Methodology In University-Community Research Partnerships:The Link-By-Link Project
A Case Study(1)

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Introduction

We take the view that research is a social and cultural activity shaped by institutional arrangements and knowledges. A research partnership established between a community/agency and academics creates a space for the meeting of two separate logics or rationalities. Such partnership has therefore the potential for changing the nature of the research activity, altering standard methodological assumptions and practices. Through this case example, we raise the following questions: What are some of the knowledge implications of bringing together the perspectives of academic and community partners? What methodological insights can be gained? What changes take place in the conduct of research? How does this modify the involvement and stance of the research partners?

The project we discuss is entitled **Link-by-Link: Creating Community with Survivors of Torture**. It is led by the Canadian Centre for Victims of Torture (CCVT), the Faculty of Social Work at the University of Toronto, and the School of Social Work at York University's Atkinson College. The Canadian Centre for Victims of Torture is the second oldest centre in the world, and the first in North America. It has the mandate to provide direct services to survivors of torture, and to promote public education. The Centre offers medical, legal, and social services. One of the major roles that the volunteers play is to establish a personal relation with survivors by becoming a friend. This particular form of friendship is the purpose of the Befriending Program. The objective of this research is to document and assess the means by which the Befriending Program, in its organizational context, fosters "community" with the two concerned groups: the refugees, survivors of torture who have experienced serious community dislocation and face a "new community" with rules unknown, and volunteer staff who develop personal links with the refugees.

Building communities is a two-way process tied to the characteristics of populations. As newcomers and survivors of torture, clients are under intense pressure to adjust to their new environment, to find ways of living with their trauma, and to become active community members. Volunteers foster a range of informal and organizational competencies for dealing with everyday situations, from orientating newcomers to their surroundings to connecting them to institutional resources (educational, housing, health, employment, utilities, or immigration services). Volunteers, on their part, gain a greater awareness of the daily barriers that refugees encounter during resettlement in Canada, and of human rights in the international context. The two groups share their values and cultures with one another, and through mutuality, develop qualities of community building. More than instrumental ties, these relations grow into personal relationships.

Our project adopts one research model among many. Yet because of its grounded nature, we believe we can derive broader principles without overgeneralizing. We discuss the changes brought to a standard qualitative ethnographic methodology which although it aimed to obtain the viewpoints of participants, initially offered a very rough set of tools, and bypassed a number of issues (Chambon, 1994). Discrepancies of views between the research partners became evident in implementing the research, and led to significant revisions. The process of adjustment of the partnership has also a personal, existential aspect. As our project shifted, we were all deeply affected, and we changed along with it.

Our work is still in progress. In this paper, we focus on the beginning phase of the project: the research proposal, the initial research meetings, meetings with the Advisory Committee, and preparation of the interviews.

We draw from three broad notions and bodies of literature to encompass the multiple dimensions of the research partnership and give ourselves a theoretical framework:

1. participatory research;
2. cultural assumptions and the inter-cultural gap in the conduct of research;
3. research and the testimonial activity of "bearing witness".

Participatory Research

Collaborative research entails a process of joint construction and decision-making in conducting a project. The "participatory" research literature (Park, 1993) alerts us to check beyond stated intentions, into the actual means and degrees of mutual involvement that take place throughout a project; for these can vary. Although the focus is on the relationship between researchers and researched, the same arguments can be applied to partners in collaborative research.

Feminist researchers have emphasized the power relations that structurally exist between researchers and researched, and insist on avoiding exploitative relationships. They argue for the joint development of knowledge that is useful to the respondents. Those with a more emancipatory orientation expand the mutual process of learning into social advocacy (Lather, 1986; Reinharz, 1992).

Narrative studies based on oral history, biographical and ethnographic approaches have come to seriously question the listening or observing stance of the researcher as being voyeuristic and exploitative. In a postcolonial perspective, researchers run the risk of perpetuating historical forms of domination within the cultural realm (Davies, 1992; Personal Narrative Group, 1989; Razack, 1993). Key critical thinkers have pointed out the overall problematic nature of knowledge (such as Foucault, 1974).

More pointedly about research interviews, Pierre Bourdieu (1996) argues that the differences in social (economic and cultural) positions between the participants is often overlooked in designing research, though it is obvious to the participants themselves. Bourdieu sees this asymmetric relation as an act of symbolic violence which by its very nature has limited research efficacy, and yields findings of a dubious nature. For the difference in background experiences and references in the pair restricts their mutual understanding, and creates a suspiciousness which ultimately results in censorship.

The question is how to limit these negative effects. Suggestions run from acknowledging the gap; removing the researcher from the "knowing" position and encouraging the co-authoring of research texts; removing autobiographical narratives from the purely informative, aesthetic or theoretical mode, and placing them within a more action-oriented or advocacy mode; avoiding commonsensical solutions and constructing the object of study with greater care.

Collaborative Aspects of the Partnership in the Link Project

An important feature of the research partnership in the Link-by-Link project is that it did not come together around a time-limited activity, but builds on a collegial relationship that evolved over many years through personal contacts, shared educational activities, and joint publications (Chambon, Simalchik & Abai, 1997). The idea of the project had been discussed previously between the Centre and the university researchers. It was the agency partners who came to the academics to submit a joint proposal.

The research was set up as a collaboration with a stated participatory intent. The proposal was worked on jointly, and a common language emerged to define the project. Academic and agency partners were formally identified as researchers, with two principal investigators, one from each source type (university and agency), and three co-investigators (again mixed). The distance between researchers

and respondents is partially bridged, in that the community researchers have personally experienced dislocation from their home country, and are familiar with surviving trauma to varying degrees. Additionally, they have volunteer-related experience with the client population and thus overlap with the volunteer group.

Early on, an ethical frame was adopted which was consistent with the **Ethical Guidelines on Research** developed by the agency, which state a number of concerns:

1. Research projects at the agency should be participatory and flexible to adapt to the ways of functioning of the agency.
2. Research projects should benefit clients and contribute to their well-being.
3. Participants should be respected as persons, and their experiences, opinions and choices should be given weight.
4. Research procedures should not be disruptive to client-staff relations.
5. Research procedures should avoid any retraumatization of the refugees.
6. Participation in studies should be guided by the principle of informed consent without direct or indirect pressure.

The proposed methodology was a standard ethnographic or naturalistic-type inquiry, with individual interviews of survivors, volunteers and staff, and separate focus groups with each constituency to garner diverse views. Care had been given to avoid splitting the responsibilities of academics and community researchers into "researchers" and "facilitators" (which is often the case), with the role of agency partners being restricted to locating informants and making initial contacts. Yet, the academics took upon themselves the methodological aspects of the project with a view to integrating the community partners' comments. However, attributing this specialized function to one partner group, while reasonable on paper, immediately restricted the options that could be considered. Indeed, some of the limitations quickly became apparent.

Some precautions had been taken to adjust the original proposal and provide some participatory mechanisms. The project included an initial setting-up phase to make its implementation more responsive, and a consultative mechanism through an Advisory Committee which included clients and volunteers. Throughout, researchers met in periodical research meetings.

We wish to stress that the time and energy spent by the partners were considerable and increased manyfold over the developmental and implementation phases. This raises a serious concern about the feasibility of this type of research and the resources that are needed to compensate community partners for their investment.

Restricted Roles and Identities

Like all studies, our project was anchored into set roles and identities that were initially taken at face value: the mutually exclusive identities of the two constituent groups, Survivors and Volunteers. From the start, however, the Advisory Committee members balked at our initial attempts to locate them on this grid.

A comment made by a committee member:"So you want my testimony as a survivor!," made us realize that these identities excluded situations whereby a survivor becomes a volunteer. More generally, we were denying the possibility that individuals occupy various positions. When group members themselves initiated a discussion on the topic of identity, we then discovered that the groups were heterogeneous. Survivors had variously experienced or been exposed to torture, befrienders were a mix of persons: some had never had an experience of torture; others had witnessed such situations or had helped others in similar situations.

Restricted identities biased our research in important ways. They froze clients into a single dramatic and victimized identity, and underplayed their process of integration (Chambon, 1994), the very topic we were working on. Refugees wanted us instead to give a closer account of their experience of

shifting identities without loss of their previous identity. They were survivors and more than survivors all at once. Harshly drawn distinctions between survivors and volunteers further contradicted the philosophy of the agency. We had overlooked that the program commonly used the terms of Friends and Befrienders, a choice of words which stressed the reciprocal nature of their relations instead of their service function. In summary, our agency partners let us know that the assumptions built in our research design created distortions. We were excluding certain type of accounts and participation, and leaving out more complex realities. This important finding showed us the need to adjust our project.

Research Partners and Leading Positions

Initially, the meetings of the Advisory Committee stumbled as the academic researchers attempted to lead a discussion that was by its nature too procedural. The exchange was taken over with technical comments. Concerns about trust were expressed. The discomfort and stalemate showed, in Bourdieu's terms, that the position of the academic researchers was too distant from that of the respondents. The process changed radically when, following a debriefing session in the research team, it was decided that the agency researchers would take on the lead role. Agency researchers then set one which was consistent with the Centre. Emphasizing the importance of the project for the agency, they elicited a commitment to the project, and no longer an adherence to a technology of knowledge, or to scientific expertise. In a highly sensitive manner, they modelled a way of talking which allowed personal sharing while protecting disclosure, a format adopted by all those present, academic researchers and committee members alike. In making this shift, agency partners had become cultural relays in the conduct of research.

The Mediating Role of Agency Researchers

Agency researchers support the project and create the conditions for its implementation. Theirs is not a technical task, but a complex endeavour. Agency researchers mediate the communication across groups, between clients, volunteers, staff, and academic researchers. They are in a unique position to involve the program participants in the study. They find ways of explaining and translating the purpose and meaning of "research" in relevant terms. It is worth noting that one of the possible ways of translating the term "research study" into Spanish is to use the word "investigacion", which is also a way of naming the police and has a highly negative connotation for refugees. Being staff, agency researchers can make explicit how the role of the researcher is different from that of a counsellor. All along, they can anticipate the types of questions that participants may have, and find ways of responding to these.

By their close acquaintance with clients and volunteers, agency researchers can validate their concerns and their choices; they easily find instrumental and personal solutions to problems of schedule and transportation, or even the need to not remain alone and be accompanied. Staff further create a conducive environment so that researching about friendship is done in a friendly atmosphere, making sure that the informal interpersonal interactions are not subsumed under research needs. This can take many forms, including greetings, refreshments, and informal conversation.

Importantly, agency researchers provide the emotional support of a "holding environment". Staff give participants the reassurance that they will not be exploited or "used" for the purpose of research, and that they will not be retraumatized in telling their experience. More than one client expressed this fear through questions such as: "What is the ultimate purpose of the research? Who are these [academic] researchers? Would it be possible to obtain the questions in advance?," stating: "I do not wish to talk about my torture in a group."

The issue of trust is central in the disruption caused through torture, and in its ripple effects upon subsequent relations. Initially though, trust in the research was established through the agency researchers. They are the ones that respondents turn to and query most genuinely. Only they can truly reassure them. Because they themselves are trusted, they could introduce the academic researchers to the participants, which greatly facilitated the interviews. Their presence during the

Advisory meetings and later in interviews made possible the disclosure of strong feelings and conflicts. Indeed, agency researchers carry this responsibility throughout the project.

Academic researchers periodically questioned their agency partners on how to translate the research objectives into feasible, appropriate, and helpful steps. Agency researchers could advise their academic partners on how to act, and propose relevant procedures. The work was intense, more so than had initially been thought for the agency partners. This highly skilful work requires continuous interpretation and creative adjustment.

Cultural Assumptions in Knowledge Creation

Since we are working in a crosscultural context, the sociocultural distance between academic researchers, community researchers, and participants cannot be overlooked. What seems natural to one group can stifle the expression of the other. There are differences in cognitive schemas and cultural assumptions about the structures of knowledge and the respective norms of communication or sharing. We will focus on two issues from their methodological angle:

1. What are the implications of adopting a collectively-oriented instead of individually-oriented assumptions in the conduct of research?
2. How do we bridge the gap between text-based research practices and cultures which have a strong oral tradition?

Collective Orientation, Redesigning our Research

The participants in the study come from societies with a strong community orientation: Central American, African, Middle and East Asian countries. A collective orientation (Miller, 1994; Triandis, 1993) is a fundamental perspective. It is a cognitive schema with a set of moral obligations. By contrast, standard research programmes, which are treated as neutral generally follow an individualistic orientation. This dimension was particularly important given the focus of our study on community building.

In our proposal, there was an attempt to balance individual and collective modalities through the two formats of individual and group interviews. But this plan was conceived analytically. The two modes were thought of as distinct, with primacy given to the individual interview, to be later complemented by group data. This is quite a different choice from a collectively oriented framework which, from the start, locates the individual within a collective. Indeed, for a collective, the formulation of notions, the development of knowledge, and even personal views are foremost created within the group; the individual voice is a variant.

To further contextualize this discussion, we had found that the CCVT had a strong community-orientation which we came to define as a "culture of community" (see also Abai & Sawicki, 1997; Chambon, Simalchik, & Abai, 1997). In its daily operations, the agency fosters personalized links between clients and intake workers, ESL teacher, and volunteers; between staff and volunteers; and within each constituency. Individual participants and staff members belong to multiple Circles of Solidarity. Once we grasped that the collective orientation was an intrinsic feature of the organization, and not simply an additional benefit, we were faced with a new question: How could our methodology become more congruent to this approach so we could collect relevant data and answer our question? Could we make sure that our methods not preclude documenting this aspect?

We had to consider that some modalities of research are individualizing, while others are more collectively oriented. Given our initial objective to document the relationship between volunteer and client, we had planned to start with individual interviews. Once we learned that what mattered was the group, and that this relationship took place in a collective context, we redesigned our method to capture this constellation. We decided to start with the collective modality of focus groups, followed by case-based interviews, themselves modified to a small group format of a triad---a volunteer, a client, and a staff member---replicating the service configuration. Individual interviews were now seen as a

truncated form of data collection, and would only be used as a complement. Agency researchers were greatly relieved. The academics were catching up.

Oral versus Written Culture in Research

Our proposal stressed that participants speak in their own words rather than through predetermined and structured interview schedules. We paid attention to diverse language fluencies, and the need for interpretation and translation. This was as far as we went. Early on, however, we were confronted with a very different layer of understanding that we had overlooked: the difference between written and oral cultures (Ong, 1982). Research practice comes out of a written tradition while the groups that we studied have a strong oral tradition. The implications of this gap are not generally examined. Even qualitative interviews--- our method of choice--- are most often modified procedures derived from written texts. While narrative and testimonial approaches, particularly feminist ones, have commented on this aspect in reflecting on past research (Personal Narratives, 1989; Riessman, 1987), the question remains: How do structures of elicitation restrict or enhance oral traditions or written ones? Are there different ways of fostering talk or telling that truly support an oral tradition?

Agency researchers and Advisory Committee members conveyed the meaning that the program held for them in personal accounts rather than by identifying issues (Kvale, 1996). They went over minute events and concrete circumstances. More than evocative examples, these detailed segments, and at times, full-blown stories, were explanations with a structure of arguments. Yet they were quite unlike analytical talk. Our group encounters had more than one teller. As the stories flowed from one group member to the next, we saw how the two cultural dimensions of orality and collective orientation were intertwined. Participants brought forward arguments and counterarguments through stories and counterstories. We were finding out how talk could be structured and issues debated within an oratory mode of exposition. This was, we realized, a beginning step in our learning.

Research as Transmission and Testimony

Service providers offer protection through adequate information so that the clients make informed decisions. Clients need vast support and protection along with information. Service providers have an obligation under contract to protect clients from harm or retraumatization. Any research activity carried out at the Centre must take these parameters into account.

The focus of our study, the community-building nature of the program, was intentionally non-intrusive. The project was designed to assess the programmatic conditions that facilitate current learning and integration, and to identify areas that could be improved. It steered clear of exploring past or current traumatic circumstances. Further, our proposal identified the vulnerability of survivors of torture and the need to avoid retraumatization through the project. We would not ask about traumatic events. We would not tape survivors who did not wish us to. We would purposefully avoid procedures that could be reminiscent of practices of interrogation. In the same spirit, we adapted our ethical procedures; and the agency researchers were particularly responsible for anticipating and responding to potential vulnerabilities of the participants.

There is yet a different perspective to our project that we became aware of over time, and that became increasingly important. Although it is not about traumatic memory, our project concentrates on the community linkages that can be developed following dislocation and collective trauma. Thus, trauma and collective memory are inherent in the difficulties in community-building, and constitute obstacles to the development of social ties. They are the rationale and underlying motivation of the study. This undercurrent once made, we started to revisit the nature of our research project, and wondered about incorporating explicitly into our research a dimension we were increasingly experiencing as an activity of "bearing witness" and a responsibility of transmission. In this perspective, the distance between the persons who have experienced powerful collective circumstances and the gatherers of such tellings becomes part of the query.

Simon and Eppert (in press) define testimonial accounts as communicative acts which establish obligations and responsibilities between tellers and listeners such that the listeners become tellers, in turn. Testimonies have a pedagogical function of educating through chain-transmission.

The first-order witness initiates a chain of testimony-witnessing held together by the bonds of an ethics forged in a relation of responsibility and respect. Testimony is thus always directed toward another. It places the one who receives it under the obligation of response to an embodied singular experience not recognizable as one's own (p.4).

We can now raise differently the question of how to tell and how to listen. For in this perspective, a rational and distanced stance is not adequate to the task. As one member of the Advisory Committee told us, to listen is a deeply rattling experience that touches the core of one's being. In his words: "What she told of her experience went right through me." As he spoke, he made a gesture with his hand that ran down the length of his body. Simon and Eppert echo his message in their quote of the philosopher Emmanuel Levinas:

True learning consists in receiving the lesson so deeply that it becomes a necessity to give oneself to the other. The lesson of truth is not held in one...consciousness. It explodes toward the other (Levinas, 1994:80).

There are multiple reasons for the difficulty in telling, listening and transmitting. It is to face something that cannot be reconciled with humanness, something for which there is a lack of words--- what Simon and Eppert call "an engagement with the unsayable." The fear of retraumatization affects the teller, but also the witness. Part of the trauma lies also in its secretive nature, so that constant avoidance becomes another source of distress. It is the distress of not being heard, having one's reality distorted, or simply not believed (Catani's 1995 discussion of Primo Levi's work; also Laub, 1992). Thus, intrusive remembrance and abrupt forgetting usually alternate, as do the need for talk and the need for silence. This strong fluctuation of emotions is known in psychiatry to characterize post-traumatic stress, and is common among refugee populations (e.g. Millica, 1988). These reactions are accompanied in relational terms by alternate movements of connection and disconnection.

The participants in our study, as much as they come together to build their present, meet within the shadow-presence of trauma. Here we touch upon an ethical issue, closely tied to methodology and epistemology. Our wish to contain trauma had made us set it aside. We altered our approach. We could tell that traumatic stories were not very far in our research meetings and in the Advisory committee meetings. There were moments when the boundaries between silence and talk were quite thin. There were allusions, a burst of reference, sometimes even humour. We were all affected. It was impossible to listen in a detached manner to the stories told with enthusiasm, strong feelings, commitment. We could not come back to the following meetings as if nothing had happened. A chain of witnessing was starting to take place with academic researchers becoming witnesses.

Debriefings took the form of shared imagery triggered by the sharp remembrance of details, a mood, a wink, our own responses, then and later. We started to modify our stance as we became implicated. Our study changed. We moved away from a naturalistic type of inquiry--- which is largely analytical--- to a more phenomenological and existential query (Kvale, 1996).

Mirror Images -Participants and Researchers

The presence of volunteers and clients in the Advisory committee created a situation of encounter which made visible the mirror experiences of the two groups. This occurred as they dialogued, asking pointed questions of one another. Survivors told of their fear of talking and not being listened to; the fear of wounding by telling; the fear of the unwanted eruption of trauma. As a countervoice, volunteers talked of their fears of listening to trauma or of stumbling upon trauma, and not knowing how to respond; the tension they experienced between avoidance and fascination. They all shared the wish to make these meetings non-dramatic. We could see the transmission process at work. Clients could hear the effects of their telling. Volunteers had become listeners and witnesses. Academic

researchers were responding in ways that parallelled those of the volunteers. Staff were also witnesses but of a different kind. In their absence, the most vulnerable clients would not show up.

The shadow presence of a traumatic event is not truly hidden. It is like an eclipse, always a reminder of the fuller shape. The project opened up the possibility of evocation without imposing to tell, or silencing the telling. This situation requires that the listener respect at once the boundaries of silence, and the trace of that presence. It means to develop a stance that meets the hiding of something yet acknowledges it. Volunteers talked about it. Researchers discovered it. In such exchanges, researchers are not simply collectors, or gatherers. They have become listeners and witnesses who in turn will testify. To make this possible means that we move away from the position of researcher as an objective listener, or even an empathic or engaged listener in an advocacy sense. For to listen to trauma is to acknowledge something else, a radical difference, and to become, in Dori Laub's words echoing Levinas, the "addressable Other."

Conclusion

Research partnerships between communities, agencies and academics reveal the different structures of experience and understandings of the partners as of so many cultures. It follows that when such partnerships explore the challenge of welding together diverse perspectives, they start to ask different questions of research, and develop different means of inquiry.

The approach and methods of our project were much enhanced by blending the academic and the community-based perspectives. Significant decisions in redesign resulted in a finer adjustment of the study to its object. Indeed, research methodology is the result of seeking and inventing ways to reconcile the method to its object--- in our case, to redefine them both. This does not come naturally, as habits of mind and expertise are deeply entrenched. Even well-intentioned schemas fall quite short of their aims.

We had given ourselves some flexibility so we were able to modify our plans when we stumbled upon the consequences of our partnership. We wish to stress that our project benefits from the strong personal connection that exists between the research partners. Our personal and long-standing relationship has helped us to handle the many indeterminacies and loss of footing that accompanied this experience. It is in the process of working together that we discovered what we did.

We came to expand our understanding of the nature of research, and to redraw the roles, limits and responsibilities of the research partners. We all faced personal challenges through that learning. Beyond the immense vigilance needed to implement equitable participatory modalities, the cultural dimensions of orality and collective orientation, and the testimonial stance of "bearing witness" stand out as significant findings. They raise not only methodological, but also epistemological and ethical concerns, of equal relevance to professional, lay, and research communities. We have just begun to struggle with these possibilities.