

Affective collaboration in the West Fjords of Iceland

Valdimar J. Halldórsson¹

Director of the Museum of Jón Sigurðsson, Hrafnseyri, Iceland

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Abstract

This article advances the need for participatory, affect-based approaches to research through reflection on two projects: the first, concerning the work of a District Committee, the inhabitants of the district and the Municipal Government in the West Fjords of Iceland; the second, a qualitative research project conducted for Red Cross branches in the same area. Anthropologists and ethnographers have always practised collaboration of some sort. This collaboration was until recently mainly driven by the anthropologist who sought to represent 'native points of view' in 'objective' 'scientific' forms. This unequal hierarchical relationship was severely criticised in the 1970s and 1980s and led to various experiments such as 'Collaborative Anthropology', which shifts the control process out of the hands of the ethnographer into the collective, equal hands of the ethnographer and the community with which they are working. However, collaboration and other social arrangements are based in the intersubjective realm, in which people, things and events affect one another in multifarious ways. This article holds that 'affect' must be granted central consideration when conducting collaborative and other social research.

Keywords: Affect; collaboration; participation; ethnography

Introduction

This article is an elaboration of my presentation at Lancaster University's 'Participatory Research: Working and Communicating with Communities' conference held in Newcastle on January 7-8 2017. The article concerns two projects with which I have been involved in the Ísafjarðarbær Municipality, which is situated in the North-West of Iceland and called 'The West Fjords'.

The first project concerns the work of the District Committee of Súgandafjörður (Hverfisráð Súgandafjarðar), which is one of seven District Committees in the Ísafjarðarbær Municipality. Five persons (including me) were elected in the District Committee of Súgandafjörður and are working voluntarily in the group. The District Committee of Súgandafjörður covers the village, Suðureyri, as well as the fjord, Súgandafjörður, in which the village is situated. During my time in The District Committee of Súgandafjörður (of which I am still a member), I did not participate as a researcher but as a civilian interested in greater direct democracy in Ísafjörður municipality, in which I live. It was not until I was asked to present the work of the District Committee of Súgandafjörður this year that I started to listen

¹ hrafnseyri@hrafnseyri.is

to our meetings (which I had recorded) and to write down and analyse the discussions. The second project was qualitative research which I conducted in 2012 for the Red Cross branches in the area. The main objective of the research was to identify which groups of people were most vulnerable in the North-Western part of the West Fjords and suggest means by which the Red Cross could improve their condition. After having some difficulties in finding out what these two very different projects had in common, I decided that the common denominator for them should be seen to be ‘collaboration’.

I will begin this article by explaining this term as it is used and understood within the discipline of social anthropology. Then, I will describe the collaboration between the Ségandafjörður District Committee and Ísafjarðarbær municipality government, and between the Ségandafjörður District Committee and the villagers in Suðureyri. Throughout, I also describe my collaboration or, rather, the lack of collaboration, in the research project I conducted for Red Cross branches in the area.

Collaborative research

I became interested in collaborative research during my Red Cross research in 2012, when I encountered the literature on ethnographic collaborative research developed during the last two decades or so. The shifts in cultural anthropology in the 1970s and 1980s have been traced by Choy, et al. (2009), who demonstrate the emergence of collaborative research and other experimental projects. Lassiter’s (2005) *The Chicago Guide to Collaborative Ethnography* is perhaps the clearest articulation of the need for collaboration between academics and communities, tracing the theoretical schools that influenced the concept of collaboration. Campbell and Lassiter (2015) advance the approach further with regard to collaboration in fieldwork situations (participating-observing), interviewing and writing. This North American trend is influenced by an older phenomenon in South-America (Rappaport 2005; 2008; 2013). Rappaport’s research focuses more on an organizations than Lassiter’s, but her reflection on collaboration with various groups in Colombian society, such as the ‘Collaboradores’, who ‘do not speak *for* a subordinated sector, but are speaking *with* them’ (Rappaport 2005: 62) is important. In addition, she discusses the contrasting nature of colonization and decolonization of knowledge, the former being dominated by Euro-American thought, creating ‘disconnection between universities’ needs and communities’ needs’ (Rappaport 2013: 32). The ‘Otro Saberes Initiative’ established within LASA (The Latin American Studies Association) in 2004 is a decolonial project that is intended to promote collaborative research between civil society and academy-based intellectuals to explore research topics of interest to both (Hale and Stephen 2013). Carolyn Fluehr-Lobban emphasises ethics in collaborative research in which individuals and groups have ‘vested interests in the project through their participation in the research design, execution, publication and outcomes’ (2008: 175; 2013: 163). W. B. White talks about the difference between Lassiter’s and his colleagues’ collaborative approach advanced through the *Journal of Collaborative Anthropologies*, highlighting the contrast between the modern, team-based approach and the post-modern, epistemic approach advanced by George Marcus White regards Lassiter’s approach as more hermeneutic, disparate and community-based than the other two, which are primarily targeted at expert and academic audiences (White, W. B. 2012:88).

Reading this work stimulated me to think about the value and the relevance of my work as an anthropologist at home and abroad over many years. I did my fieldwork, as part of my studies in Social Anthropology at the University of Aarhus in Denmark, on an organic farm in South-India in 1989. Looking back, I must admit that neither the farmer with whom I stayed nor other farmers in South-India at that time who were adopting organic methods, benefitted greatly from my fieldwork. My field-report sought mainly to explain and understand the farmer’s view of nature and his reasons for starting organic farming in the 1970s, which,

incidentally, was around the same time as I was introduced to the farming method in Iceland. I was preoccupied with the discussion within the discipline at that time and sought to understand the ways in which the theory of practice and structure fitted with the reality of ‘my’ Indian farmer and his organic farming. There were several people from the Netherlands in South-India during that time who were teaching farmers organic methods, but, unfortunately, I did not contact them because I was too busy seeking to understand ‘my’ farmer. Otherwise, had I known about collaborative research at that time, I might have started collaborating with the Dutch teachers and ‘their’ organic farmers in ways that mattered to them.

Nevertheless, the word ‘collaboration’, is related to a whole lot of other concepts that sometimes overlap, sometimes mean similar things or sometimes relate to each other in similar ways. These concepts include participation, cooperation, involvement, engagement, democratization and openness, among others.² Social anthropologists together with their ethnographic method³ have always practised collaboration of some sort during their fieldwork in countries around the world. They cannot carry out their craft in the communities in which they work without engaging others, because that work is necessarily focused on the lives of others. Ethnographic fieldwork (i.e. collecting contemporary data on the site) is thus ‘saturated with various and multiple ideas, assumptions, expectations, and hopes for collaboration on the part of ethnographers themselves, the collaborators with whom they work and the people and institutions, such as employers and funders, that in most cases make ethnographic work possible’ (Campbell and Lassiter 2015: 19). However, this collaboration was, until recently, driven mainly by the needs, wants and wishes of the *ethnographer* rather than the *subject*.⁴ My research for the Red Cross branches in the northern part of the West Fjords was also made in this spirit, being oriented around interviews with various people in institutions and NGO organisations in the area working with people who need assistance.

The criticism of collecting, analysing and presenting ethnographic data in this way started to emerge in the 1970s (see Geertz 1973; Asad 1973; Bourdieu 1977) and 1980s (see Clifford and Marcus 1986; Fabian 1983; Marcus and Fisher 1986). Critics held that ethnographers monopolised authority in depicting the ‘subjects’ of study, possessing the capacity to define ‘the native point of view’, and benefited from hierarchical power relations which left ‘subjects’ dominated. In contrast to scientific description, it was not possible, within this context, for ethnographers to represent the ‘other’ objectively. Representation was always grounded in the ethnographer’s subjective interpretation of observations, of and accounts provided by, members of the studied society (Clifford 1988: 37; 1986: 17). The ethnographic field could ‘no longer be formulated as innocuous collection of raw, unbiased, or unmediated “data”.... Ethnographic description...is an inherently mediated affair that is always surfacing historically, politically, and rhetorically between and among people’ (Campbell and Lassiter 2015: 74-75). The unequal power relations between the ethnographer and the ‘subject’ were seen to be particularly problematic given the colonial and post-colonial contexts within which such work was conducted. Put simply, critics argued that, in such contexts, it was not possible for, generally, white men from colonial countries to engage with subjects of colonialism in

² This has also been called a ‘participatory turn’ in a number of domains, such as higher education, science and technology, environment, urban regeneration, arts and policy making (see Mahony and Stephansen 2017). These words have also started to become popular in the high-tech industry, the new media (Google and Apple) and hundreds of start-ups, in which almost all are promoted as domains of liberty and autonomy for employees (Kelty 2017).

³ In Greek, ‘*Ethnos*’ means ‘people’, and ‘*graphein*’ means ‘writing’, and ‘ethnography’ therefore means literally ‘writing about people’ (Boellstorff, et al. 2012: 13-14).

⁴ Collaboration can also involve ‘shared management and direction of research project(s) among scholars’ (Low and Merry 2010: 209; see also Konrad 2012), but I am focusing first and foremost on collaboration between the researcher and the subjects of research.

non-colonial, non-hierarchical and non-paternalistic forms.⁵ This criticism advanced more reflexive, multi-vocal and co-constructed forms of ethnographic practice that led to various experiments within the discipline in subsequent years. One of these experiments came to be called ‘collaborative anthropology’ (Low and Merry 2010; White 2012).

The form of collaboration that scholars discuss today within anthropology is different from the one that emerged earlier. In light of critiques of the authority of ethnographers it is rather questionable today to pursue collaboration based on the control of the ethnographer, because it will only sustain the status quo and normalize this unequal relationship between researcher and subject. Instead the research should be based on collaboration between equal partners, in which the ethnographer does not have ‘subject’ or an ‘informant to provide information at the researcher’s request, but a consultant or a co-operant, with whom to work together, side by side. Lassiter describes this collaboration well when he says that collaborative ethnography is

an approach to ethnography that *deliberately* and *explicitly* emphasizes collaboration at every point in the ethnographic process, without veiling it—from project conceptualization, to fieldwork, and, especially, through the writing process. Collaborative ethnography invites commentary from our consultants and seeks to make that commentary overtly part of the ethnographic text as it develops. In turn, this negotiation is reintegrated back into the fieldwork process itself. Importantly, the process yields texts that are co-conceived or co-written with local communities of collaborators and consider multiple audiences outside the confines of academic discourse, including local constituencies. These texts can – and often do – include multiple authors; but not exclusively so. Collaborative ethnography then, is both a theoretical and methodological approach for doing *and* writing ethnography. (Lassiter 2005: 16)

Collaborative research is therefore more than ‘traditional’ ethnographic research, because it shifts control of the research process out of the hands of the ethnographer and into the collective hands of ethnographer and the community with which they are working on an equal basis, engendering dialogue between and among them, which in turn engenders co-understandings about the similarities and differences between them (Lassiter 2005: 62; Rappaport 2008: 6). Collaborative ethnography emphasizes, therefore, finding common ground on which to build shared understandings and mutually directed actions. Both ethnographers and their ‘consultants’ ‘struggle together to co-interpret and even co-theorize experience via the ethnographic text, the process can be multi-directional and multi-transformational ... (and) can transcend both ethnographic method and ethnographic product’ (Campbell and Lassiter 2015: 6). The collaborative research is then relevant for both the ethnographer and the people with whom they work. It can promote active involvement capable of assisting communities to transform their condition. The research then becomes applied or action-oriented research, and the ethnographer, becomes an advisor and facilitator (Campbell and Lassiter 2010).

As a civilian working voluntarily in the Ségandafjörður District Committee to promote better democracy in Ísafjörður municipality, I neither conducted ‘traditional’ ethnographic research nor collaborative research with the members of the Committee or other citizens in the area. It was not until after I was asked to give a presentation of our work in the Ségandafjörður District Committee that I started to analyse our meetings and produce the presentation and, subsequently, this article. But I collaborated consciously and unconsciously as a civilian on

⁵ Being a ‘native’ ethnographer, my research for the Red Cross did not include the colonial legacy mentioned here. However, the relationship between me and the people I interviewed was still hierarchical and unequal, because I, alone, did the interviewing, analysed the material that I collected and wrote the final report. That is to say, the research was totally under my control.

equal terms with other Committee members and other citizens in the village, although my analysis and the output are mine alone.

The turn to affect

A collaboration between two or more partners for building co-understanding and co-directed actions, must be based on recognition of the intersubjective realm of the social. Recently, a new theoretical frame related to the sensory part of the intersubjective realm, called ‘affect’ theory has been launched (Clough and Halley 2007). When studies in feelings, sentiments and passions emerged within social anthropology in 1980s, with the writing of Michelle Z. Rosaldo (1980), Lila Abu-Lughod, (1986), Fred R. Myers (1986) and Catherine Lutz (1988), proponents tried to shift the research focus of these concepts from almost exclusive concern with the psychology of the individual to the social, cultural, historical and political relations of people (Lutz, C. 2017). The concept of affect has recently been added to this body of work and expanded to a variety of disciplines.⁶

The subjects of study within affect studies include: experience of emotions such as love, hate, fear, resentment, passions, embodiment or belonging; means of attachment to and detachment from others (people, animals, things and events); contextual pressures that influence the intensity of emotions; the transference of emotions and attachments from person to person, and individual differences in affect (Sjösstedt, J. 2016). And yet, there does not seem to exist any ‘single, generalizable theory of affect: not yet, and (thankfully) there never will be’, as Gregory J. Seigworth and Melissa Gregg write in their *The Affect Theory Reader* (2010: 3).

Recent interest in affect studies emerged with publication of two essays in 1995: ‘The Autonomy of Affect’, by the Canadian philosopher, Brian Massumi (1995), and ‘*Shame in the Cybernetic Fold*’ by Eve Sedgwick and Adam Frank (1995). These essays, and the subsequent work of these authors, have had a seminal impact on understandings of affect across the humanities (Gregg and Seigworth 2010: 5; Blackman 2010: 182). Massumi is influenced on the work of the French philosophers, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, who were inspired by Spinoza, Bergson and Hume, among others. Massumi holds that emotion flows, merges, develops and changes. He differentiates in various ways between affect, on the one hand, and other sentiments on the other hand, such as feelings, emotions, passions, saying that affect is a pre-personal, non-conscious and non-intentional experience of intensity, while feelings are personal and biographical, and emotions social⁷.

Conversely, Sedgwick and Adam are influenced mainly by American psychologist Silvan Tomkins, who was inspired by Darwin to investigate the existence of innate, genetically determined basic emotions (Wetherall 2015: 141). Sedgwick and Frank presupposed therefore that emotion, affect and feeling were stable and pure entities. The likes of Wetherell (2015), Leys (2011) and Martin (2013) have criticised Massumi’s division of affect and other

⁶ For example, for influence within: feminism, see Pedwell and Whitehead (2012); Liljeström and Paasonen (2010); cultural and communication studies, see Gregg and Seigworth (2010) and Hemmings (2005); religious studies, see Schaefer (2015); social-psychology see Wetherell (2012; 2015) and Blackman (2012); phenomenology, see Ahmed (2004); Marxism, see Hardt and Negri (2000), Negri (1999), Lordon (2010); literary studies, see Berlant (2011); cognitive- neuro- and computer science, see Slaby (2016), Damasio (1994), Barad (2007), and philosophy, see Deleuze and Guattari (1987; 2010) and Serilli (2015).

⁷ In ‘Notes on the Translation and Acknowledgments’, which is a foreword to his translation of Deleuze’s *A Thousand Plateaus*, Massumi writes: ‘AFFECT/AFFECTION. Neither word denotes a personal feeling (sentiment in Deleuze and Guattari). *L’affect* (Spinoza’s *affectus*) is an ability to affect and be affected. It is a prepersonal intensity corresponding to the passage from one experiential state of the body to another and implying an augmentation or diminution in that body’s capacity to act. *L’affection* (Spinoza’s *affection*) is each such state considered as an encounter between the affected body and a second, affecting, body’ (Deleuze and Guattari 1987/2011: xvii).

sentiments thoroughly. They focus on the many complex past and present experienced relationships between sentiments, feelings, emotions, desire, atmospheres, intensity (Deleuze/Guattari and Massumi) and power (Spinoza),⁸ as well as other affective influences, which people (and things) have on one another during their daily lives at home, work or, in the instance I discuss, participating voluntarily in a District Committee (Wetherall 2015: 159). In other words, they do not focus on affect *per se*, nor the state of a feeling in each and every individual, because affects are not static but dynamic between individuals (Mühlhoff and Slaby 2017: 2). Seyfert (2012: 30) suggests therefore that we use ‘affect’ as a general term that defines relations among all kinds of bodies, of which emotion, feelings, desire, passion, constitute but one particular form. In addition, and especially important for the present article is the claim that, whereas ‘affect is always an interplay of affecting and being affected’ (Mühlhoff and Slaby 2017: 3), this dynamic cannot be reduced only to one individual affecting another – it is an interplay that ‘co-depends on all the other participating individuals’ and their surroundings (Mühlhoff and Slaby 2017: 3). The unfolding of affect is therefore a co-presence and simultaneity of multiple affects through which we move. It can be found in political rallies, religious gatherings, music concerts, family get-togethers, sports events, mass celebrations and other events and activities. Affect has therefore as much to do with the collective, conscious and unconscious and the body writ large, as it does with an individual’s mind, body and emotion. Therefore, affect interactions comprise all kinds of encounters. It is always ‘an open process, a process in its becoming’ (Deleuze and Guattari 1987 cited in Mühlhoff and Slaby 2017: 3) which also makes it vulnerable and an easy target for manipulation by various powerful persons, firms, corporations and nations (see e.g. Dowling 2012; Richard and Rudnyckij 2009; Rudnyckij 2011; Muehlebach 2011; 2012).

Being a condition of both subjection and transformation, can particular social and structural arrangements produce affects that correlate with those arrangements? Can we control whom we affect and how we affect them? Perhaps, up to a certain point. We build various institutions such as homes, schools, religious houses, sport sites, concert halls, shops, malls and markets to control and affect people in certain ways. But a teacher, for example, does not know how their teaching will affect or be received by students in advance. This is due partly to do with the fluctuation, flowing and changing of affect, and the fact that we do not confront social structural arrangement as an isolated individual because we are always embedded in social relations, such as family, work, organizations, economics or politics. We are therefore in multiple webs of interdependence where we both exercise our abilities and powers and rely on others for what we are not able to do. In the words of Ian Burkitt, ‘one’s action is rarely one’s own and rarely for one’s own sake only, for it is pulled, pushed, harmonised, agitated, coaxed, pleaded . . . by multiple bonds. In this sense, one could say it is always already co-authored’ (Burkitt 2016: 336). Thus, in interactions with others, we are always active and passive, powerful and vulnerable, to varying degrees, acting on others and being acted on by others, formulating plans and intentions in interdependence with people that are deeply dialogical, polyphonic, personal and social (Burkitt 2016: 336). In other words, any social arrangement is a joint movement where it is impossible to determine who is affecting whom (Mühlhoff and Slaby 2017: 3). In addition, as Pedwell points out in referring to Dewey, ‘it may only be possible to discern in retrospect which collective actions or interactions made a difference in a given context; what peaked and fizzled and what took shape and endured’ (Pedwell 2017: 164-165).

Whether affect is structured or not is therefore ‘in part a matter of perspective’ according to Slaby (2017: 6). This account is not without consequences, because by focusing

⁸ ‘Spinoza’s affects . . . are less determinate states of individuals and properties of objects than passages and transformations, increases and decreases of power’ (Read, J. 2017:107).

on structure, it is more than likely that one becomes preoccupied with questions relating to structure, which is the reason why Mazzarella (2017: 7) suggests that we should rather focus on the encounter, which may be preferable because the participants in the encounter are accounted for more fully than if the researcher focuses on structure of the encounter. In addition, according to Spinoza, affects ‘do not only orient mere individual strivings but do so only in and through the encounters and relations with others’ (Read 2017: 104). Therefore, it is of paramount importance that research on the encounter is conducted in collaboration and on an equal basis with as many participants of the encounter as possible, to inhibit hierarchical and colonial relationships between the researcher and his ‘consultants’. Under such circumstances, affect will provide fertile ground for ethnographic research because it is always related to particular people, places, situations and objects (Skoggard and Waterston 2015; Mazzarella 2017; Frykman and Frykman 2016).

Collaboration is one of many social arrangements in society in which affect does take place. The common ground for co-understanding and co-directed actions in collaborative research must involve a certain amount (in form of strength, intensity, energy) of trust towards each other, ‘willingness’ among participants to collaborate, ‘empathy’ for each other and a ‘common sense’ of the goal which they are ‘interested’ in and ‘want’ or ‘hope’ to achieve. In other words, the common ground for collaboration is ‘affect’. It does not matter whether the collaboration lies between a researcher and the people they are researching (i.e. hierarchical), between two or more researchers within the same discipline (vertical) or between researchers of various disciplines. All these variously arranged collaborations must deal, to varying degrees, with good/bad, strong/weak affects. There is however no guarantee that the collaboration will become successful for the participants.

Here it is tempting to start analysing various arrangements to ascertain how affect might be controlled (i.e. structured), but that would leave us preoccupied with how structure controls us and how structure is reproduced, while the people with whom we are collaborating will disappear (Mazzarella 2017: 7). If, instead, we start analysing the encounter of the collaborators, we become interested with who resonates with whom, and who does not, what sounds promising and what does not, what worries us and what does not, what is threatening to our collaboration and what is not and what are our possibilities and what are not (i.e. how we deal/manage with sameness and differences).

These dynamic interactions and encounters between individuals in collaborative arrangements provoke affects that are important to inspect closer. In the next section, I do this through examination of collaboration of the District Committee of Ségandafjörður with the Municipal Government and other villagers in Suðureyri village.

Collaboration in the West Fjords, Iceland

Iceland is 103.000 km² with 337.610 inhabitants and 74 municipalities. 41 of the municipalities have less than 1000 inhabitants and 6 of them have less than 100 inhabitants. The inhabitants of the Northern part of the West Fjords, called Ísafjörður municipality are 3.639 (Ísafjörður Municipality 2014). They are divided between 5 villages with around 200 inhabitants each, except for the Ísafjörður town which has 2.527 inhabitants. People living in the countryside outside of these villages are 187. I will now discuss collaboration between the District Committee of Ségandafjörður and the Ísafjörður Municipal Government, situated in the Northern part of the West Fjords, as well as the collaboration of the District Committee and the villagers of Suðureyri village. Then I will discuss the collaboration or the lack thereof between me as a researcher and a group of people whom I tried to study for the local branch of Red Cross in this same area.

After the local election in May 2014, a new local government was formed in Ísafjörður Municipality. It was a coalition of three parties, The Left-Green party, The Social Democrats

and a liberal party, while the opposition consisted of two right-wing parties, one conservative and the other liberal. The headquarters of Ísafjörður Municipal Government is placed in Ísafjörður Town Hall.

The newly elected Municipal Government decided to establish seven District committees: three in Ísafjörður and one in each of the four other villages; Hnífsdalur, Suðureyri, Flateyri and Þingeyri. These committees are supposed to act as mediators between the people of the Municipality and the Ísafjörður Municipal Government.⁹

The main purpose of the committees is to ascertain the wishes of citizens for their communities and to forge suggestions about how best such wishes can be realized. In addition, the Municipal Government can also ask the seven committees to form an opinion (independently or by asking the people in their villages), on issues that concern the villagers. The Municipal Government can accept or dismiss such opinions, once formed, at its own will. The committees lack therefore formal power and participation is voluntary, with general assemblies, held once per annum.

The District Committee of Súgandafjörður

The first general meeting, in which the District Committee of Súgandafjörður was established, was held in the village, Suðureyri, in Súgandafjörður, in autumn 2014. Five people and two substitutes were elected in the Committee. I was one of those five elected members. Suðureyri is a village with 271 inhabitants. The main employers in the village are two fish processing factories, one situated on the western side of the village and the other on the eastern side. The village has a kindergarten (with 24 pupils) and a primary school (with 47 pupils). There are two hotels in the village which are only open during the summer.

The only way to enter the village from the main road (Road 60) is from the east. It is, however, forbidden to drive straight through the village from this direction, because ‘The Main-street’ (the literal name of the main street) is one-way, which can only be driven in the opposite direction – i.e. from west to east. Therefore, if one wishes to drive through the village towards the western part of it, one must turn right when entering the village, and turn left towards west at the next street which is parallel to The Main-street.

It has, however, been impossible for large trucks to do this when collecting the fishing products from the factory on the western side because the streets are too narrow. Therefore – and in violation of the law – trucks were forced to drive back and forth on the main street. Over the years, this two-way truck-driving has been silently approved by the authorities, until a year ago, when the police ‘suddenly’ decided, that the trucks required a police escort to drive through the village. This escort was paid by the fish factory. The factory made a complaint to the Municipal Government regarding payment. The Government responded by changing the street to a two-way system. However, before they did that, they wanted the newly elected District Committee of Súgandafjörður to discuss this matter and to see if it could find an alternative solution.

Most of the committee members were heavily against the decision of changing The Main-street to a two-way street. They thought it would be far too dangerous for children living nearby. Instead, the Committee suggested three other solutions which do not require exposition

⁹I was told by one of the people in the Municipal Government that the idea of establishing District Committees in order to enable people in the villages to have influence on the decision-making of their districts/villages was first suggested in 2010. Genealogically this idea has its roots in the Porto Alegre democratic experiment from the beginning of 1990s where they started to redistribute the city resources in favour of the more vulnerable social groups through participatory democracy. As such, it can be regarded as an act of decolonialisation or a resistance to authoritarian and patrimonial traditions of public policies as well as global capitalism (de Sousa Santos 1998). However, the idea of the District Committees in the West Fjords was introduced by a member of the right-wing government in Ísafjörður Municipal Government that was in power at that time.

here. A few days later, we read in the local newspaper, that the Municipal Government had decided to change the street to a two-way street nonetheless. When the journalist asked the Leader of the Government whether the opinion of The District Committee of Ségandafjörður mattered, he argued in response that it is the elected Municipal Government that has the ruling power in the area and not the District Committees. This decision and the high-handed manner in which it was made by the Municipal Government left the members of the District Committee very angry, frustrated and powerless, creating a relationship of mistrust. It also created mistrust between the villagers and the District Committee. Because of this dispute and other less dramatic incidents, The District Committee of Ségandafjörður suggested a conference for the Municipal Government and all seven District Committees to be held the following autumn (2016) to settle our disputes and to discuss means of proceeding more positively in the future. Having described a rather unfortunate beginning to our ‘collaborative’ relationship between The District Committee of Ségandafjörður and Ísafjörður Municipal Government, I now wish to describe the collaborative relationship between The District Committee of Ségandafjörður and the inhabitants of Suðureyri – i.e. the other villagers.

As I mentioned before, the main purpose of the Committee is to ascertain the ways in which the people of Suðureyri wish to make their village a better place to live. In order to identify wishes, the Committee decided to place ‘a box of ideas’ in the local post-office in which ideas could be submitted anonymously. After three months, only two letters were found in the box. However, many ideas for a better village were expressed in those two letters. As a starting point, we chose two of those ideas to explore. The first idea was to regenerate the old playground for young children in the village – a playground among the oldest in the country. The second idea was to regenerate the surroundings of the primary school and the area in front of the church.

The playground has been neglected by the municipal authorities for several years and is no longer appealing for children or their parents to visit. The District Committee contacted an architectural firm which, after consultation with Members of the Committee and the leaders of the Women’s Association in the village, produced ideas for the playground and the school area. These ideas were then introduced to the villagers in a general meeting and posted on a wall in several prominent places in the village. An election was held a week later in which the villagers choose the idea they liked most. However, only four people, besides the District Committee members, participated in the election. As such, it became clear both that the villagers are not particularly keen on coming forward with opinions on how to make the village a better place in the future and that The District Committee of Ségandafjörður is not particularly good at getting them to participate in new initiatives of the Committee. Our collaboration with the villagers is therefore not very successful – yet.¹⁰

Having described The District Committee of Ségandafjörður, their actions and the context of their actions, I have touched upon contextual or structural problems that might hopefully be changed incrementally in the future. However, even though we might be able to transform these structures and relations into more equitable relations in future, it will not automatically result in greater participation of the villagers in this democratic project. It should also be necessary to establish a feeling or an atmosphere of interest, empathy, positivity, will, hope and trust among the villagers to influence and transform the village in accordance with their vision – if one exists. There was at least one experience among the members of the District Committee that could point in the direction of what we might require to achieve this.

Shortly after we had commenced Committee discussions of the architectural plans for the village, one of us said that she wanted more grass in the playground than the architects had

¹⁰ The ‘Villagers’ are, of course, a diverse group of people, both socially and economically. While most of them are Icelandic by origin, some also come from Poland, Thailand and the Philippines.

suggested in their drawings. Another member of the Committee answered immediately, ‘yes’, but that he did not think that it should be around the boat, because it would soon be trodden down and reduced to a mud-hole. Soon, there was a lively discussion between all members of the Committee. Gradually, we reached a common conclusion with regard to the placing of grass, asphalt, stones, sand and other items. All these suggestions were then written down and sent to the architects who made the third drawing for the playground which included our new suggestions. This third plan was elected by the (four) villagers and the Committee Members, with the result that the Municipal Government has a working plan for next summer.

What had happened during that particular meeting was that all the Committee Members had become very interested in the drawings. They felt an ownership of the playground and its drawings and they became enthusiastic about it, felt joy in discussing and creating a new drawing together, and became interested and emphatic towards each other and each other’s ideas, as well as for the whole creative work involved in this process. The question is, though, how can we create such an empathic, creative, positive and interesting process with other projects in the District Committee in the future?

To advance that discussion further, I will now turn to the other example of collaboration – my attempt to enable the Red Cross branch in the Northern part of West Fjords to identify the most precarious people in the area and to foster ideas for improvement of their situation.

Vulnerability and Red Cross research

The Icelandic Red Cross carries out surveys regularly on a national scale to find out which groups in Icelandic society are most vulnerable in order to develop means of supporting them. Local branches of the Icelandic Red Cross can also carry out surveys to gather information on circumstances in their local communities’ if they wish and have the ability to do so.

The last two national surveys were made in 2010 and 2014. The problem with national surveys is that figures and descriptions from local places tend to ‘disappear’ in the abstract results. In 2012, I therefore contacted the six Red Cross branches in the Northern part of West Fjords and offered to conduct a similar survey in their area to that conducted nationally by the Red Cross on the same topic – the identification of precarious groups and means of improving their circumstances. My local study was qualitative, while the national survey was more quantitative in nature. The headquarters of the Icelandic Red Cross in Reykjavík wanted me to ask similar questions as those they had asked in the national survey in 2010 in order to permit comparison between my research and theirs. In particular, I was asked to interview people in official institutions and non-governmental organisations who assist those who need various kind of assistance because they – according to the Red Cross – are the ones who know best which groups are in need of assistance and what kind of assistance they require. In other words, I was not supposed to interview people who received official assistance, because it would require more time and funding, than just interviewing people in institutions and non-governmental organisations.

Accordingly, I interviewed 30 people in 22 institutions and organisations working in this area. All of them said that the people who needed most assistance were immigrants, people with various disabilities and elderly people who lived alone. This was very similar to the result of the national survey conducted by the headquarters of the Icelandic Red Cross in 2014 with 100 specialists in the social, health and education sectors. The restrictions in engagement left me extremely frustrated, not because the knowledge of doctors, nurses and other service providers is irrelevant. The source of frustration lay in the fact that precluding researchers from engaging with those who are the recipients of support and the subjects of policy is fundamentally inequalitarian and can have serious consequences. In the first place, it is unethical and fails to uphold respect for those who receive official assistance. The research that results is jaundiced and fails fully to take seriously the knowledge of those in a condition of

vulnerability who may know best the causes of, and best means of overcoming, their vulnerability. Sometimes, this knowledge is not just qualitatively different, it is also uniquely important within particular contexts that service providers simply may not understand. While this is clearest in colonial or post-colonial encounters, there is good reason to believe that ignorance can persist in situations, such as those in Iceland, in which there is a presumption of understanding on the part of the service providers. This can lead to bad policy that actually exacerbates problems and ends up being more costly, in the long-run. More broadly, this all compounds and normalizes the hierarchical, dominating and sometimes prejudiced relationship between the service providers and receivers in the health sector and beyond.

However, even though the recipients of official assistance are asked about their needs as well as the providers, both groups are still dependent on the researcher's opinion and interpretation of the data he or she collects. Not only does the researcher interpret the data collected and define the subject people as a group with certain characteristics, they also produce a report which is disseminated to publics. If the subject people are allowed to say anything in the final report, or if they are considered at all, they often take a secondary role – included in an epilogue or a postscript. The research then tends to become irrelevant for the community or the people who are being researched, which most certainly is an ethical matter.

One of the founding ethical principles of liberal society is Kantian respect for persons. This means to acknowledge that 'man, and in general every rational being, exists as an end in himself, not merely as a means for arbitrary use by this or that will: he must in all his actions, whether they are directed himself or to other rational beings always be viewed at the same time as an end'. For Kant, this ethical tenet rests on the belief that each individual seeks, rationally, to exercise and protect their natural, autonomous facets against the malign, 'unsociableness' of others (Kant 2005: 105). The sorts of research methods discussed thus far fail to respect persons insofar as they treat subjects as means. Much greater care, then, needs to be taken to consider the place of power and the politics of representation and about who has the right to represent whom and for what purposes and about whose discourse will be privileged in texts. So instead of reading

over the shoulders of those who are being researched ... the researchers have to start to talk about reading and writing '*along*' the researched, through the framework of dialogue in order to escape or shift from the authoritative monologue to one that represents involved, intersubjective exchange between the researcher and the 'informants. (Lassiter 2005: 4)

As the slogan 'Nothing about us without us' emphatically asserts, research should be conducted *with* people. So,

what is required from this point of view for the principle of autonomy to be respected is that the people being researched become at least equal partners in the research process. That people have a right to participate on an equal footing with researchers in the pursuit of any research that relates to their lives, making decisions about what is to be investigated and how, what forms of analysis will be used, how the conclusions will be written up, how the findings will be disseminated, and so on. (Hammersley and Traianou 2012: 81)

One of the main purposes of the Red Cross is to ensure respect for persons, upholding the life and health of the most precarious and vulnerable individuals in particular. I think that the collaborative research that I have described here is naturally suited to the purposes of the Red Cross. Research on vulnerability can best promote autonomy and empowerment by placing

community members at the active heart of work, identifying issues of importance and determining the methods by which to explore them.

Had I been granted more autonomy over the research, I would also have engaged with people from institutions and non-governmental organisations. However, I would also have asked recipients of the assistance, and members of the community in general, similar questions. Very often there are people who do not fit into the various classifications on which the assistance of the health system is based, and to find the blind spots of the system one has to ask people outside institutions as well as the institutions themselves. In other words, I would have engaged in a form of ethnographic field-work. Having identified, collectively, the most vulnerable, the challenge would then be to establish, collectively, their needs and to formulate their demands to institutions. During this process, I, as a researcher with practical and theoretical knowledge, would participate on an equal basis with other parties. I would accept that this is time-consuming and that there is no guarantee that the collaboration would achieve its stated aim of promoting the health interests of the most vulnerable. However, the ethical, procedural and practical concerns above mean that there simply is not a preferable alternative.

Conclusion

I have described a collaboration between the District Committee of Ségandafjörður and Ísafjörður Municipal Government in Northern part of West Fjords in Iceland, as well as the collaboration between the District Committee and the inhabitants of Suðureyri village. I have also described very shortly, a collaboration, between myself as a researcher for a local Red Cross branch and various communities. In the collaboration of the District Committee of Ségandafjörður, I participate and collaborate as a civilian on equal footing to others in the Committee. But I, alone, interpreted and analysed the data and created a narrative in this present article without collaborating with the others. I asked only for their permission to write it. Therefore, this part of the research is a monologue and therefore only partly collaborative. In addition, there is certainly a need for more collaboration with the villagers of Suðureyri, who are a diverse and unequal group of people with various (political) opinions and desires, in order for this democratic project to become successful in the future.¹¹

In my research for the Red Cross, a collaboration between me and providers of official assistance in institutions and non-governmental organisations did take place, but at the same time there was a complete lack of collaboration between me and the recipients of official assistance. The collaboration with the service providers was, however, initiated and controlled by me and the interpretation and analysis of the data I collected was entirely mine. The Red Cross research was therefore similar to the ‘traditional’ ethnographic research described in the introduction and carries with it the same attendant ethical problems.

One way of overcoming the collaborative gap in those two projects might be to do the research *with* the people who are being researched, through the framework of dialogue that represents involved and intersubjective exchange. However, an involved and intersubjective dialogue is as saturated with conscious and unconscious power relations and positive and negative feelings as any other research methods. We, in the District Committee, became frustrated, powerless, wounded and angry and felt that we were unjustly treated by the Municipal Government when it decided to change the main street in the village to a two-way street. This decision affected strongly the relationship between the Committee and the Government and does so still today. This intense feeling of insult, disempowerment and unjust treatment by the Ísafjörður Municipal Government is something that we do not want to experience often in the future. It destroys the feeling of trust and empathy for people and

¹¹ ‘Success’ means, here, that villagers participate, genuinely and intensively (at least at some points) in the collaborative process

institutions, makes us angry, hurt and reduces our energy, power and will to collaborate with the Municipality.

However, our work with the landscape architects – in which we discussed enthusiastically their drawings of the playground for the children in Suđureyri village – was an entirely different experience. Here, we felt excitement and joy in our collaboration, creativity, willingness, empathy, eagerness and power, both individually and as a group. It is this kind of feeling which collaboration should aim to achieve and it should be possible to build such an affective arrangement¹² in which positive feelings are enhanced instead of suppressed.

Similarly, if the fundamental roots of collaboration between people is how they affect one another, thereby enhancing or diminishing individual and collective experience and power, then any social research, whether it is collaborative, or ‘traditional’, must take affect into serious consideration their strong influences on people’s daily life.

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¹² Affective arrangements can, for example, be specific work environments, such as an ordinary office, stock market trading floor, sport site or a particular collaboration – in other words, a kind of ‘operational space’ for affective interactions (Slaby, Mühlhoff and Wüschner 2017: 7).

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