

The Ivory Tower and the Challenges of Collaborative Research

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Abstract: This study explores researchers' understandings of and experiences with collaborative research. Findings suggest that academic reward structures restrict the ability of academic researchers to become involved in truly collaborative relationships thus limiting the potential of these types of projects.

In the last two decades there has been an increased interest in collaborative relationships between universities and other sectors of society. In research, the "partnership trend" has translated into collaborative research projects between university-based and non university-based researchers. This paper describes the experiences and understandings of university-based and non university-based researchers doing collaborative work. Special emphasis is given to the academic reward systems that influence the ability of university-based researchers to engage in collaborative research.

Literature Review

Feminist researchers have long focused on relationships as the basis for knowledge generation. They argue that researchers build relationships with participants and with one another when involved in research (Tom & Herbert, 2002; Tom et. al. 1994). Relationships profoundly influence the approach and therefore the results of a research project. One relationship that has been under-examined in the literature has been that among researchers based in different institutions. Researchers need to make shared project related decisions that can be suitable for organizations with different reward systems. Values, demands and expectations are quite different in a university setting for example than in other organizations. These differences add a specific layer to the collaborative relationships between researchers located in different institutions.

Academia and Collaborative Research

An examination of the literature on collaborative research reveals that researchers, especially those working in the university, have found that academic practices are not always in harmony with the demands of collaborative work. The emphasis of collaboration is to work with others; individual expectations and rewards are negotiated so that the collaboration can be successful. Academic culture, in contrast, is mostly based on individual work, achievements and rewards. Researchers are pressured to adapt their work to meet the requirements of funders (Porter, 1997). Mainstream understandings of knowledge and research, represented by funding and publishing requirements, exclude non-traditional ways of knowing (Kuokkanen, 2005). Universities have become dissociated from their main role, service to society, becoming *autopoietic* organizations in which "a narrow group of socially interdependent individuals generate standards for each other and judge each other's performance without regard to their contextualization within the interests of society at large" (Greenwood & Levin, 2000, p.104). Certain academic practices, such as peer review can be seen as one of the professional structures built into most academic

mechanisms that serve the perpetuation of the system. The current reward systems in universities influence the ability of researchers to do research with communities (Barnsley, 1995; Cottrell et al, 1996; Scott, 2003). There is a “cost” and a penalty for doing research that includes, for example, participatory components, since it does not translate easily into the degrees or promotions researchers seek within the academy (Cancian, 1993; Wolf, 1996). Some authors (Cancian, 1996; Stoecker, 1996) refer to two different worlds, academia and community. Academics who want to engage in collaborative research with community groups are torn by two different worlds with very different institutional reward systems. While recognizing the shortcoming of the academic structures, some researchers (Smith, 1999; Stoecker, 1997) have also recognized that significant spaces have been opened up within the academy and within some disciplines to talk more creatively about research with particular groups and communities – women, the economically oppressed, ethnic minorities and indigenous peoples (Smith, 1999). Linda Tuhiwai Smith’s (1999) analyses make a compelling argument for researchers involved in collaborative research to reflect on and share their understandings of knowledge and examine how these are influenced by the context within which they are working. Researchers who have tried to work with groups of researchers developing “other” ways of knowing recognize the difficulties entailed in such task. Ultimately, the academy is the result of what those working in it produce. The fact that most of the authors referred to in this review are located in the academy is testament to the different forces at play in academic circles and provides a sense of hope of changes to come.

Research Design

This research is based on in depth interviews with university-based and non university-based researchers who have had experience in collaborative research. To bring a wider lens to the project, interviewees included researchers from various kinds of backgrounds and interests. The institutions within which the interviewees worked included unions, grass roots organizations, funding agencies, research agencies, universities and advocacy organizations. Out of the twelve participants, eight were women working in the university, in centres of excellence, in community-based organizations and in unions. The four men I interviewed worked in non-university settings. Two of them, although not currently involved in doing research, worked at agencies that in one way or another funded and disseminated research. Eight of the participants had a graduate degree.

The interview protocol consisted of a series of ten questions that guided the conversation with participants. The verbatim transcripts of these interviews constituted the bulk of the data with institutional information serving as background for some analyses. The data was analysed using the constant comparative method.

Findings

The Partnership Trend

In the past two decades there has been an increasing call for collaborative projects, particularly of collaborations between universities and other organizations. These partnerships are referred to as ways to connect research with community needs on the one hand and to facilitate the dissemination of new knowledge on the other. Researchers based in universities and in community organizations pointed out that universities and academic funding agencies are trying to engage university researchers with communities as part of a larger political movement. University researchers compete with community-based researchers and therefore need to become and show that they are relevant to society.

While one of the community-based researchers interviewed recognized that some university-based researchers are interested in developing relationships with community-based researchers, others are more interested in the access to funding these partnerships allow. In her view, universities do not “really” value partnerships; it is what they need to do to access the funding. Furthermore, to her, the projects funded through partnership grants are not really that different from what they would have been had they not had community partners.

These developments have meant that the funds community groups used to have access to have now been directed to collaborative projects that include university-based researchers. The push for collaboration has left community organizations more limited in the options for research funding and therefore the kinds of projects and actions they can undertake.

This movement towards increased collaboration has not been supported by studies and reflections on collaboration as a methodological approach. Interviewees in this research worried about an overwhelming, unquestioned move towards collaboration. The interviews contain references to the lack of understanding of what works when and for whom in collaborative research. One university researcher described the process of relationships in collaborative research as “unmapped.” One funder also acknowledged the lack of understanding of how collaboration works. He argued that there are no established procedures to evaluate the collaborative aspect. So instead of using set criteria, the evaluation is based on political decisions to fund collaborative projects.

Why Collaborate

Participants in this study chose to collaborate with researchers based in a different institution because of the potential collaboration has for enriching the process and product of research. Most of the interviewed researchers referred to the potential collaborative research has to generate “richer” knowledge because it involves more than one perspective on a situation. Their reflections revealed an interest in collaborating with other researchers to gain or offer credibility to studies or to include a variety of skills and perspectives in their projects.

Although participants acknowledged challenges such as how much time collaborating requires, tensions arising from differing agendas and funding requirements, they recognized the many benefits. They referred especially to benefits to universities, community groups and to the resulting projects as they yield richer data and analyses by including a variety of perspectives, mostly about the topic being researched.

The Reward Systems in the Academy

Despite individual researchers’ best intentions to include different perspectives in research projects, many collaborative relationships are established and developed in a context where collaboration between universities and community groups is not valued or rewarded by academic institutions. Contextual factors such as funding agencies’ requirements for funding influence the motivation of some researchers and consequently the relationships they are able to develop. The main challenge interviewees mentioned was the reward system in the academy, specifically the various types of scholarly activity that are considered and assigned value in the tenure process. Those researchers who wish to work collaboratively with researchers outside the university have found that the emphasis on publishing and on individual advancement is in conflict with the values of collaborative research.

I don’t think the university does much to help anybody who’s doing these kinds of things. By and large they’ll tolerate it but it’s not basically what they want you to be doing and so it’s not given a whole lot of print. Some universities have that established or they recognize that

this is part of a very strong service component. No, this [collaborative research] is just all something else and it's considerably less.

Tenure. Interviewees working within universities as well as those working outside described achieving tenure as a freeing experience. Although the freedom they gain is not total freedom, participants' words reflected almost a sense of liberation. Most participants agreed that once university-based researchers obtain tenure, they achieve some kind of freedom to take risks. It looks different depending on which side of the tenure line you're on. When you're an established and tenured faculty member, doing the community stuff is career enhancing and it is valued, especially in the last [few years], and there's another change, the universities in general have become more aware of that and they're desperately searching for people who are doing it so that it is more advantageous to one's career. I still believe that if I had an untenured colleague come to me and ask me for advice about, how best to build their career and their pre-tenure years, that I would caution them against some of the things I did. Especially the [collaborative] project. I still hear that talk that devalues the pragmatic, that devalues the collaborative and that emphasizes the individualistic achievement model within the university.

Publications. According to interviewees, what universities value most is publications. In collaborative research, some partners expect to participate in the analysis as well as in the writing of reports and articles about the shared project. Academic expectations of single authored publications may become a challenge as university-based researchers can struggle with their need for institutional recognition on the one hand and commitments to their collaborative partners on the other.

What counts most is your publishing, that's what the university considers most significant. So if you've done that you get the highest reward. You don't get anywhere in [the] university if you don't have substantial scholarly writing. That's crucial. But I don't think that political activism and working with community groups hurts anybody's career in a university. I think it helps it. It's just a very hard thing to do.

The institutional rewards of the academy place university-based researchers in a difficult situation. If they want to establish a collaborative research project that truly opens up the possibility for negotiated methods and inclusion of a variety of ways of knowing, they risk not producing what the university values most. If they decide to engage in collaborative projects and produce academically recognized products, they do so at the expense of their own time and energy. Writing publishable articles and chapters is something that many researchers would do on top of doing the collaborative project, not as part of the project.

At least in relation to the interviewed participants, traditional academic standards and requirements of research have been applied to most research projects regardless of who is involved and where the project is located. Those participants involved, especially if they are located within academic units, need to produce products valued by academic structures. They find that there are pressures to design and carry out the project following traditional academic understandings which limit the involvement of those who do not have academic training. If the academically located researcher's way of writing proposals, defining questions and choosing methods is preferred, other perspectives will be less represented. This situation sets the stage for unequal control of the collaborative project. The biggest challenge for collaborative research, however, may not be the disparity in valuing different ways of knowing but in the fact that collaborating researchers do not discuss their notions of research.

Collaboration is a Different Space

Interviewees pointed out that contextual, institutional and personal stands influence how the research is done and therefore argued that research needs to be carried out from different perspectives. There needs to be space and resources for academically based researchers to do research they are interested in pursuing, for community-based researchers to do the research they want and need to do and *also* for both groups to engage in collaborative research. Collaborative research is the space where differing perspectives could come together to be discussed and negotiated and where researchers try to find common grounds for their joint work.

The findings suggest that collaborative research has the potential to generate knowledge in ways that are different from traditional research models. This can happen only if researchers participate in the collaborative projects with a willingness to explore their own social location and their relative privileges and how these influence the knowledge that is generated in the project. There are, however, certain contextual factors that are required for this space to be generated. Current academic structures and understandings do not foster the inclusion of a variety of standpoints and therefore the potential of collaborative research is not fully realized. The challenge, in terms of collaborative research, is to generate spaces where individuals with different ways of knowing can enter a genuine dialogue in which the differences are acknowledged and valued. Including different ways of knowing is not an easy task. Unless there is an awareness of and respect for different standpoints, collaborative research does not fulfill its potential of generating dialogue between different standpoints. Definitions of research and knowledge cannot be taken for granted if researchers truly want to engage in sharing the process of generating knowledge with other researchers who may have a different way of knowing.

Conclusions

When researchers based in different locations and “cultures” collaborate in a project, they can create a space where their perspectives can be made explicit and shared. I suggest that it is in respectful sharing that a more complex understanding of the research endeavour can be developed. For the different perspectives to be articulated, a more inclusive understanding of research, one that is not bound by academic criteria, needs to be used. As a starting point I contend that the notion of research has to be problematized in an intentional yet open manner by those involved in the collaboration. The concept of research has to be detached from how it has been traditionally carried out to uncover the essential elements of the process. The intent is to open up a discussion that will explore underlying assumptions and unexamined practices that play a part in how research is carried out and reflected upon. Discussing the conception of research can prompt conversations about each researcher’s location and relative privilege. A conversation about what research is highlights the inherently political nature of the process of knowledge production. Such discussion can encourage reflection about what research is and recognition that no one group has the monopoly on a definition.

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