

Protean Possibilities: Attending to Affect in Collaborative Research: A Reply to Halldórsson

Elizabeth Campbell¹
Curriculum and Instruction, Marshall University

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For reasons both epistemological and ontological, Valdimar Halldórsson grounds his call for participatory, affect-based research in his own experiences as an ethnographer, applied anthropologist, scholar, and engaged citizen. He observes that when social or community research is not constructively engaged with the people it seeks to address or help, it can leave participants—especially on the community side—with bad feelings, and a future unwillingness to participate in social research. He is absolutely right about this; others have been making related observations for quite some time (see, e.g., Brettell 1996). But Halldórsson expands this observation by calling for social researchers to explicitly take up the 'intersubjective realm' out of which all relationships—research, political, commercial, civic, personal, and so on—emerge.

That point is compelling, as is his recommendation that research collaborations intentionally craft affective arrangements in ways that cultivate positive feelings and strengthen relationships and communities, thereby strengthening both the quality of the research and the strength of community life. Calling for deeper attention to how all of the varied and shifting agents and elements of collaborations play out, Halldórsson argues that attending to affect offers potentially fruitful ways to both conceptualise and construct participatory research collaborations.

Collaboration

Halldórsson does an admirable job of reviewing the development of collaborative research approaches. I won't go over it again, but I do want to add a bit in terms of the intellectual, practical, and activist paradigms that have characterised collaborative research over the last several decades.

Throughout the twentieth century, attempts to justify collaborative research as relevant forms of knowledge production appropriate for institutionally situated researchers (by which I mean those formally affiliated with universities, government agencies, scholarly organisations and so on) appeared rather regularly at the margins of disciplines. Although arguments for collaborative research in the social sciences began to gain ground in the 1970s, they did not gain widespread appreciation. Some of the most powerful objections to collaborative research in those days were that formally trained researchers should not surrender their disciplinary expertise to "non-experts"; that such a shift in positions could not produce rigorous or objective knowledge; and that, by its very nature, knowledge produced either by or in collaboration with those who were being researched could be neither reliable nor valid.

¹ campbelle@marshall.edu

Those who began to embrace collaborative research approaches in the 1980s and 1990s tended to focus on two different justifications for collaboration: that such researches were more authentically representative and thus more accurate and/or that the approaches themselves were more ethically or morally just. Collaborative research became especially important and relevant in cases that sought to remedy imbalances in the historical record, to redress colonial misrepresentations and to foreground previously absent voices, experiences, and perspectives. The approaches to collaboration that emerged during that time tended to emphasise agreement and to sometimes privilege the voices of community situated participants over those in the academy or in other traditional sites of scholarly knowledge production. These approaches became known for their experiments with the ‘how to’ of researching and writing collaboratively, and for their serious attempts to deal (or play) with issues connected to realms of expression and the politics of representation.

As a graduate student in the 1990s, I well remember seminar discussions that passionately upheld the rights of research participants (or ‘consultants,’ a term we used then that is still often used in fields like folklore or anthropology) to decide what research would do, how it would operate, who would be involved, and in what ways—if at all—research findings would be presented or disseminated. During my early years as a fieldworker, I took those earnest discussions to heart, consistently deferring to the wishes and concerns of my consultants. I revisited and revised interpretations with them and shifted voices and points of view based on their positions and perspectives. In a few cases, I returned research materials that participants later decided against sharing and stripped the contributions those materials had made out of the work itself. This is too easy a position to attack now; setting its naiveté aside for the moment, though, I do want to say that say such are much more complex positions than they seem at first glance. Still, in many of its earliest iterations, the ethical imperative of collaborative research was to negotiate interpretations and representations through dialogue; those positions that could not be negotiated were to be surrendered.

It doesn’t take flashing yellow arrows to figure out where that would lead. As more and more people—scholars, artists, indigenous rights advocates, environmental activists, citizens, policy makers, and others—began engaging collaborative research over broader and broader fields and projects, these acts of deference and privileging became increasingly problematised. And more difficult. Accounts of collaboration started to raise a whole host of issues, from position to power to process and more. It became clear that simply surrendering or sharing authority did not automatically make research more equitable. Or more accurate. Collaborative researchers came head to head with conflict and difference, which turned their attentions to the complex nature of collaborations, to differently situated participants, and to the challenges—and emerging moral imperatives—of working across difference. This was happening even as collaborating with those being researched was becoming a bureaucratic requirement, an issue of law or policy, rather than of ethical preference. And, of course, as more and more researchers and their interlocutors explicitly engaged collaborative research approaches, they came into contact with the discord and disagreement that are as much a part of human relations as accord and harmony.

Over the last decade or so, especially, as research participants across positions have engaged both the possibilities and the challenges of collaborative research, ideas about what it is, how it works, and why it matters are in flux again (see, e.g., the journal *Collaborative Anthropologies*). This leads to the important connection Halldórsson points out—that ‘collaboration and other social arrangements are based in the intersubjective realm, in which people, things and events affect one another in multifarious ways’—and takes a step further: if collaborations are, in fact, intersubjective and affective, it should be possible to conceptualise and enact our collaborations in ways that make possible the positive change so many of us hope for.

Middletown

Despite the situational, tentative, related, and often difficult nature of collaborative work, I remain captivated by it. I have seen collaborative researches, pedagogies and writing change research participants and their relationships in a host of productive and hopeful ways. In the early 2000s, I had the great good fortune of being part of a project called ‘The Other Side of Middletown’ (TOSM) out of which arose a book by the same title. TOSM was, at times, an extraordinarily challenging endeavour. Seventy-five people of different ages, races, genders, economic levels, educational backgrounds, political persuasions, and religious identities participated in that project. We did our work in a variety of places: in an early twentieth century mansion built by one of the city’s wealthiest early industrialists; in a wood frame church where, in 1930, the bodies of lynching victims had been guarded over and protected; in living rooms, in vacant lots, and in legislative chambers. We worked, together and alone, in airless archives by day. We walked under old trees at night. We ate at TV trays and banquet tables. We laughed uproariously and fought ferociously. We hoped that some of our emerging romantic attachments would work out and that others would not. We struggled against a backdrop of racist conflict, of professional rivalries, of personal tragedies. We marched and protested.

We embraced an explicit and overriding commitment to writing that book, and living that commitment continuously formed and transformed the relationships between us. Although we did make what we still think is an important contribution to the literature around Middletown, for me, what remains of that encounter is less the knowledge we contributed to Middletown studies than the differences we made in each other’s lives.

The Place of Affect

Halldórsson calls attention to the role (and place and phenomenon) of affect in participatory and collaborative research in ways that are both new and notable. He is especially interested in the affects of collaborative encounters, in what those affective encounters produce, and in how they work. This relates, in some ways, to other researchers’ calls to take up the role of relationships in collaborative work (cf., Campbell & Lassiter, 2015; Haviland, 2017; Lassiter 2005). But he is calling here, specifically, for participatory and collaborative researchers to place affect at the centre of those relationships, and thus those collaborations. This offers those who do collaborative work a slightly different take on the connections between collaboration and participatory action research; attending to ‘affect’ could very well lead to richer understandings of both.

At this point, there seem to be nearly as many different theories and definitions of affect (and affect theory and theory/ies of affect) as there are thinkers who engage them. Halldórsson’s cites Gregg and Seigworth’s (2011) grateful expression that there is as yet ‘no single, generalisable theory of affect’ (p. 3), freeing those who wish to explore this nexus of collaboration and affect to focus on that important work. Per Seyfert (2012), Halldórsson proposes that affect be thought of as ‘relations among all kinds of bodies’—and here he is talking about bodies beyond those of human agents, for whom emotions, feelings, desires, and passions, constitute but one particular form of affect. Skoggard and Waterson (2015) take it further:

Affect as noun and verb has as much to do with senses and sensibilities of the collective unconscious and conscious and the body writ large—the body politic, the social and the cultural—as it does with an individual’s mind, body, and emotion (112). Seigworth and Gregg (2011) take it further still:

That is, affect is found in those intensities that pass body to body (human, nonhuman, part-body, and otherwise) in those resonances that circulate about, between, and

sometimes stick to bodies and worlds, and in the very passages or variations between these intensities *and* resonances themselves. (1; italics in original)

Halldórsson's discussion of affect as different from structure is also important. Although it has been common to frame collaborations in terms of structure, he quite rightly suggests that focusing on structure can shift attention away from the people with whom we work and eventually lead to their disappearance. Attending to how people and bodies and events and places and histories (and so on) affect each other (and as this idea rolls around in my mind an idea of ontological dark matter begins to take shape) is an area that is ripe for investigation.

I share Halldórsson's interest in crafting research that leads to productive relationships and stronger communities. I am increasingly convinced that all of us, citizens across positions, need more opportunities to make shared commitments, to build strong connections, and to craft collective solutions to the challenges we currently face.

Affective Possibilities

Recently, I had a bit more good fortune, becoming involved in a collaborative research project sponsored by the United Kingdom's 'Imagine: Connecting Communities Through Research' Programme. This particular collaboration is set in Rotherham, a once booming industrial city in Yorkshire that has lately seen more than its share of troubles. A very different kind of collaboratively written book, called *Re-Imagining Contested Communities* (Pahl, Rasool, Pente, and Campbell forthcoming) arose out of that research. The book aims at multiple audiences: university members, community members, and policy makers. Its authors include artists, academics, parents, students, poets, singers, and community development workers who juxtapose history, theory, narrative, place, identity and images with memories, poetry, freestyle, hope, rage, and dreams. The book's collaborators were motivated by the desire to document the complicated community within which they all lived, and to do so in ways that could actually heal some of the divisions and rifts within that community. The group did not use affect as a conceptual or pragmatic frame for the project or book but, looking back, it was clearly at the collaboration's core. Moreover, embracing the commitment to both the collaboratively produced product and the collaboration out of which that product emerged helped to deepen positive relationships and generate multifaceted understandings among many of the participants.

The still-dominant research approaches born of linear, rational, positivist, and post-positivist ideologies that continue to rule over many fields (like my current discipline of Education) can neither describe nor solve the protean problems we face today. What would our work—and our worlds—look like if we took up Halldórsson's call, if we turned our attention to affect and the collaborative encounter? What might we then be able to know and do? These are important questions that all who are engaged in collaborative research should take to heart.

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