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(Un)doing collaboration: reflections on the practices of collaborative research

The CRESC Encounters Collaborative

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For further information: Centre for Research on Socio-Cultural Change (CRESC)
Faculty of Social Sciences, The Open University,
Walton Hall, Milton Keynes, MK7 6AA, UK
Tel: +44 (0)1908 654458 Fax: +44 (0)1908 654488

Email: cresc@manchester.ac.uk *or* cresc@open.ac.uk

Web: www.cresc.ac.uk



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Abstract

Collaboration is often put forward as a programmatic ideal, or invoked as an antidote to conventional research methods in the humanities and social sciences. Collaboration also increasingly features in the lexicon of ‘innovation’, ‘interdisciplinarity’, ‘partnership’, ‘engagement’ and ‘impact’ that accompanies the restructuring of Higher Education as well as the production, circulation and consumption of knowledge. But despite this turn to ‘collaboration’ and the set of tensions it generates, there has been comparatively little sustained attention to the actual practices of doing collaborative research. In this Working Paper, researchers from the CRESC Encounters Collaborative reflect on their experiences of collaborative research, offering a series of case studies that describe research with actors ranging from City Councils to a feminist community allotment, from Eurostat to intra-academic projects. Through these case studies we unpack the research process in ways that serve to disrupt conventional representations of research as a linear, sequential activity resulting in a set of knowable outputs. Rather we find that collaborative research often requires that the definition of research problems, methods or outputs be left open or remain undetermined, whilst at the same time posing questions about the authorship and ownership of knowledge production that are often otherwise foreclosed in conventional research. Furthermore, via an analysis of our research encounters, we find that the relationships that underpin collaborative research are often sustained through the production and exchange of particular kinds of ‘gifts’, which may be missed in contemporary regimes of ‘impact’. In these ways, the accounts presented in this Paper throw into relief the artefactual character of representations of research that as academics we are often incited to construct. Yet, by paying attention to the mundane and opportunistic ways in which collaborative research often proceeds (or fails to proceed), the case studies also serve to complicate a reified opposition between conventional and collaborative research. Rather, we find that the distinctiveness of collaboration lies less in a deviation from some kind of imagined, non-collaborative research process, than in the way it forces a reflexive acknowledgment of the emergent quality of knowledge in research relationships across time and space.

¹ The CRESC Encounters Collaborative is made up of current and former CRESC researchers: Michelle Bastian, Niall Cunningham, Francis Dodsworth, Gemma John, Hannah Knox, Andy Miles, Johnna Montgomerie, Niamh Moore, Stewart Muir, Susan Oman, Annabel Pinker, Evelyn Ruppert, Mike Upton, Vron Ware and Alban Webb. Collaborative work also poses challenges for the conventions of authorship. To elaborate: This paper was inspired by conversations amongst this group since the summer of 2012. The introduction and conclusion were formulated by Hannah Knox, Niamh Moore and Mike Upton, and written primarily by Mike Upton. Case studies were provided by the researchers named at the beginning of each section. Further information about the work of the CRESC Encounters Collaborative can be found at www.cresc.ac.uk/our-research/cresc-encounters-collaborative.

(Un)doing collaboration: reflections on the practices of collaborative research

Introduction

In recent years, there has been a renewed interest in collaboration across the humanities and social sciences as a particular kind of research practice (see for example, Collier 2007, Holmes & Marcus 2008, Marcus 2008, Konrad 2012). This 'turn' to collaborative research is imbued with much potential and held up for its imagined capacities to address many of the global challenges we currently face. Yet 'collaboration', and invocations to 'collaborate', also feature in a new lexicon of 'interdisciplinarity', 'partnership', 'innovation', 'engagement', 'value' and 'impact' of Higher Education bodies, Research Councils and universities, one that is mobilised in the context of the radical restructuring of the 'public university' as well as the production, circulation and consumption of knowledge (Strathern 2004; Eubanks 2009; Holmwood 2011).

Established in 2004 as a collaboration between the University of Manchester and the Open University, CRESC offers a unique vantage point from which to explore a set of tensions generated by these trends. Involving a high concentration of researchers from multi- and trans-disciplinary backgrounds engaged in research with non-academic actors – ranging from town councils to feminist community groups, from Eurostat to the military – and producing multiply-authored outputs in a wide range of formats, the work of CRESC's researchers offers a productive site to investigate and unpack the practices of collaborative research.

It is beyond the scope of this paper to provide a comprehensive history of research in the social sciences that might be described as collaborative; indeed scholars have described the 'origins' of collaborative approaches as being somewhat nebulous (Berg 2004: 196). A careful genealogy of collaborative research would require extensive work across a wide range of disciplines and interdisciplines, not least because a key feature of collaboration is that it very often acts to disrupt disciplinary boundaries. The broad revaluation of method and epistemology for approaching developments in science and technology has been particularly generative in this regard (Collins & Evans 2002; Rabinow & Bennett 2007; Collier 2007; Rees 2007; Holmes & Marcus 2008; Konrad 2012).

At the same time, collaboration is often invoked in an ahistorical manner as something methodologically 'new'. This tends to obscure the ways contemporary iterations of collaboration build on a complex methodological heritage, and in particular the tradition of participatory action research pioneered by scholars and others from a broad range of backgrounds including psychology (Lewin 1946), education (Freire 1972, hooks 1994), sociology and anthropology (Goodenough 1963), as well as feminist and post-colonial scholars and activists engaged in the Civil Rights Movement and South Asian social movements (Reinharz 1992, Hall 2005). In this genealogy, collaboration is valued in terms of a particular kind of encounter where all participants are understood as, and treated as, active subjects of knowledge production, rather than some participants being seen as passive objects of an analytical 'view from nowhere' (Haraway 1991; Kinpaisby 2008, see also Ruppert (1)).

Yet if collaborative approaches have been valued in terms of their emphasis on participation and partnership, both of these concepts have also, at times, been subject to critical appraisal. One particularly potent site where participation has been deployed and critiqued as a means of legitimising certain interventions is in 'development' contexts (Cooke & Kothari 2001; Richter 2001; Gould 2005; Green 2010). We suggest that such critiques point to important issues that also hold for the University sector. As in international development, the commitment to collaborative research in universities has been part of a broader process where 'participation' and 'partnership' are the vehicles through which services are withdrawn, or

where it is invoked to rationalise new governmentalities that appear to leave researchers 'double-bound' (Eubanks 2009). In this respect, critical development studies alerts us to the ways in which collaboration often involves a messy nexus of a commitment to ethics and politics – and opportunism. Critical studies of partnership working in the context of development highlight how calls to engage in collaboration need to be approached as much more than just the pursuit of the free flow of knowledge. It is with an awareness of this 'neoliberal' moment within which we find ourselves that we revisit in this working paper, the specific kinds of 'collaboration' we have been participating in, through our own research practices.

In particular we have become interested in the ways collaborative research encounters throw into sharp relief the assumptions and representations of the model research process in the social sciences and humanities (Collier 2007). This model often projects a linear research sequence in which the researcher(s) undertake a series of activities. Typically the researcher is expected to elaborate a research question, design a methodology, execute the method, collate the data, analyse the findings, and finally, generate and disseminate answers. This model tends to rely on normative constructions of the relationship between the individual researcher and research participants, expected outputs and dissemination activities, underlying which are fundamental assumptions about where the 'value' of research lies (cf Strathern 2004).

While there is a general widely shared understanding amongst academics that these constructions do not accurately reflect the practice of research, nonetheless this version of the research process stubbornly persists, and there is a sense that publishing accounts of the actual practices and processes by which research does take place remains difficult. Whilst much is written on methods, as an idealised form of research, much less has been written on how research actually takes place (or fails to take place) in and across specific spatial and temporal contexts. Similarly, while 'collaborative' research is often counter-posed to the 'individual research model' (Collier 2007), there has been little analysis of the distinctiveness of collaborative research encounters in specific contexts; for example, how the non-hierarchical and reciprocal promise of collaborative research plays out (or fails to play out), or the role of trust in collaborative research encounters. Like methods, collaboration is more often put forward as a programmatic ideal rather than an object of sustained reflexive attention.

In contrast, in this working paper we offer a series of case studies in which CRESC researchers reflect on their own experiences of collaboration via an analysis of these collaborative research encounters. In doing so, we rethink how the research process proceeds in practice as a necessarily collaborative activity. Indeed, in the process of writing and collating the case studies, it became clear that our examples of collaborative working refused to be organised linearly. For example, several contributions speak to different moments in the research process or collapse it altogether. Nevertheless, certain themes emerge that are addressed in the concluding remarks.

To begin, Niamh Moore offers a phenomenological account of a collaborative research project with young people involved with a young lesbian and bisexual women's community allotment in Manchester. In both style and content, the case study highlights the impossibility of knowing when research 'starts' and when it 'ends'. Did it emerge in a snatched conversation before a loo-break at a conference or in the relationships established by the author through voluntary work at the allotment? The study describes the ways in which the methods, research design and outputs were all transformed in the process of collaborative research, but also transformed the allotment project itself.

Evelyn Ruppert's first case study draws on an STS perspective to consider a research project that transcribed original handwritten Canadian census forms from the first half of the twentieth century into digital format, across five sites. She identifies a range of actors, both human and non-human, that collaborated on the project, including data-entry workers,

sociologists, national statisticians, protocols for interpreting, transcribing and coding the data, as well as the software and manuals designed for the project. Ruppert's approach throws into relief the ways in which the judgments, biases, capacities and positions of researchers also become the 'subject' of research to the extent that they shape the knowledge produced 'about' the census data. Yet as the project showed, this census data had already been subject to translation in the production of aggregate statistics that purified the handwritten documents of 'noise'.

Niall Cunningham's contribution explores the spatial character of collaborations, from an intra-academic transnational collaborative project, to work with Oldham Council that aimed to develop information systems to facilitate the implementation of policies around 'social cohesion'. The paper suggests that physical proximity may be a condition of success for collaborative projects whilst raising questions as to the role of 'collaboration' for the public sector in the context of austerity.

Stewart Muir's piece describes the unexplored potential of research on community projects involving the elderly that followed an ESRC-funded project on intergenerational relationships in Manchester. Organisations such as Manchester City Council and third sector service providers were approached as potential gate-keepers that could provide access to participants. While these organisations were open to pursuing collaborative research, the paper suggests that a lack of organisational capacity, inexperience in the sector, as well as the fact that these organisations were themselves often 'seeking clients', sapped momentum.

Johnna Montgomerie's contribution describes a collaborative research project with trade unions and third sector organisations addressing the financial crisis that began as a one-day workshop and developed into a series interviews, events and networks. The piece highlights the role of method and research design to the constitution of the research object, arguing that a focus on government, banks, and regulators in the literature tends to reproduce the depoliticisation of financial governance. Thus collaborative research with actors otherwise excluded from this focus is analysed as a self-conscious intervention into the debate, one that disrupts categories of 'expert', 'academic', 'community organiser' or 'activist'.

In her case study based on work with the environment team at Manchester City Council, Knox describes the design and implementation of a collaborative research project investigating the shift in methods used to measure carbon emissions. Knox unpacks the collaborative process in terms of a relationship based on a series of exchanges, yet one where exactly what was being exchanged as well as the eventual outcomes remained open. Knox draws on this example to reflect on the afterlife of collaborative research and the challenges of extrapolating insights beyond the immediate research context to non-academic audiences.

Gemma John describes the challenges faced devising a collaborative research project with two councils, one urban one rural, on the implementation of the Localism Act. In particular, John documents a moment in which the project threatened to unravel as one 'partner' questioned the project's design. Responding to this, John's intervention highlights the importance of the symbolic and material act of listening to participants' viewpoints in the production of 'trust', drawing attention to 'collaboration' as a kind of performance.

Ruppert's second case study describes the Socialising Big Data project that aims to develop new methodologies for establishing collaborative relationships between academics, scientists, engineers and statisticians. The project draws on the concept of the 'collaboratory', in which knowledge production is conceived and practiced not by individual academics but as a collective intellectual process. Socialising Big Data extends this concept of the collaboratory to include non-academic expert actors. While the project takes as its starting point shared conceptual understandings of material semiotic practices as distributed social

networks/assemblages/apparatuses, there is an expectation that these framings will change, or even be abandoned in the process of research.

Finally we finish by coming full circle and returning to the beginning of a new research project with Vron Ware's research proposal for a project that seeks to track the impact of military bases in the UK on surrounding civilian populations as a way of investigating the domestic impact of the UK's military engagements in Iraq and Afghanistan. Building on her previous work with the military, the proposal envisages research with actors who regularly cross the military and civilian divide, as well as charities and local councils, in order to unpack the domestic social, economic and political transformations of military deployments.

Growing Collaborative Research, by Niamh Moore

It began, not with a research question, but with some apparently random encounters, which somehow eventually coalesced and materialised into a research project.

It began with a failed allotment, with an attempt to grow vegetables with others, not with research at all, because at that point growing vegetables and research did not seem related activities. It began with an allotment which grew out of the failed allotment.

It began at an AHRC summit, in a grey room someplace, maybe Coventry. It began with too many powerpoint presentations and a schedule too full to make much use of the supposed cabaret-style tables which were too big anyway and the programme did not actually include introducing each other to people we were sitting with. It began with the guy across the table asking a question and mentioning in passing something called a community farm he was involved in. It began in the moment of deciding whether to use the 5 minute dis/comfort break to go for a wee and get some more tea or skip the queues and breach the space across the table to ask what was a community farm, to hear a description of an amazing place, and an amazing way of growing food, to the eventual decision that I really did need a wee before we started back, and a quick 'oh I'm involved in a community allotment in Manchester' tossed over my shoulder as I dashed off. It began with the email a few weeks later from Neil asking if we would be interested in putting in a grant application to the AHRC for a project about community growing projects. It began with a yes to a project with someone who I'd barely met.

Though really it had already begun on another project, which also began down the allotment, in a conversation with Amelia while we dug, and dug, and dug, where, in the resourcefulness I now recognise as so characteristic of her, she told me about a grant they were planning on putting in to the Heritage Lottery Fund for an oral history project of feminist youth work and youth work with girls in Manchester and the North West. It began with 'you know something about oral history don't you?' and a 'can I give you a call when we are doing the application to get some advice?'. It began with an 'of course', and a curiosity, and a desire to know more, and to be more involved than just giving some advice over the phone. What was this project anyway? What was feminist youth work? It began with me saying over the phone that I didn't think that it was quite right to give some oral history training and then leave them to it, that oral history, and research, was an ongoing process, and that I thought I should be on hand to provide research support throughout the life of the project, so it was also about the ethics of research, not only my own interests.

So I'd already done some work with Amelia, and with young women in youth groups in Manchester, where I delivered 'training' in oral history, and provided research support, as part of a HLF-funded project where Amelia was in charge. So she had already tried me out.

Who knows when and where it all already began. I was already in deep, already involved long before it began, transformed, into a research project. It began because I was involved, puzzling over what on earth was going on, down here among the endless brambles. On the one hand, a lesbian allotment seemed like some kind of cliché – in my world anyway – of lesbian separatist back-to-the-landers; but I had just written a book on an eco/feminist peace camp, saying that wasn't what it might seem to be. And in any case, this allotment, though it invoked those histories and herstories for me, was definitely also of another time and place, post-millennial Manchester. And it also involved other histories, about which I initially knew very little, of feminist youth work, and community growing.

I'd been involved in the group so I knew that I could have gone and interviewed everyone one-to-one – the kind of thing I had done in previous projects. But this didn't really seem to

make sense as an approach. I couldn't imagine interviewing people in their own homes; or in my institutional office, or even in the hectic business of the youth centre. Where else to do the interviewing but down the allotment. And, it's a group with a huge emphasis on participation, so somehow me interviewing everyone hardly made any sense. We decided to interview each other.

Technically I shared interview skills in an hour-long session in the youth centre. Together we generated a list of questions that we could ask each other about the allotment. But as I experienced with Feminist Webs, the methods are transformed in the encounter, in the sharing. Somehow the plan to interview each other morphed into a plan to video the process and to make a YouTube video – I can't even remember how and when now, but I think it was about a format and output that would appeal to the group. I didn't have any video skills; they didn't either. Though they did have enough connections that someone turned up at the allotment to show us how to use the cameras I had borrowed from the university. Though perhaps a few tips on which buttons to press was not quite enough to transform us into experts. But somehow, together in our unknowingness, we made two short YouTube videos anyway.

And I morphed from being this person who came and did some digging down the allotment to a 'Researcher' from the University of Manchester. And there was the sense that now there was 'research' on the allotment that its stature grew, that the research bestowed value on the allotment from the beginning, that the research already had an impact, before we had even started.

And thanks to the innovation of the AHRC Connected Communities programme, there never really was a research question, but there was an openness to pursuing a research process together, to working together to document the allotment and the process of growing together.

There are endings, of sorts. We finished the YouTube videos. But the project continues. The writing came much later, a review paper on Community Supported Agriculture; a paper on the 'public-private' nature of the allotment; one in planning on 'on knowing (and not knowing) your onions'. We begin to think of the research process as a kind of spiral, a community stories spiral, how stories are invited, generated, circulate and are remediated. Who knows where it will all go and how, when, if it will ever end.

I have been thinking about this as a kind of 'public research'; this is not public engagement, or knowledge transfer. It is about what happens when you share research methods; and recognise that you are not the only one with research methods, when the methods are transformed in the encounter of different expertise.

Methods and working with people and things, by Evelyn Ruppert (1)

I am interested in thinking of encounters in relation to methods and how they inevitably involve the mediations of people (dead and alive) and things (practical and technocratic). From 2002 – 2007 I co-directed a project that involved digitising some 1.5 million individual level records from the 1911-51 population censuses of Canada. The objective was to transcribe original handwritten census manuscript forms into digital format in order to reveal the variability of lives that is lost in aggregate statistics and thereby provide insights about the lives of the historically anonymous who typically do not leave records.

In general the process involved over 70 people—technicians, data entry operators, computer scientists, historians, geographers, sociologists—plus an infrastructure of microfilm reels and readers, specially designed software and computer networks—all distributed across five ‘high security’ regional centres (due to the confidentiality of the records). To manage the practices across such a distributed network of course required the development of a set of rules and protocols for interpreting, transcribing and coding what turned out to be extremely variable paperwork.

The handwritten manuscripts revealed much variety and uncertainty rather than being straightforward recordings of individuals into the state's classification system. The variability was particularly evident in the unique answers to individual questions, which are more numerous than the categories reported in the aggregate statistics. For instance, a four per cent sample of individuals enumerated in 1921 (approximately 362,041 individuals) resulted in over 563 unique versions of 'racial and tribal origins'. However, the aggregate statistics identified 32 unique categories and five 'other' categories. Beyond the obvious spelling errors and problems of illegible handwriting, how can we account for the number of unique versions?

As STS would suggest, this is a result of mediations and translations along a chain of relations from the paper form, respondents and enumerators to the compilers and correctors in the central offices of the statistics authority of the early twentieth century. But it also of course included us 70 researchers one hundred years later who encountered and sought to interpret and digitise their traces.

A long story could be told about the almost two years we spent designing the software, writing the manuals and rules for data entry and coding, training data entry supervisors, operators, checkers and so on. Yet, all of this could not cover everything encountered in the meticulously handwritten documents where details about individuals were painstakingly recorded, often in immaculate handwriting. We encountered idiosyncratic handwriting and styles, notes in the margins, erasures, crossed out entries, changes made to entries in different handwriting and so on. There were also many 'errors' or categories not 'properly' completed. Read as a text then the manuscript forms revealed how individuals were not simply counted but the categories of the census were also contested, often resulting in problematic, unexpected and unrecognisable responses. Indeed, we required a special 'notes' field to enter such unexpected text such as corrections and additional notations.

In brief, there was much back-and-forth negotiation and decisions made between data entry software designers, supervisors, operators, checkers and academics across the five centres. These negotiations and decisions required consensus building and often challenged our different conceptual understandings of our shared enterprise of co-producing standardised historical databases. But despite the continuous updating of manuals and rules to address new issues, for practical reasons much had to be left up to individual ‘discretion’—recognising that such discretion was configured by all of these arrangements.

Of course, as good social scientists would, we documented our rules, procedures etc. and provided qualifying statements about these vicissitudes of our method. And of course, many researchers have noted and brought attention to how all methods involve such matters. Methodological descriptions and metadata are standard practices that presumably account for this. But what typically happens is that such mediations and ‘noise’ disappear when the data is analysed. Indeed, social historians are now writing ‘new’ histories of modern Canada based on our data.

I am not arguing that what we produced is inaccurate, error-ridden, not valid, etc. Rather, I like to think of the data as a product of collaboration that says as much about the past and long dead as it does about ourselves and relations with things. For the subjects of our collaboration included various technologies and us. Not only were long dead people the subjects of our gaze. We were subjects too in that our judgments, biases, capacities, positions and their shaping by technologies were part of the mediations that enacted the subjects of our gaze. As renowned street photographers have expressed, the subject of photography is not in front but is behind and in relation to the camera and together their gaze enacts streets.

What then if we were to bring ourselves as subjects—not as individuals but as collaborators—to the front of the camera and conceive of our doings not as interferences that taint the historical record, but as part of the object/subject of inquiry itself, that we as collaborators are entangled and constitutive of the subjects of our gaze? This calls for a reflexivity (Bourdieu 1992) and understanding of a subject-positioning (Foucault 1983) that is not about the self but the self in relation to arrangements we can refer to as collaborations.

Collaborations, by Niall Cunningham

Most of my experience of collaborative working to date has been limited to the academic sector. Before becoming a professional researcher I worked as a teacher in secondary schools in both the UK and Japan. My teaching experience in Britain was characterised more accurately by a sort of mutual dependence rather than collaboration; I was broadly dependent on the deference of my pupils in order to provide a reasonably conducive learning environment, whilst they were (in large part), dependent upon me to teach them according to the demands of the national curriculum for History. Beyond the classroom, collaborations did not really exist and teachers appeared to operate with a considerable degree of independence, using their own methods and developing their own resources. In a sense, each class (and classroom) was its own republic, exerting its own dynamics, stresses and strains in which this mediated form of collaboration played out. For me, to maintain the delicate balance in this collaboration within the four walls of the classroom was the measure of success as to either seek or attract the intervention of a more powerful colleague was a signal indication of weakness. In contrast to the tertiary education sector, everyday successful ‘collaborations’ in schools were usually contingent upon a context of spatial and social restriction.

Prior to joining CRESC, I was a Research Associate on an AHRC-funded project based at Lancaster University but forming a collaboration with colleagues in the Geography department at Queen’s University Belfast and the Sociology department at the City University of New York. When funding for my post expired and we had had exhausted other avenues, the impetus behind this aspect of the project fell away. Many of my colleagues at CRESC are involved in projects which involve a remarkable number of partner institutions both within and well beyond the academic sector and I marvel at how they can make these projects succeed to overcome the challenges of spatial dislocation. In our case, the distances were not that great, but by the end of the project the nature of grant funding inevitably meant that much of the intellectual momentum was coming from the host institution at Lancaster as the attention of the co-investigators was increasingly drawn towards other priorities that were closer to home. From this experience I developed the myopic view that spatial propinquity was crucial to the success of such academic collaborations. However, having been exposed to people working in much wider networks here at CRESC, I now understand that this is not necessarily the case.

More recently I have become involved in a different sort of collaboration with a public sector organisation, Oldham Council. This emerged out of a workshop I organised along with Laurence Brown to explore the possibilities of Geographical Information Systems for the analysis of issues surrounding ethnic residential settlement. Since the disturbances of 2001, Oldham is one of a number of former mill towns in the north of England that had become inextricably associated with issues of racial tension and segregation in the public mind. This is an image that has been both reinforced and challenged in media and public debates over the course of the last decade. Oldham has a recent history of involvement with the academic sector, and so representatives from the Council approached us to see if we could work together on these issues.

Much has been written of the economic downturn and the particularly severe impact this is now having on the public sector. However, it was only when walking through the Council offices and seeing the vast, empty open-plan spaces, where all that remained were the unbleached patterns on the carpet where office furniture used to be, that I realised how profound the cuts have been in human terms. The impact has been particularly severe in local government research departments, to the extent that it is stretching their capacity to conduct the breadth and depth of research that they need to carry out on important areas such as education and housing. Compounding the challenge for them is the current release of the 2011 Census results, which has serious implications for core funding over the coming years. It is

interesting to reflect on the terminology because now when I think of the word *collaboration*, particularly in an academic context, I think of it as a largely autonomous and volitional concept; we generally choose whom we work with and we are largely fortunate in being able to design our own research agendas. But in the context of the Oldham collaboration, while we were working with engaged, energetic and willing partners, there is also the wider sense that macro-economic concerns are creating new dynamics in terms of how the academic and public sectors interact. Fundamentally, there is a danger of collaboration becoming the academic equivalent of the 'big society' as the inherently positive and expansive normative implications of the term act to mask underlying dynamics of civic decline and dereliction.

The desire and limits of collaboration, by Stuart Muir

In my previous work as a cultural heritage professional, collaboration with a range of partners (government bodies, indigenous communities, developers, road engineers, builders, environmental impact consultants) and the construction of overlapping (although often contentious) goals was intrinsic to the work process. In contrast, my academic work has rarely if ever focused on collaboration outside of the research team.

Nevertheless, I have experienced some desire for engagement with academic researchers; a desire that has mostly been unmet because such collaboration lay outside the specific goals of the project. Indeed, much of my research has been of only peripheral interest to the people involved in the research. For example, when working on the Inter/generational Dynamics project – a mixed methods study of ageing and intergenerational relationships that was a component strand of the ESRC National Centre for Research Methods ‘Realities’ node – I sought assistance from a range of local government and third sector organisations in an attempt to recruit research participants and to satisfy my interest in the assumptions underpinning intergenerational community projects. That is, contact with non-academic agents was not part of an attempt to negotiate reciprocal or overlapping research goals but simply part of the fieldwork process of seeking gatekeepers for a project with pre-defined research questions (including research questions that had arisen during the already completed data collection). To this end I had meetings with members of Manchester City Council’s Valuing Older People (VOP) team (itself a collaboration between council employees and third sector organisations), the Manchester Cultural Offer Working Group (a collaboration between representatives of the city’s museums and galleries), and several community projects that ostensibly aimed to bring together different ‘generations’ in a variety of activities.

Much of this contact came to relatively little. A few organisations put me in contact with potential research participants and two agreed to help organise and host a short series of focus groups pertaining to older people and digital technology (a side-project that salvaged a failed funding application by the project team and the VOP). Most of the contacted organisations were willing to help but unable to do so because of limited capacity or their own organisational problems (they too were sometimes seeking clients). What was obvious, however, was their desire for something more from me. In particular, some of the organisations contacted hoped that the research might contribute to their organisation’s goals or contribute to in-house projects for which they lacked funding. More unusual was the sometimes expressed desire for help elaborating project goals or clarifying key concepts (such as what ‘generation’ might mean) and the willingness to talk, in an exploratory way, about the assumptions that underpinned organisational work with older people. Several of the third sector and local community organisations had only recently become involved in working with older people and/or intergenerational relations and lacked experience or knowledge of the sector; their involvement in such projects had arisen as an outgrowth of other programmes and/or a result of the opportunistic acquisition of funding. Such projects were often stalled or behind schedule. The potential gatekeepers contacted during fieldwork were often enthusiastic about their work and excited about the possibilities for future collaboration with academic researchers and/or by the potential for them to gain new ways of understanding their field. Such people were subsequently often very generous with their time. Yet, for the most part, such goals and desires lay well outside the project’s research goals and with limited time to spend on activities tangential to the project any such potential remained unexplored.

Encountering Crisis: Trade Unions, Civil Society and imagining an alternative, by Johnna Montgomerie

This case study investigates and unpacks the practices of researching in times of systemic crisis, when what was previously 'known' is fundamentally questioned and the outcomes entirely unknowable. The unfolding financial crisis, which began in 2007, revealed important political and social dynamics that make finance and banking an elite game: its commercial power is spatially bound within The City (Erturk et al. 2011); the power to politically regulate its activities are institutionally bound to The Treasury and the Bank of England (Barr 2012; Busch 2012; Sants 2010), its specialist knowledge practices bind the two together to the exclusion of 'outsiders' whose solutions or ideas are summarily dismissed as 'unworkable' (Bryan et al 2012; Froud et al 2011; Knight et al. 2012; Murphy 2010). Breaching this barrier and gaining access to the debate about the role finance plays in the economy and society is remarkably difficult for those on the 'outside' of these elite networks. The majority of social science research addressing the causes and consequences of the financial crisis focuses exclusively on these elite network of actors and the institutions (government, banks, central banks and regulators) to the exclusion of other stakeholders in financial markets; thus, reproducing the depoliticisation of financial governance that, arguably, facilitated the financial crisis in the first place. Therefore, 'the crisis' is not only in the object of analysis (financial markets and governance practices) but also in the method by which it is studied.

This research encounter began just after the collapse of Lehman Brothers in the US and the nationalisation of Lloyds and HBOS in the UK, and began as a one-day workshop (February 2010) organised to promote dialogue between academics, civil society groups and Trade Unions with interests in the social and political impacts of financial markets. Initially the invited participants were weary of engagement with academics: one said he feared they were being studied like lab rats. The day's events provided fruitful exchanges and revealed interesting areas of mutual interest. Some participants went on to create a series of podcasts organized by Dr. Mike Pryke at the Open University (<http://www.open2.net/ethicsbites/index.html>). From this initial encounter I went on to conduct a set of pilot interviews with Trade Union officials working on financial reform and a follow-on roundtable (September 2012) to debate and discuss on-going successes and failures of campaigns for financial reform. Also, I attended the Anglo-German Trade Union Forum and wrote a public report of its proceedings.

My involvement in this project stemmed from both academic and personal interests. In the first instance I was interested in conceptualizing the potential and capacity for civil society/trade unions to bring about substantive change, be it in policy outcomes or the democratic imagination, to the elite world of financial market governance. Also, I was keen to be involved in some way with efforts to bring about political change and promote social justice at a time when the demands of being a full-time working mother limit my time and energy to contribute in any other way. Initially the aims were modest: begin a dialogue with civil society groups and individuals from trade union members (those responsible for research or action related to financial or corporate governance and reform) who were already seeking to bring about change in financial governance and how they were responding to events related to the financial crisis.

The collaborative encounter created a space that disrupted categories like activist, academic, policy expert and community organizer; where collaboration was valued because participants became active subjects of knowledge production, rather than the passive objects being 'observed' or sources of information being 'mined'. This iterative engagement with civil society groups and Trade Union representatives facilitated knowledge exchange between the related communities of knowledge producers: importantly, it created an open dialogue that adapted as circumstances and events changed. One interesting realisation about the

collaborative encounter was that it happened as much in the mundane administrative activities of emailing and coordinating participants as in the organised events and interviews. Sustained engagement with participants revealed how important interpersonal dynamics are to capacity building: networks of allies and enemies, exchange of an (mostly unpaid) internship labour force across civil society groups and access to most up-to-date emails of individuals were important factors determining the success or failure of a particular initiative or event. Another interesting realisation is that knowledge production without a defined output is more fruitful because it allows for greater creativity and participation. For example, I tried organizing an edited volume and found that many participants expressed a reticence about writing down their experience and could not see the pay-off in terms of what the publication would achieve. For most participants it is tweets, blogs, editorials, policy papers and press releases that are their currency of communication; as such publication in books, or for its own sake, is not worth the time.

However useful or productive these open-ended conversations were to the different groups of participants, it enabled a different type of public engagement and put forward a different notion of, and role for, the 'third sector' than that usually envisioned by Research Councils. On a number of occasions funding bids were discussed and different participants explored building knowledge exchange between academics and different constituencies of actors seeking change in the governance of financial markets. Yet, with all the support and good will it is very difficult to get any movement, in terms of commitments of time or resources, even replying to emails. Similarly, as a whole we could measure the impact of this encounter in terms of website hits for podcasts and the public interest report; but its greatest impact was in facilitating an on-going dialogue that enabled the re-formulation of the relationships established in subsequent research encounters. This coordinated endeavour between academics, civil society groups, trade unions and other 'non-elite' stakeholders in financial markets to learn, debate, and build consensus around potential avenues for financial reform has 'impact' at its core even if it does not conform to proscribed notions of what 'impact' should look like.

Through this on-going dialogue a new conversation has emerged that will be the next phase of this collaborative encounter; it will consider and analyse the role these organisations can (and cannot) play in bringing about political and socio-cultural change. More specifically, how individuals, or organisations, envision reform or radical change in the current economic and political system, in particular as it relates to financial markets? Since the 2007 financial crisis what have been their perceived major successes and/or failures to bring about substantive reform or radical socio-cultural change? This new set of research questions reveal the interesting ways that collaborative research encounters disturb long-held representations of appropriate research processes in social science. Our traditional research model relies on notions of observation and information gathering that suppose a linear process of devising aims and objectives, elaborate a research question, design a methodology, execute the method, collate the data, analyse the findings, and finally, generate and disseminate answers. By contrast this collaborative research encounter focuses on co-production of knowledge and exercises no proprietary ownership of its results.

What made this particular collaborative encounter work was that the participants shared a common interest (financial market governance), a common problem (financial crisis) and a common politics (reform or radical change). Research encounters with non-elite stakeholder groups has great potential to create innovative and powerful platforms for engagement; at the same time the institutional imperatives of academics, civil society groups and Trade Unions are so different that they must be addressed at the outset in order for the encounter to be useful for everyone.

Collaboration, Knowledge and Exchange, by Hannah Knox

This case study concerns a piece of research that I conducted at Manchester City Council as part of a broader project that I have been involved in looking at the cultural politics of climate change mitigation. My research at the council had always been conceived in some senses as a ‘collaboration’ – with the hope that my observations as an anthropologist might help a local project of carbon reduction by shedding light on the cultural practices of energy consumption. Aware that the timescales and methods of the ethnographic work that I was conducting at the council were however likely to be at odds with the rhythms of work and methods by which decisions were made within this institutional context, I was keen to spend some of my time directing my efforts towards understanding and feeding back reflections on a discrete project that might benefit from the insights and reflections of an anthropologist.

Timescale of Collaboration

During initial fieldwork I had become interested in a long running commitment within Manchester to shift the method of carbon measurement from one based on ‘direct carbon emissions’ to one based on ‘total carbon footprinting’. There was broad consensus that the direct emissions measurement method was flawed, but also an increasing sense that moving to a more nuanced and accurate method of measurement was likely to be very difficult. Having already gained a relatively good understanding of the basic issues surrounding the development of a total carbon footprint approach within Greater Manchester, I proposed a small research project that would look at the social and cultural issues being played out in relation to debates around total carbon footprinting. With members of the council, we put together a proposal for an HEIF (Higher Education Innovation Funding) eco-innovation voucher to fund the research.

The research questions for this project were thus devised after some research had already been conducted with the council. The identification of total carbon footprinting as the focus of the research was a matter of both interest to me as a researcher and a live political issue that people within the council had some questions about themselves. There was a shared sense that total carbon footprinting was not just a technical exercise but a complex social and political arrangement and that it would be useful to make more explicit the contours of these social and political relationships.

Methods

In order to demarcate this particular facet of an ongoing collaboration as a discrete research project I wrote a short research proposal. This outlined research questions, methods, costs and timescale. Whilst the general topic of research was a matter for discussion, judgment as to what methods should be used and what specific questions I would be answering were left to me. There was something of a performance of expertise here – where the questions and methods were the potential added value provided by a social scientist. At the same time, I did receive direction as to whom I should interview in the course of the research. There were certain key political figures that the head of team was very keen for me to speak to. He wanted to get a sense of their opinions of this new footprinting methodology. For me this was illuminating for shedding light on the social terrain within which the method of total carbon footprinting was understood to be operating. Throughout the preparation and conduct of the research I felt that I was engaged in a slightly ambiguous relationship of exchange with my collaborators. They were providing access to research participants, time, and their own reflections, whilst I was providing an outsider’s perspective on their activities, and information about what people working for other organisations ‘really’ thought about the methodology they were exploring. Both aware of the limits of a simple exchange of technical information for money, I felt we were all engaged in an experiment where the outcomes of

working together were not transparent, but where we had established a working relationship based on the potential for some as-yet-undetermined value to result from the collaboration.

Doing the Research

I came to an agreement with the head of the team that whilst the research would be directed by questions being posed within the council, the data from interviews would be available to the broader ethnographic research project I was conducting. The material I was collecting was expected to do at least two jobs: *both* assisting the work of trying to implement total carbon footprinting at an immediate day to day level, *and* providing a more generic understanding of the relational dynamics set in play by attempts at climate change mitigation. It was much harder to envisage a direct and immediate use value of this more generic of abstract understanding for people working in the council. The value of this work lay more in the academic labour of comparison, generalisation and theory building.

Outputs from the collaboration

Document:

The formal output from the collaboration was a 38 page research report which thematised interview material into different issues of interest. The final report repositioned the total carbon footprinting method as a tool – and situated the analysis of this tool in the anthropology of technology. The report was recently approved by the funding body and by the city council itself.

Relationships:

Another ‘output’ from the collaboration was the relationships that it set in play. It provided a means of engaging in an ongoing and deeper conversation between myself and people working at the city council.

Effects:

Neither the document nor the relationships that this collaboration produced either with the council employees or with others interviewed as part of the research will necessarily have an afterlife without ongoing intervention and continuation of local relationships with research participants.

Issues/Themes thrown up by the collaboration:

Three issues in particular have been thrown up by this exercise in reflecting on this particular collaboration. The first is the challenge of how to work across different temporal regimes. A specific piece of collaborative research in this case offered a way of bridging the gap between the timescales of academic research and the timescales of policy interventions. The positions of those being brought together in the collaboration (University Researcher, Local Authority Officer, Business People), created a timescale for the research which was neither purely that of the officers, or of the researcher but lay somewhere inbetween. In this respect the collaboration was generative of a new/different kind of format and a reconceptualisation of the appropriateness of different kinds of methodologies needed for different kinds of research.

The second issue is the way in which the research highlights the importance of relationships of exchange in processes of collaboration. One difficulty about collaboration is that the benefits of the relationship for each party are not necessarily the same – collaborative research has many different benefits – some more tangible than others (e.g. monetary value, the creation of new social networks, reinforcing relationships of trust, kudos, prestige, legitimation). Nonetheless, what this example highlights is that even when the ostensible benefits of collaborative research might be different for different parties, the mode through which collaboration is managed and negotiated is through a relationship of exchange where something (information, expertise, time) is deemed mutually beneficial. This appears to be an

often overlooked dimension of collaboration and one which we should pay more attention if we are to understand more of the social and political implications of a turn to collaboration in academic research.

Finally, this case study appears to highlight that collaboration has different kinds of benefits and effects at different (social) scales. In this case, collaboration was bounded within a relatively close social circle and the outputs from the collaboration seemed to serve two purposes. The first was the illumination of a set of very local and specific preoccupations. The second was the illumination of social processes that exceed the specific case of Total Carbon Footprinting in Manchester and speak more to debates on technical practice. Ethnographic research seems to lend itself to both participation in the extension of a local social field, and participation in the extension of an academic debate (another kind of local social field). At present, however, I have found it difficult to see how ethnographic research collaborations can produce 'impact' at an intermediate level where research findings about the specific relations in a particular location can be extrapolated out to a broader set of policy concerns which require abstraction from the specificities of local relationships. My suspicion is that this 'intermediary' value will derive not from reports like the 'Total Carbon Footprinting' report produced for the city council, but in the interventions of anthropological theory in broader discussions about the cultural implications of climate change mitigation activities, and to come back to the first issue raised, will produce 'impact' over a much longer timescale, and in a more ambiguous way that will likely be difficult to trace.

Collaboration and trust: making relationships visible, by Gemma John

This case study traces how I went about devising a new research project focusing on people's responses to the Localism Act 2011. I collaborated with people in two areas of the UK – Lambeth and Eden Valley – in order to devise this new research project. My collaborators needed me to make the relational process of collaboration explicit in order to place trust in the new research project. The outcome of trust, here, was it turned information (the research project itself) into knowledge. This is the second draft of the case study. I include a pertinent section of the first draft as a 'box' in the middle of the text. The two drafts should be read together.

I set out to study concepts of the 'local' in the borough of Lambeth (London) and Eden Valley (Cumbria) in light of the recent introduction of the Localism Act 2011. The Localism Act gives local councils and citizens more power to decide over local matters. It has provided citizens themselves with the opportunity to opt to run public services. This has led citizens to organise themselves into groups and start small social enterprises design to deliver public services.

What determines whether and how citizens participate in delivering public services instead of local government? A study of people's responses to Localism Act 2011 is particularly interesting in light of the perceived mobility of the categories 'local' and 'global'. Anthropologists have explored how 'local' and 'global' are categories that are produced in and through practice (rather than taken for granted as fixed spatial domains). They focus on interaction between local and global in era of technological change, an international market etc. A study of the 'local' offers a lens on people's responses to the Localism Act 2011 in Eden Valley and Lambeth. Who is considered as 'local'? Who decides who or what constitutes the 'local'? What importance or authority is attributed to the 'local'? How is expertise being (re)configured in the process?

One outcome of the Localism Act 2011 that I predicted is that the division between government and citizen (that is currently perceived to exist) migrates to become a division that exists between citizens participating in 'localism': does devolving power to the 'local' mean that only some citizens are regarded as local experts? How does this affect to whom power is devolved under localism and who delivers public services instead of local government? A question of the 'local' appears to facilitate a study of the dynamics between *citizens*, as well as between government and citizens, and is also a means of studying their collaboration.

This project was principally devised through my own collaboration with Penny Harvey at CRESC (Manchester). I came to CRESC (Manchester) having completed a PhD at St Andrews University that focussed on responses to Freedom of Information law in Scotland. I was interested in methods of devolved government in Scotland and this gave rise to interest in the Localism Act 2011. My PhD research findings provided me with an analytical framework – or a method – for studying people's responses to 'localism' in Eden Valley and Lambeth. Taking a study of the 'local' as my research topic appeared a means of drawing on already establishing conversations within CRESC, drawing on an analytical framework derived from conducting my PhD on devolved government in Scotland at St Andrews University, and also building on preliminary fieldwork in Lambeth and Eden Valley.

I had been speaking with the councils in Lambeth and Eden Valley for some time about the impact of 'localism' in these two areas. I approached the leaders of Lambeth and Eden councils to find out a little bit more about 'localism' from their perspective. I conducted four days pilot fieldwork in Eden Valley in June 2010, prior to the Localism Act 2011 coming in force, and returned for one day in April 2011. On these two occasions, I met with the Leader of Eden Council, and also several Eden Valley residents. After conducting preliminary

fieldwork in Eden Valley I approached Lambeth council. Although I did not visit Lambeth (as I did Eden Valley), I spoke at great length with two key individuals within the council. I put my findings from conducting pilot fieldwork in Eden Valley together with the conversations with my two informants at Lambeth council. I analysed this preliminary research, drawing on relevant literature on devolved government in the UK, to establish some key insights and some key analytical questions. I used these to design a first draft research project on the Localism Act 2011, which I shared with my informants in Lambeth and Eden Valley.

I found Eden council's response to my draft research project rather surprising. The leader of Eden council, whom I had met and spoken to at great length on many occasions, was unclear why I was conducting this research. In bringing my previous findings into conversation with my current research interests, and Eden Valley into conversation with Lambeth, I seemed to have 'lost' Eden Valley along the way. The Leader of Eden council did not see the point of my study. In particular, he did not see the point of comparing two very different field sites.

Pertinent extract from the first draft of this case-study

The Leader of Eden Council offered an alternative project description. As far as he was concerned, it was impossible to compare Eden Valley and Lambeth based on concepts of the 'local'; the 'local' would be expressed in such different ways in these two areas that it was not a useful comparator. He argued it would be much better to explore the different economic and political factors that contributed to 'localism' in these two field sites. Each council receives a different amount of funding from central government, and the rural areas tend to receive less than the urban ones, which will have an impact on the capacity of Eden Council to implement the proposed changes under the Localism Act 2011. Because the council receives less funding, Eden Council is unable to make the kind of wholesale changes that it perceives Lambeth Council is making, and is instead having to be innovative about how it transfers responsibility to residents and how it entices them to participate in the delivery of services. At the same time, the Leader of Eden Council argued that its residents did not have much awareness of the Localism Act 2011. He argued that awareness was key to social change. I responded by explaining economic and political factors were of course important, but from my experience of conducting research on Freedom of Information (Scotland) Act 2002 (FOISA) that was designed to provide people with access to information held by different arms of government, these were far from the *only* important factors.

I explained that the Scottish Information Commissioner (SIC), responsible for implementing FOISA, had spent a lot of time, energy, and resources on raising awareness of the legislation amongst potential users in Scotland. The SIC considered that raising citizens' awareness of the legislation was key to its success. But there were other important issues to consider. For example, it was important to consider the way in which potential users *perceived* the information that was held by government (was it useful or meaningful to them?) and also the kind of relationships that accessing it would foster and also truncate. Making information accessible to citizens did not necessarily mean they would ask for it. FOISA was not a silver bullet. Its implementation alone would not make government more 'open'. Rather, it was necessary to understand the complex social and political factors that motivated and/or inhibited people from using the Act. 'Openness' was not brought about by increasing citizens' awareness of FOISA, or increasing the SIC's funding, but might be achieved by appreciating the subtle social and political dynamics involved.

Too many relationships meant the Leader of Eden council could neither see his relationship to me nor Eden Valley's relationship to the research proposal I had sent him. I had to once again make visible to him his relationship with me, and Eden Valley's relationships to the research I proposed to conduct. I visited him in Eden Valley to talk through his concerns.

I asked him a very direct question: What did he want to find out about with respect to the Localism Act 2011 that he did not have the time or energy to find out for himself? What new relationships could I foster with councillors, public servants, and the residents of Eden Valley that he could not? What approach might I take to understanding people's engagement with 'localism' that he felt he could not?

I explicitly drew on my previous doctoral research to explain what I thought social science could offer the council in terms of an insight into 'localism'.

Trust. My meeting with the Leader of Eden council was not so much an exercise in making my research appear 'useful' to him. It did not constitute a response to his concerns by incorporating his interests into the research proposal itself. Rather, my meeting with the Leader of Eden council was an exercise in making the relational process of research explicit to him (and myself). It was an exercise in enacting the *relations* entailed in the research process itself. The fact that the aim of my research was not altered by my visit did not appear to matter to him. What did appear to matter was that I made my relationship with the Leader of Eden council (and the council itself) visible in the research proposal I had written. It was important to him that I made my relations visible, both to him during our meeting and in the context of the proposal I had written – alongside those my relations with other collaborators – such as Lambeth council and CRESC and my previous research institution.

Trust, here, was an outcome of making social relations visible. Collaboration was not so much an exercise in making my research appear 'useful' to my research participants by doing a better job at reflecting their own interests in the proposal itself. Rather, collaboration was an exercise in making the relational process of research explicit to my research participants (as well as myself) thereby turning information (the research proposal itself) into knowledge. The research proposal that I presented to my research participants was turned into knowledge – made meaningful to them – because they could see themselves in the research proposal itself.

Concept development with interdisciplinary researchers and practitioners, by Evelyn Ruppert (2)

I am currently leading a pilot project on Socialising Big Data that seeks to develop a methodological approach for conducting collaboratories between interdisciplinary researchers (anthropology, sociology, science and technology studies) and practitioners (climate change, genomic science and national statistics). Generally speaking the collaboratories are conceived as forums for the development of shared concepts and methods (mapping, visualising) for defining and tracing the lives of diverse ‘multi-sited’ digital data-objects (DDO) and expert practices: disease (genomic scientists), populations (statisticians), and carbon (engineers).

The concept of collaboratory is initially taken up from the work of Paul Rabinow and others at the Anthropology of the Contemporary Research Collaboratory (ARC) (Rabinow & Bennett 2007; Collier 2007). ARC advances concept work and collaboration mostly in relation to academic knowledge production as a practice distributed amongst scholars concerned with identifying comparable findings and shared concepts that are more than the sum of their parts. That is, instead of each scholar doing their fieldwork and developing their own framings and concepts we are seeking to collectivise this. But our aim is also to do concept work also with practitioners as co-producers instead of working within our separate studies and practitioners in their specific fields.

But concept development of course both precedes and will extend beyond the collaboratories. We are beginning with some shared framings, especially in relation to the understanding of material semiotic practices as distributed social networks/assemblages/apparatuses. This is expressed in the proposed unit of analysis, the digital data-object (DDO), which is neither a natural nor technical phenomena but enacted and sustained through multiple and selective social practices. But we expect that this will be refined, deepened and possibly even abandoned as a consequence of our deliberations. Furthermore, our main outputs will consist of joint working papers and articles by researchers and a joint researcher-practitioner policy report, which again will involve concept work. In sum, our collaboration will be a loosely distributed social practice much like our objects of inquiry.

The Military in our Midst: research proposal, by Vron Ware

This research proposal is included in this paper as an artefact of the conventional research process. The proposal highlights the work of constructing the proposed research in ways that contrast with the previous accounts of the practice of research.

Summary

The proposed research will track the impact of the Military Covenant campaign in 2007 in order to identify significant shifts in the relationship between UK military institutions and civil society that have occurred in the period from 2003 to the present. By focusing on particular places where there is a sizeable military footprint, the project will investigate the impact of the country's prolonged military involvement in Iraq and Afghanistan on a local scale. In particular it will ask: how has this deployment 'brought home' the cost of maintaining a standing army, with a special focus on the social, cultural and economic impact of military bases on the surrounding civilian areas?

Rationale

The costs of contemporary wars are frequently calculated under two broad headings: the numbers of lives that are lost and the expense of training, equipping and maintaining sustained military deployment overseas. Much less attention is paid to the impact of long-running wars on the domestic population: in particular, the repercussions of basing military organisations alongside civilian communities in different regions of the country.

The project will examine recent attempts to integrate military and civilian communities in three garrison towns in the south of England: Tidworth, Aldershot and Colchester. It will investigate the various ways in which the Armed Forces Community Covenant is being implemented on the ground over a period of two years. The research effectively focuses on a relationship - a volatile, shifting terrain of encounters between numerous stake-holders, and a dimension of policy and practice that is largely hidden from view.

Method

Researchers will work with people who regularly bridge the gap between the armed forces and civilian communities. On the civilian side this might include people who live on mixed military-civilian housing estates or work closely with military personnel and their families. On the military side, this might involve those who work with veterans, reservists and cadets, as well as families of Armed Forces personnel – especially female spouses. The project plans to engage with a wide range of public bodies, agencies and charities including local councils, the RBL, SSAFA, NHS.

The project will entail the organisation of focus groups and workshops as a way of gathering information about this integration process as it develops. Research participants will be encouraged to lead on these activities and take a creative participatory role in how they are carried out.

Concluding Remarks

The case studies above demonstrate the enormous variation of research that may be thought of as collaborative, and indeed sometimes they stretch the limits of that term. Indeed, if the picture of collaborative research is messy, what the case studies make clear is that there may be collaborative moments in more conventional research processes, or times when collaborative research falls back on more classical models. Nevertheless, there is a shared sense that as a distinctive kind of research process, collaboration involves open-ended interactions whose framings, research questions, methods and outputs are often determined (or left undetermined) in the process of the research itself. In several of the examples, it is this open-endedness that creates a participatory space of dialogue between actors, elite and non-elite, who might not otherwise have the capacity or opportunity to collaborate (Moore, Knox, Montgomerie, John, Ruppert (2)). However, at times this open-endedness fails to fulfil academic demands (e.g. for particular kinds of ‘outputs’) on the one hand, or the needs of collaborating actors on the other (Muir, John, Cunningham).

An important aspect of the research encounters described here is the sense of collaboration corresponding to what Knox terms a ‘research exchange’ (Moore, Knox, Montgomerie, Ruppert 1 & 2, Ferguson, Muir). The notion of ‘research exchange’ points towards the work of sustaining the relationships on which collaborative research depends and which are often transformed in the process of research. Thus in several of the examples, relationships are forged through acts of giving and receiving in what Mauss (1925) might lead us to identify as a reciprocal gift economy. These ‘gifts’ come in many shapes and forms and can relate to different moments of research: from training in oral history techniques (Moore), to a research report (Knox). Equally sometimes relationships fail because different participants are unable to reciprocate: Whereas Muir hoped his partners would be able to ‘gift’ him research participants, it turned out they were both short of elderly ‘clients’ or ‘participants’.

While these relationships are generative, they can also require a lot of maintenance, and several case studies point to the particular kinds of mundane as well as performative work required of collaborative research (Moore, Montgomerie, Cunningham, Ruppert (1), Muir, John). For example, Montgomerie documents the ways in which collaboration took place as much in the administrative activities of emailing and coordinating participants as in the organised events and interviews. This coordination depended not only on the academic’s labour but also that of the unpaid interns working in the third sector. John’s case study highlights the work of listening to a particular ‘partner’ who questioned the premise of the research project. While this was a material act requiring considerable effort on the part of John, she argues that its power lay in its symbolic value for generating ‘trust’. Indeed, collaborative research often leads to academics occupying a coordinating position, in which part of their work and perceived value is to perform a ‘neutral’ or objective role in politicised contexts (Knox). Moore and Montgomerie’s examples also suggest the ways in which different kinds of work will be valued differently in different contexts. How do we as researchers render visible or legible collaborative work in the job application or promotion assessment: When does a YouTube video produced collaboratively become an identifiable research ‘output’? (Moore).

Indeed another feature of the examples of collaborative research presented here is the diverse forms of knowledge generated through collaborative research, which may or may not conform to conventional academic notions of ‘impact’ or ‘output’ (see Cahill & Torre 2007). These range from podcasts (Montgomerie), social media (Moore), transcription manuals (Ruppert (1)), a set of relationships (Ruppert (2)), to a policy report (Knox). Montgomerie’s case study documents the ways in which ‘outputs’ were shaped in the process of collaboration. Where she proposed an edited volume, other participants preferred tweets, blogs, editorials, policy papers and press releases. Yet to use her term, these kinds of objects are not the conventional

‘currency’ of academic research capital, highlighting the ways collaborative research often generate different kinds of outputs holding different values for participating actors. Indeed, the studies offer examples of highly transformative collaborations that may be undervalued in contemporary regimes of ‘impact’. For example, Moore’s case study highlights the pedagogical aspect of participatory action research with young women whose effects are difficult to render visible within this regime. Furthermore, the non-proprietary, multi-authored character of collaborative outputs throws into relief the way in which conventional research often presumes a particular kind of proprietary knowledge production. Who ‘owns’ the data sets and research outputs produced by the process of collaborative research (Knox, Johnna, Ruppert (1))? In these examples, collaborative research clearly has the potential to unsettle conventional notions of authorship and ownership in academic knowledge production, something that deserves greater attention as we transition to an era of ‘open access’.

Another theme that emerges from the case studies is the particular spaces of collaboration. In his contribution, Cunningham highlights the challenges of a transnational intra-academic project and suggests that physical proximity may be a factor in the success or otherwise of collaborative work. John also encountered difficulties in her project convincing actors that collaboration across rural and urban spaces was worthwhile, in a context where geographic markers came to stand for epistemic difference. Ruppert (1) describes arrangements for managing a group of 70 researchers distributed across five sites, which included the development of a set of rules and protocols for interpreting, transcribing and coding the data. Yet even with these technologies of standardisation in place, in practice, the project operated with a high level of ‘individual discretion’ across the sites. Conversely, other case studies draw attention to spaces, both physical and conceptual, which come to embody the relationships generated through collaboration, such as the allotment in Moore’s example or the ‘collaboratory’ of Ruppert’s (2) project. Whether dispersed or proximate, it is clear that spatial dynamics are an important variable in collaborative work.

Likewise the specific temporalities of collaboration that emerge through the case studies often act to disrupt teleological narratives of the sequential research process. Both Knox and Moore’s contributions complicate this sequence in different ways. Moore offers multiple narrations of the ‘start’ of the research project, each of which foregrounds different actors and events, drawing attention to the socially constructed nature of the ‘individual research model’ (Collier 2007). In Knox’s case study, research questions were formulated after a significant amount of research had taken place, disrupting the conventional research process in ways that appear to exceed categories such as ‘pilot study’ or notions of ‘scoping’. If as academics we are incited to produce linear narratives of the research process, for example in funding proposals (Ware), these case studies highlight those documents as particular kinds of artefact, ones whose fictions may obscure the temporal complexity of collaborative research. Indeed, Ruppert (1) describes the historical and contemporary acts of transcription of census documents in ways that construct the ‘historical record’ as an ongoing process of collaboration, the temporal boundaries of which are impossible to delimit.

But if this is case, it is also true that ‘collaboration’ has come to have particular resonance in the contemporary cultural, political, social and economic context. Against the backdrop of massive cuts to local government budgets, several of the case studies highlight ‘collaboration’ as a means for councils to bridge gaps in funding (Muir, John) or deliver core policy and services, for example around social cohesion (Cunningham). Cunningham’s example in particular unsettles the assumption of actors freely coming together to pursue collaborative research. In the face of pressure to respond to problems of ethnic segregation and racism, yet faced with a drastically reduced budget, Oldham council is to some extent coerced to ‘collaborate’ with better-funded ‘partners’ in order to deliver services. The flipside of budget cuts are ‘disappearing’ collaborators, as whole departments in councils are cut to meet budget restrictions or outsourced to arms-length agencies or charities with little experience of working with academics (Muir) or limited capacity to do so (Montgomerie).

This in turn draws attention to the different positions collaborating actors may inhabit in relation to each other. On the one hand, the intellectual heritage of ‘collaboration’ in participatory action research encourages explicit reflection on power dynamics, yet on the other hand, the millennial rhetoric of ‘collaboration’, ‘participation’ and ‘partnership’ may ironically serve to obscure unequal relations. Indeed one criticism of actor-network theory influenced iterations of collaboration, is that it tends to narrate research as taking place across a flat plain; or making knowledge ‘flow’ around a network (Callon, 2011, Whatmore and Landstrom 2011). The case studies presented here raise several important questions for thinking through power relations in collaborative research. Who gets to ‘participate’ in a problematic and on what terms (Montgomerie, Cunningham)? Whose voices are prioritised and whose are heard in collaborative work (John)? Can collaboration serve to empower otherwise marginalised groups in ways that conventional research cannot? (Moore, Montgomerie). Is collaboration across difference more difficult than amongst those with similar epistemic viewpoints, and does this play a role in who collaborates? (Cunningham, Muir, Ware, John, Knox, Ruppert (2)). Finally, who gets to say what is ‘collaborative’ or when ‘collaboration’ can be said to be happening? (John, Knox, Ruppert (1)). Indeed these questions extend to this paper itself, both as an example of collaboration between researchers, and as a particular documentation of collaborative projects in which the voices of academic researchers have been intentionally prioritised.

Finally, if as academics we are incited to represent research practices in particular ways, the case studies highlight those representations precisely as particular kinds of social construction that may themselves serve to limit what may be imagined as research. The lexicon and associated audits of ‘impact’ and ‘output’, or terms such as research ‘user’ or ‘beneficiary’, contain within them particular assumptions that foreclose questions that may need to be left open in the pursuit of collaborative research. At the same time, the binary opposition posed between the individual research model on the one hand, and collaborative research on the other (Collier 2007), tends to participate in the reification of the research process in ways that obscure the messy realities described in this paper. In our experiences of practicing collaborative research, the distinctiveness of the approach lies less in a deviation from some kind of imagined, non-collaborative research process, than in the way it forces a reflexive acknowledgment of the emergent quality of knowledge in research relationships across time and space.

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Further information on the projects described in this Working Paper as well as other projects of the CRESC Encounters Collaborative can be found at www.cresc.ac.uk/our-research/cresc-encounters-collaborative

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