of the general space of probability regarding where the weight of evidence might lie over the coming years, and the implications that might stem from this.

So the question was not whether agreement could be reached between researchers who profoundly disagree with one another on whether disorganized attachment is only caused by environmental factors or also by factors to do with child temperament. Rather, it was how best to convey to a practitioner audience the implications of the research programmes currently underway, and the arc of future knowledge that this might imply. They agreed to 'agree enough', and this led to useful conversations between different parties. Agreement was not simply a common attitude towards a collection of facts, but itself a social entity with its own properties and purposes, even besides whatever determinate content was agreed upon or not. Though that is not our focus here, it can be noted that the same is also true of disagreements.



## Three distinctions

The nature of agreement within interdisciplinary working, and the price attached to it, can be clarified through three distinctions, loosely modelled on some implicit contrasts made by Weber in *Economy and Society* (1922). They are intended as heuristics rather than clean and clear opposites. **A first is between an open and a closed agreement.** For example, the agreement about the agenda of the meetings about asbestos-waste dump sites depended upon the conditions of unequal power between agency staff and different local residents. It was a closed agreement because certain residents were not in a position to reframe the concerns of the meeting. By contrast the definition of the research object in the REACH Ambler Project is an open agreement, where power inequalities operate but do not bar the agreement from being altered. It seems to us that the price of an open agreement tends often to be inefficiency, and is paid in terms of output. This affects all stakeholders of quantity of outputs, and may very well render everyone vulnerable if outputs are used to judge the value (e.g. labour market value) of individuals. Certain kinds of working relationships are called for by open agreement, and these require structures

that enable groups to take risks and allow lengthier start-up time to break open consensus, with space for researchers to fail at things honourably individually and together. Where these structures are not in place, or are quite local to the enclave provided by a particular team, then vulnerability remains firmly on the horizon and shapes judgements about how much openness feels affordable.

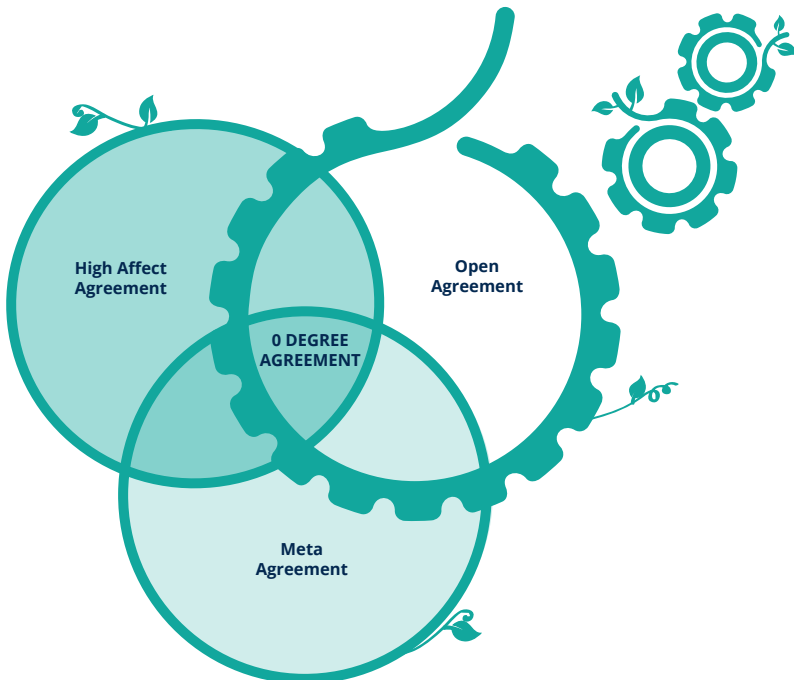
By contrast, the price of a closed agreement tends often to be in participation, which can impact the quality of outputs. In the Consensus Statement on disorganized attachment a core set of claims were subject to closed agreement. For instance, even though one of the co-authors felt that there could in principle be value in use of disorganized attachment in assessments for child maltreatment, she recognized that the extent of misuse of the classification by practitioners to date meant that this was not really the pressing concern. For good or for ill, consensus functions as a criterion of the value of an idea or piece of work, and she recognized the overall benefits of a united position. Around this core of closed agreement, a band of other claims were subject to open agreement, and indeed the parts of the text addressing these were changed very substantially

as the document underwent multiple rounds of feedback from dozens of people. The Consensus Statement therefore gained some advantages of a closed agreement, in producing a document in less than half a year with forty authors. However, it also had some of the advantages of an open agreement, in gathering insights from many different quarters.

**A second distinction is between high- and low-affect agreements.** The asbestos-waste dump site meeting and the Consensus Statement are both examples of high-affect agreements because of the delicacy of their topic (people’s health and welfare), their aim (to impact people’s health and welfare), and the vulnerability of their context (populations experiencing socio-economic adversity). Though we note that what might have high stakes for one person may have low or no stakes for another, these are the kinds of agreement to which different parties are likely to

bring a highly developed and ingrained viewpoint. “When a tender affection has been storing itself in us through many of our years, the idea that we could accept any exchange for it seems to be a cheapening of our lives. And we can set a watch over our affections and our constancy as we can over other treasures.” These lines by George Eliot apply to the high-affect agreement; they implicate our sense of self. Being outside a high-affect agreement can leave us feeling aggrieved, attacked, stupid or misguided, reaching around for courage. Being inside one can feel like a relief, that we are not alone, and sometimes comes with a sense of thrill or recognition: someone else understands this idea! Other kinds of consensus are not especially laden (though being outside them might well matter of course, sometimes a great deal). The price of low-affect agreements tends to be paid by those outside of the agreement, for whom there are impacts, but who have no say. By contrast, the price of high-affect

## Graphic representation of a “0-degree agreement”

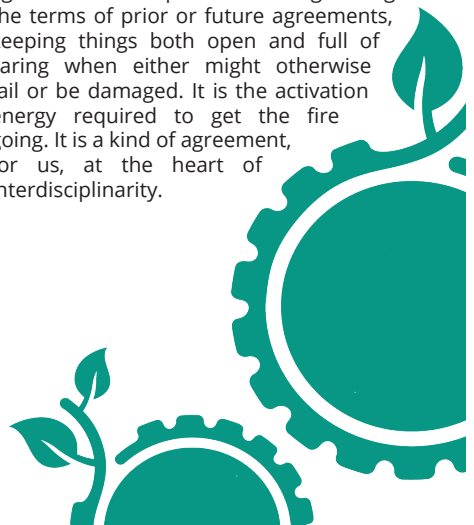


agreements tends to fall along the intersectional lines of inequality when the agreement was premature and other good options were available but not considered. The price of high-affect agreements when the agreement was hard-earned falls less frequently so neatly along social divisions. Part of the distinction that we observe between medical humanities and STS (Science & Technology Studies) is that while they work to nibble away at closed agreements, medical humanities researchers focus more on high-affect agreements, while STS scholars focus more on low-affect agreements with greater acknowledgement that some agreement is still required for settling decisions and taking action.

**A final distinction is between agreement about content and meta-agreement about the appropriate way to come to agreement about content.** In the meetings about asbestos-waste dump sites, there was meta-agreement that the group would debate the current findings as well as the techniques which should be trusted to give information about asbestos safety. This meta-agreement meant that diverging views from residents about the appropriate content of the meetings were never entertained: there was openness to talk about methods of risk assessment, not to talk about the priorities themselves. Conversely, in our research groups there is a good deal of agreement about content a lot of the time. But the prospect of meta-agreement about the appropriate way to come to agreement about content feels like an achievement only slowly coming into sight on the horizon, and very much subject to negotiation and mutual learning. The price of agreement about content lies especially in the potential for other good options of understanding and acting to be ignored. By contrast, the price of meta-agreement about process, i.e. the desirable level of deliberation about content, lies especially in potential for other good ways of relating to be ignored. A closed meta-agreement can be defined as hegemony, marked by compliance rather than consensus, even when it produces excellent results as judged by conventional metrics, since such a situation always has to depend on relations of power to be functionally stable. However, we also wish to flag that there are significant costs to the lack of a meta-agreement when one is needed, and that high-affect environments with little meta-agreement generally feel unsafe.

## 0-degree agreement

In closing, we want to consider a specific permutation of agreement that we have found important in our practice as academics, and which we value as an antidote to tendencies we have noted in ourselves to want agreement too soon. This is the open, high-affect agreement in which content is not certain or intelligible yet, but a meta-agreement is in place. In this kind of agreement, one offers others something that is not yet formed enough to be called content, and trusts that they will show sufficient patience, inventiveness and competence that it can be supported to grow into something between you. We term this a **"0-degree agreement"**, because the agreement is the formal terms of recognition, not agreement about something specific in the world. It is consensus to enter unknown space together for a bit. This is the kind of agreement with which we embarked on writing a Project Short on agreement together, based on our different experiences in different research groups on different continents. With 0-degree agreement, something inchoate can be put on the table to be looked at together, with joint attention. It is only sketched in though, and there is no certainty that we will want to do anything with it, but it is affect-laden because whatever it is has attracted some intensity and weight for us. 0-degree agreement certainly has its price. It is a very vulnerable space, rarely sustainable for long. Attempts to formalize a meta-agreement can reduce the vulnerability, but only to an extent. However, for us 0-degree agreement is important in negotiating the terms of prior or future agreements, keeping things both open and full of caring when either might otherwise fail or be damaged. It is the activation energy required to get the fire going. It is a kind of agreement, for us, at the heart of interdisciplinarity.



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**Series editors:** Charles Fernyhough, Angela Woods and Victoria Patton.

