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Confronting collaboration: dilemmas in an ethnographic study of health policy-makers

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Abstract

In this article we report on collaborative, ethnographic research investigating the first regional tobacco control office in the U.K. and some of the dilemmas it poses. The ideal of collaboration is fully realizable in this setting, where the participants are both eager and qualified to contribute meaningfully to the project. However, the fulfilment of such an ideal poses its own problems. For example, the educational level and professional expertise of participants allows them to fully engage with the theoretical framework to the extent that they could, if allowed, rewrite manuscripts. Other issues are more subtle, such as how to establish appropriate boundaries between the researcher and the tobacco control office staff and their perspectives. We suggest that collaborative research presupposes differentials of power, education and culture that do not necessarily apply in the case of research with health policy-makers in such settings. The challenge is to maintain a balance between collaboration and research especially when there are no power differentials between the researchers and participants but there are power differentials between the participants.

Keywords: Tobacco control, public health policy, collaboration, ethnography, England

Confronting collaboration: dilemmas in an ethnographic study of health policy-makers

Introduction

Anthropology as a discipline is beset with image problems. All too often it is regarded as insufficiently valuable by those who set the budgets (Basch 1999), and there are widespread accusations that anthropological research only further entrenches the power imbalances that have caused some of the problems anthropologists study (Tierney 2001; West 2005). As a result, there has been a significant shift towards what is known as collaborative or engaged anthropology, which has gained momentum since the *Darkness in El Dorado* controversy (Hurtado and Salzano 2004: 3-4). According to the American Anthropological Association (AAA):

‘Collaborative research involves the side-by-side work of all parties in a mutually beneficial research program. All parties are equal partners in the enterprise, participating in the development of the research design and in other major aspects of the program as well, working together toward a common goal. Only in the collaborative model is there full give and take, where at every step of the research knowledge and expertise is shared.’ (AAA 2002: 46)

As a result, methodological and ethical training has been adjusted to support and encourage collaborative work, for example in calling for on-going consultation with participants, for results to be fed back in a meaningful manner and for “ongoing iterations of data collection, analysis and validation, reflection and re-evaluation” (Sillitoe *et al.* 2005: 85). Such approaches can be criticized for their uncritical

acceptance of collaboration, and their lack of regard to the practical problems that may be inherent in the concept.¹

In this article we reflect on the process of carrying out collaborative research in a study of England's first tobacco control office, now known as the Smoke Free North East Office (SFNEO), which was established in May 2005. This research has confronted an assumption implicit assumption in the collaborative paradigm, namely that there are entrenched power, ideological, educational and cultural differences that need to be surmounted. Our account highlights the issues that arise when there are no obvious power differentials between researchers and participants.

The SFNEO coordinates the activities of Smoke Free North East (SFNE), an umbrella term for all the tobacco control activities in the North East region of England. At the time of data collection, SFNE was funded by the 16 North East primary care organisations (later reconfigured to 12), with a further contribution from the Department of Health. It is steered by a broad coalition of public, private and third sector partners in the region.² After looking at the research project we have established to evaluate its effectiveness, we chart some of the unanticipated effects of the lack of power differentials in terms of project structure, research methods, outputs and who collaborates.

The Project

Research funding was obtained from the National Prevention Research Initiative (NPRI), a large consortium of UK research councils and charitable bodies set up to advance research into 'what works' in four key areas (smoking, alcohol, diet and exercise) that can help to prevent some of the 'big killer' diseases (including cancer, heart disease and diabetes). The majority of proposals funded in the first

round, 26 in total, involve randomized controlled trials. Ours was the only anthropologically-based multidisciplinary project; co-applicants included a health inequalities expert, a health policy analyst, an epidemiologist, and a health economist. However it fitted both the remit of the NPRI and the call by Wanless (2004) for more micro-level studies of the dynamics of interventional approaches in public health and the analysis of mechanisms whereby these outcomes were reached, rather than a focus on outcome measures alone.

One of the selection criteria for applications to the NPRI was whether “consumer or patient groups, other beneficiaries of the research or the public in general [have been] involved in a consultative manner in the development and/or operation of the study.” The NPRI also called for “multi-disciplinary collaborations from the prevention research community”. Thus there was a convenient convergence of current trends towards collaborative methods in both anthropological health research (Lambert and McKeivitt 2002) and the selection criteria of the funding body.

In keeping with those concerns, the SFNEO research project was designed in collaboration with key members of SFNE, some of whom were appointed to the project’s steering committee. Moreover, the regular feedback of results was written into the project’s methodology, thereby building into our proposal strong collaborative links, as well as engagement of ‘the public’ through the provision of annual stakeholder events offering the chance both to communicate information about the project and to receive public feedback on it.

The project commenced in April 2006 for three years. It aimed to describe the formation and functioning of the SFNEO and to monitor outcomes in order to study its effectiveness. A postdoctoral research associate (Heckler) was employed to run the project, using ethnographic data collection methods such as observation and recording

of events, stakeholder interviews, and the collation and analysis of relevant documents. Her work was overseen by regular meetings with the principal investigator and six-weekly meetings with the project steering committee. Once underway, the project's aims were further refined under three strands:

1. To describe and analyse the fluid and negotiated relationships between the SFNEO and its collaborating networks in the NE region.
2. To compare the SFNEO to tobacco control management in the other regions of England.
3. To study public perceptions of smoking using in-depth qualitative methods in the district of Easington (one of the most deprived districts in the country).³

In addition, three subsidiary outcomes were identified that would be of immediate benefit to the collaborators: to publicize the work of SFNE; to inform and increase the efficiency of the SFNEO; and to provide a model of good practice for other regions and other public health initiatives.

Confronting Collaboration

Having set up the project as an example of excellence in collaborative research, it became apparent that the strong push for integration, which has been a multi-faceted and generally very positive process, could generate a new set of problems in the key areas of project structure, research methods, and output.

Project Structure

The project was designed in line with the AAA's call to 'include all parties in the research design'. Indeed, three of the co-investigators are also participants, in that

they are involved with SFNE's intelligence sub-group. Our three named collaborators also work closely with the project.

Meanwhile, SFNE has used the fact that it is the subject of a major research project as part of its publicity, for instance by including the project in a presentation to the deputy chief medical officer in May 2006. SFNE has incorporated the project as one element of its own research portfolio, and formal lines of accountability have been set up—the project reports quarterly to the intelligence sub-group. The potential problem of blurred roles and conflicting identities this could engender was felt by the investigators and collaborators to be more than made up for by the real benefits generated by such close links and team working. A number of checks and balances built into the design of the project were intended to ensure an appropriate division between participant and subject. For example, although the project reports to the intelligence sub-group, it was written into the project protocol that this group would “be able to make comments on, but not alter, the findings of the project”.

However, such measures require an on-going balancing of the opposing pulls of collaboration vs. autonomy. For instance, the SFNEO's offer of office space was accepted, but not its offer of funds to help with expenses. The support of an SFNE secretary as a minute taker was initially accepted, but it subsequently seemed to risk compromising the project's autonomy. Similarly, it seemed inappropriate for the researcher to use an SFNE e-mail address even though network security measures would have made it much more convenient for her to do so.

Despite the appeal of having named collaborators involved in project governance, it became clear that there was a need to separate the role of collaborator from that of investigator in the project's steering committee. It would have inhibited the free and frank discussion of project findings concerning SFNE in steering

committee meetings when members of SFNE were present and it might have been a significant threat to the holistic goals and multiple perspectives of the project. It was therefore written into the terms of reference of the steering committee after its first meeting that, while the collaborators would no longer sit on the steering committee, “their involvement in and commitment to the project is fully acknowledged. They are available for individual discussion and e-mail consultation with members of the steering committee”. The collaborators understood and accepted the rationale behind this move. However, this backtracking from the original collaborative structure could conceivably have gone badly wrong, leading to accusations of opacity and manipulation.

Research Methods

Participant-observation is one of the central methods in anthropology and one of its unique strengths. Participant-observation also accords well with Wanless’ (2004) call for greater emphasis to be placed on how effective policy implementation takes place through the study of individual interactions and daily working practices. Participant-observation has enabled a detailed understanding of the operations and relationships of the SFNEO relatively quickly because of the lack of the language and cultural barriers, and issues of trust, that can hinder participant-observation in ‘other’ lands. However, in blending the boundary between data collection and interaction, participant-observation has thrown up a whole new set of problems.

One of these is the tendency for the researcher and other investigators to ‘go native’: indeed, in many respects they are ‘natives’ already. Since the start of the project in 2006, the researcher has been able to feel an integral part of the office ‘team’, to offer advice and counsel on particular issues and, because of the rapport she

has established with the SFNE director, has entered into an on-going relationship of frank exchanges, advice and mutual support. This close relationship, thereby achieving an ideal that anthropologists may spend many years working to achieve and enabling the ‘ongoing feedback’ called for in the collaborative paradigm, has led to the researcher affecting the organisation in unexpected ways.

One area where this has been particularly significant is in the type of participation with which the researcher has been involved. Rather than learning skills that are quite new, such as a particular agricultural technique or weaving a basket, she has been asked to participate in activities that relate to her skills as a researcher, a lecturer, and an anthropologist. Given that these activities are often related to strategic directions within the organization, this input may prove more significant than in other fieldwork contexts. A couple of examples may help to clarify this point:

- Participation in a meeting with SFNE’s public relations firm to brainstorm ideas for various media campaigns, including the World No Tobacco Day (31 May 2006) press releases. In the context of this brainstorming, the researcher was invited to suggest an idea that was accepted and used as the key message for SFNE’s media campaign.
- Accompanying the SFNEO team to the World Conference on Tobacco OR Health in Washington, D.C., in July 2006. To cover as many of the panels as possible, each SFNE delegate including the researcher was asked to attend different panels and write a comprehensive report on their return. These reports were compiled and presented to SFNE in October 2006, along with the team’s ideas on key messages from the conference. Part of the purpose of the presentation was to determine the long-term strategic direction of SFNE, so the researcher’s

involvement had the hypothetical potential to set the direction of SFNE for years to come.

Given that our subsidiary aims include publicizing the work of the office and improving its efficiency, this type of input seems entirely appropriate. It is also in the spirit of the AAA's call that collaborative research should allow "local experts to work side-by-side with outside researchers, with a fully dialogic exchange of knowledge" (AAA 2002: v.1, pg. 46). However, it does open up the potential for the researcher to have what might be regarded as undue influence on the subject. 'Undue influence' is a legal term meaning, 'any improper or wrongful constraint, machination, or urgency of persuasion, by which one's will is overcome and one is induced to do or forbear an act which one would or would not do if left to act freely'.⁴ It is a useful term in this context because it emphasises a gradation of influence. This gradation is welcomed in anthropological research where the power differentials between researchers and researched is great, with the influence running from the latter to the former; our point is that in research with professionals or other elite groups the question of influence is more problematic and can run both ways, an issue which most articles championing collaborative research fail to address.

Outputs

It has been argued (e.g. hooks 1990) that one of the barriers to collaboration in anthropological research is the need to translate participants' points of view into an acceptably academic or scientific language. However the collaborators in our project are highly educated, familiar with academic research and writing, and, in some cases, are authors of publications themselves. Their ability to understand the full context of academic writing and to express themselves in its particular language has negated a

crucial rationale for allowing the researcher to filter and reinterpret their discourse. This was exemplified in a meeting that was held in July of this year between two of the collaborators and the authors. The meeting was called by one of the collaborators to discuss possible ‘quick’ publication routes for the project and it produced ideas for three journal articles. We subsequently met again to comb over an initial draft of one of these articles in detail.

Although this has worked exceptionally well, in some ways the ability of a participant to make suggestions about where and when articles are submitted and to help determine the core arguments of those articles could be said to have blurred the lines between collaboration and the undue influence of that person’s particular perspective on the study subject. Furthermore, participants’ ability to evaluate a draft paper, without interpretation from the author(s), and to express their input in such a way that it does not need translation or rewording before it is included in the paper makes their input convincing and immediately usable. This contrasts with those participants who are not able to engage with the ‘language’ of academia in this way. Although this has led to real inclusion, it also means that the collaborators have a stronger voice in project outputs than some of the less senior or less analytically minded participants. In other words certain participants, by virtue of their position and education, may have undue influence on our project.

Who Collaborates?

Conflicts have arisen between different groups constituting SFNE. The intelligence sub-group, which helped to provide the direction for this project, and the project collaborators, largely reflect one side of these conflicts. Maintaining some holistic plurality of voices and opinions, given the centrality of the collaborators’

voices, has required a constant, self-conscious pull away from the integration that the collaborative paradigm calls for. Although this has not yet been identified by participants as a problem, the fact that these collaborators are at odds with some of the other participants from time to time has made the authors aware that there are no inherent or structural barriers to prevent the collaborators' voices drowning out those of other participants. The problem is how to cope with the 'dilemma of choice and positioning' as we work with (and subsequently write about) "these intersecting fields of power and responsibility" (Gledhill 2003). Had the co-investigators been aware of the conflicts in the planning stages then an easy solution might have been to include a representative from one of the conflicting groups as a collaborator. However, this could have resulted in an unwieldy and potentially conflictual group which might have spent more time discussing the conflicts than how the project should describe and evaluate them.

In adopting the expectations and recommendations of collaborative research, the project has effectively given those participants who are already in positions of power that much more influence. Increasing their ability to voice the 'participants' perspective' and inform the results, sometimes in very subtle ways, has made it potentially more difficult to access the voices and perspectives of those with less power. In this case, the ideal of collaboration is working against the decades-long emphasis on recognizing the multiple perspectives, voices and powers of different sub-groups within a community.

Conclusions

Collaborative research attempts to address differentials of power, education and culture that otherwise separate the researcher from his or her subjects in

deleterious ways. Our point is that collaborative research within anthropology appears to be premised on such differentials of power, and that where such differentials are lacking, the field is open for dominant individuals (either researcher or researched) to assume what is potentially ‘undue influence’ over the results. Our project appears to be maintaining a delicate balance between the conflicting aims of representing a holistic plurality of voices and collaboration. However, if any results are released that might be interpreted as critical of one group or another within SFNE, this could put the collaborative paradigm in jeopardy. The project steering committee has some inbuilt mechanisms whereby the researcher’s position and role is scrutinised and, perhaps, readjusted at regular intervals. Anthropological ethics and methods training offer little help in this respect. Major professional anthropological organisations and funders such as the NPRI and the UK funding councils are encouraging more collaboration, more feedback of research results and more involvement of participants in the planning and implementation phases of the project, embedding these ideals into their ethical codes. However, to guard against the potential for undue influence described, it is necessary to go against the centripetal pull (of collaboration) and set boundaries that enable a separation between project and subject - boundaries that were originally dissolved to make the project more attractive to its funders, as well as the investigators themselves.

Notes

1. In this way, the concept of collaboration can be usefully compared with that of ‘participation’ and its underlying assumptions in the development literature, which have recently been the subject of similar critiques (e.g. Cleaver 2004; Christens and Speer 2006).

2. Membership of the advisory panel includes representatives from the strategic health authorities, the primary care organisations (PCOs), local authorities, the regional assembly, the Voluntary Organisations' Network North East, the Health and Safety Executive, the North East Trading Standards Association, the North East Chamber of Commerce, the patient-public involvement forum, regional universities, One North East (the region's development agency), and the Trades Union Congress. The chair is the regional director of public health advisory panel and four other members represent different NHS organisations.

2. <http://www.easington.gov.uk/services/regenpart/nrenewal/nreasington.asp>

[accessed 6 September 2007].

3. Definition derived from Abbott, quoted in the Free Dictionary

<http://www.thefreedictionary.com/Undue+influence> [accessed 19 November 2007].

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