

# INCORPORATING IMMIGRANT PERSPECTIVES INTO ORGANIZATIONAL RESEARCH AND PRACTICE: IMPLEMENTING INCLUSIVE DISCUSSIONS

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## Introduction

Anthropologists have “been in business” with for-profit and not-for-profit organizations (NPOs) for most of the 20th century, and their role as consultants for such corporations, research firms, and local organizations has continued to grow since this time (Jordan 2013). When they invest in community-based research through these partnerships, NPOs often hope to acquire meaningful and relevant evidence about practices in their communities. Yet, NPOs are unable to realize many of their potential collaborations with academics due to their dependency on elaborate and increasingly competitive funding frameworks constructed by granting bodies (INTRAC 2012). Furthermore, Morris and Luque (2011) have argued that community-based organizations and coalitions have limited input from the populations they hope to represent. Consequently, the representation and inclusion of diverse populations throughout the research process continues to be a struggle. This includes participation in data collection, project development, creation of evaluation measures, and the negotiation of program and/or policy development. Despite these limitations, participatory-action research is shown to provide long-term partnerships between both academics and their collaborators (INTRAC 2012).

During the 2013 American Anthropological Association (AAA) meetings

in Chicago, researchers came together to identify issues of collaboration among newcomers and NPOs. They discussed successful projects that have brought immigrant voices to the decision making table to influence policy and practice. Researchers found that the involvement of immigrant participants in collaborative research varied depending on the project, the site, and the stage of research. The lack of inclusion of immigrants is often due to their perceived challenges in the lingua franca and the lack of recognition about how their education and work experience could benefit the organization. Often when immigrants are included in these processes, they have a minimal role and remain on the periphery. Their exclusion, Dei (1996) argues, helps to maintain the unequal structures of power in society and inhibits structural, organizational, and sustainable change.

This article focuses on the meanings of the inclusive dialogues between newcomers and NPOs. During the meetings, the authors, who participated in the AAA panels, found that despite the different research locations, we were able to draw connections and comparisons across various geographical areas, including Canada, the Netherlands, India, and the United States, as well as in different contexts. Among these different contexts, for example, were forced resettlement programs, integration and settlement services, and engagement from diasporic communities. The objectives of this article are to: (1) examine issues found during collaboration with NPO partners; (2) discuss unique anthropological practices in collaboration with NPOs; and (3) explore new avenues for research regarding collaboration with NPOs working with immigrants. To do this, we seek to develop a “community of practice”

for anthropologists who are working in and for research communities and NPO organizations. Consequently, we seek to build capacity, resources, and collaboration among anthropologists in non-academic settings. This article draws from multiple research projects conducted by the authors using ethnographic methods. All of the projects received ethics approval from the researchers’ respective universities.

## Issues Arising during Collaboration

### *Meaningful Participation*

Margaret Everett (2011:23) encouraged anthropologists to create *meaningful participation* that “enhances the likelihood of sustainable changes and fosters community empowerment” in collaborative research. The authors of this paper agree with Everett on the importance of incorporating meaningful participation and seek to develop an approach that will disrupt the cycle of marginalizing groups historically excluded from the spaces of decision making. Taking such an approach to collaborative research allows community members to teach collaborators about what is important to them and could result in reducing the power of the organization and the practicing anthropologist over her/his interlocutors (Sanjek 1990).

In a study of integration and settlement programming for newcomers in London, Ontario, co-author Long and Esses worked with a community-based service provider to develop research questions, identify potential participants, and then present the findings of their work. Findings that could be quickly implemented included a recommendation that the community providers increase opportunities for mixed-participant programming as a cost-effective and inclusive response to

feedback gathered from the immigrant-client population. Mixed-participant programming incorporates recent immigrants and longer-established residents of the city into the same program that typically produces multiple benefits immediately. For example, one program allows immigrant-clients to practice English, learn about the city, and discover employment opportunities from the longer-established residents who are also group members. Although this project demonstrated one avenue by which to incorporate typically marginalized voices into community planning processes, Long wondered whether this approach would create systemic change with herself as the go-between among service providers and their immigrant-clients, a topic which is further debated below.

#### *Interpretation, Writing, and Reporting*

Using critical theories to interpret research for an audience of academics differs from presenting these interpretations to the NPO that has hired the researcher. In taking field notes and writing the text, the anthropologist is guided by theory that informs certain connections of significance (Sanjek 1990). By keeping critiques to the pages of academic journals, anthropologists are able to position themselves theoretically; however, practicing anthropologists are often faced with the uncomfortable realities of potentially criticizing those who took part in, and in some cases, funded their research. For instance, Long, Fellin, and Erdogan-Ertorer (2014) found that, when developing intercultural competency training materials, they had to question how they could advocate for change in the workplace while recognizing that being too political could not only lead the training participants to resist the material (making it ineffective) but could also influence the marketability of such materials. As a result, the larger goal of creating more inclusive workplaces for immigrants would be at risk. The researchers were confronted with problems in the translation of the fieldwork into textual form because of these political constraints (Clifford 1983). One of their main problems was

not considering the holistic definition of community.

In taking a one-sided approach, that is, working only on behalf of the marginalized, anthropologists' abilities to present and signify all individuals who were interested and involved in research can be obscured. The politics of representation in writing has long been discussed in academic literature (e.g., Clifford 1983); however, there is a lack of research and dialogue among anthropologists on how to represent disparate views and account for these potential disparities in applied settings. The following section brings light to some of the promising practices that are not often discussed.

### Strategies of Collaboration

#### *Collaboration throughout the Research Process*

The Hartford Public Library (HPL) in Hartford, Connecticut initiated two innovative immigrant inclusion programs that deliberately built on Pipher's (2002) notion that "cultural brokers" could contribute to building the social capital of newcomers. The Cultural Navigator Program paired newcomers with longer-time residents, while the Community Dialogue Program sought to increase immigrant civic engagement. The library was already a hub for immigrant outreaching activities, having established The American Place (TAP), an immigrant resource center, English as a Second Language (ESL), and citizenship classes, a series of lectures and workshops for providers and the wider community, and an Immigrant Advisory Board, established in collaboration with a network of service providers, immigrants, and other stakeholders. The library's outreach education staff had become adept at deploying its own "ethnographic sensibilities."

As participatory action researchers involved in various phases of program implementation, co-author Bauer and her students were able to observe and further encourage these tendencies. They also reminded participants how newcomers use reverse ethnographic sensibilities, being intentionally observant



Photo by Janet Bauer

#### *English-Mai Mai Class for Somali Bantu Children at Hartford Public Library*

in their interactions with community partners, to shape their own integration.

As an example of collaboration throughout the research process, evaluation was implemented as an ongoing process of program development in which newcomers were active participants. By listening to and engaging newcomer participants, stakeholders, volunteers in different levels of program development, and the supervising staff were able to continually reconfigure the cultural navigator and community dialogue programs, effectively building collaborative evaluation into every stage of implementation. For example, the on-line toolkit and the training workshops developed to prepare cultural navigators were overhauled, and volunteers who were not prepared to assist with some of the more complex needs of their newcomer partners (such as accessing state benefits) were offered alternative volunteer opportunities, such as one-on-one ESL tutoring. The original community dialogue program, which brought together immigrants and non-immigrants across the metro area in focused discussion groups to address and take action around community issues of mutual interest, was expanded in its second phase to concentrate on building dialogue and action groups within neighborhood associations.

The willingness of the library's program staff to work with a broad network of existing government and



Photo by Janet Bauer

*Trinity College Students Attending Meeting of the Immigrant Advisory Board (Consisting of Immigrants and Service Providers) at Hartford Public Library*

non-governmental partners, including ethnic-based, immigrant, and faith-based organizations, initiated a cascading effect that transformed cultural brokering into a sense of reciprocal complicity among participating providers, partners, and newcomers. Like the Amsterdam program (see below), participants in both the navigator and dialogue programs talked about the profound and mutual transformation of their lives and worldviews and often recruited other members of their respective communities to volunteer. The activism of women and members of faith-based associations in these efforts raises questions about whether faith-based emotional commitments to social justice facilitate moving beyond awareness of cultural difference to produce a critical empathy that allows volunteers to be more receptive to the lives of others. Although (and maybe because) many volunteers were drawn from among White middle-class immigrant and non-immigrant groups, the issue of race and ethnic differences in these interactions or in the challenges faced by newcomers was never adequately addressed.

Besides offering models of best practices through their websites posting and workshop training for other libraries around the country and for the network of agencies with which they work, HPL staff spearheaded the work of a task

force composed of immigrants, service providers, and engaged community researchers to form a city commission on refugee and immigrant affairs, which now provides a voice for immigrants and refugees (of different legal statuses) in City Hall. This commission in turn has become a model for other library systems in the greater Hartford area to emulate. The work on this commission, like the library's other programs, reflects an insistence on critical complicity at each stage of the evaluation process, thinking intentionally and collaboratively with newcomer representatives toward more effective programming. This may bridge the divide between what some call "activist research and culture critique" (Osterweil 2013:615).

*Unintended Benefits of Collaboration*

One of the advantages of anthropological research is the holistic approach of the ethnographic method. While this approach presents practicing anthropologists with the unique challenges touched on above, it also offers researchers valuable insights into the lived experiences of project participants that might not be revealed through other approaches. Ethnography, as a methodology, can bring to light consequences of projects and processes that may fall outside of the intended outcomes of NPOs when they hire anthropologists to evaluate their programs.

The unintended benefits of programs discovered through ethnographic investigation may prove important for gaining support within the communities where such programs are situated, including funding bodies, charitable organizations, or volunteers. Co-author Mosher observed this to be the case in her research among voluntary Dutch language coaching programs in Amsterdam, the Netherlands. As volunteer-run and often neighborhood-oriented initiatives, these programs facilitate Dutch-speaking partnerships between established residents fluent in Dutch and newcomers learning the language (now a requirement for citizenship acquisition). While the main goal of these volunteer speaking partnerships is to help newcomers integrate through learning the national language, these initiatives have also had positive, unintended effects for native Dutch language coaches. As coordinators for these programs commented, many of the language coaches who participated in these programs found that, through contact with their partners, they often felt much more comfortable and less fearful around their immigrant neighbors. These positive experiences among volunteers made them ambassadors for these programs and encouraged volunteers to make friendly social contact with neighbors they may have previously avoided. Therefore, despite the fact that many of the volunteers were from White middle-class backgrounds, issues surrounding fear of "the other" were in fact alleviated through intensive time spent with newcomers. In this way, an anthropologist's collaboration with a community-based program highlighted the unintended and often overlooked benefits from such community-based efforts; this is an important factor to incorporate when planning future programs in areas that have experienced growing distrust among established and newly-arriving populations.

**New Spaces for Engagement**

Included in our panel at the meeting were discussions surrounding new avenues for anthropological engagement in

organizational spaces. Zarpour, in trying to understand the range of behaviors that could constitute immigrant political agency among Iranians, conducted ethnography in two venues: conventional ethnography among Iranians participating in ethnic grassroots based associations in San Diego, California, and virtual ethnography through looking at Iranian diaspora-based on-line groups and web forums. The latter enabled the creation of a cyber-community connecting dispersed populations, and provided interactivity among members.

An important finding in Zarpour's research relates to the multiple ways the Internet can be a forum for engaging politically and creating political community among immigrants. Iranian informants use Facebook both for posting activist causes on their individual feeds and for the logistical coordination of their politically-oriented organizations. Furthermore, the way Facebook is used differs significantly from other on-line groups, like Iranian.com (IC). IC provided a forum for the safe expression of a diverse range of political, ethnic, and religious difference not found in face-to-face interactions among migrant Iranians. Yet, the discourse on IC is much more strident and divisive than is heard and experienced in face-to-face life. IC is marked by conflict, disagreement, dissension, and certainly at times uncivil discourse; yet, differing ideologies are expressed in an environment without violence. In this, forums like IC create a civic community composed of a diversity and multiplicity of voices engaging in political discourse.

In terms of the methodological utility of merging conventional and virtual ethnography, on-line data initially foregrounded political ideologies and potential differences among informants and functioned to extend the reach of the research (Freidenberg 2011). Often, evidence from on-line communities reinforced what was found through conventional ethnography. For example, social media users and informants both discussed the importance of learning "how to be democratic" and "live in a democracy" by first practicing values like tolerance and equality through



Photo by Janet Bauer

*Asylum Hill Neighborhood Community Dialogue Event with Newcomers and Long-Term Residents to Promote Immigrant Civic Engagement in Hartford*

organizations. The replication of these discourses across two mediums (on-line and off-line) indicates the formation of a distinct Iranian-American civil society and offers a new avenue by which to investigate the possibilities of collaboration for anthropologists.

More importantly, conducting virtual and conventional ethnography extends the reach of our lens of inquiry and yields new insights that may have otherwise been missed. Perhaps issues in one locality and one NPO are not so unique. Examining virtual venues of communication, along with local contexts, helps to integrate our perspectives and consider the inter-relationship between immigrants in one place and immigrants in other places.

### **Collaboration and its Policy Implications**

As noted above by co-authors Long and Fellin, engendering integrated dialogues is difficult when working with NPOs. This is particularly salient among anthropologists who have interlocutors,

including immigrants, whose voices are typically marginalized during research, decision making, and program development. Co-author Bauer has adeptly shown how such traditional interlocutors can be integrated throughout the research process with fruitful outcomes for NPOs. Co-author Mosher addressed the manner in which anthropological intervention, or rather investigation, can highlight the unintended yet beneficial outcomes of such collaboration. Co-author Zarpour has also provided a new avenue by which anthropologists can investigate opportunities for genuinely integrated collaboration, through on-line interfaces. The practical application of this anthropological work can also address the area of policy.

In order to create policies that give voice to those affected in creating programs and interventions, members of our panel discussed the importance of the following issues. First, policymakers should recognize the diversity of immigrant populations, their organizations, and how they connect with one another and their adopted societies in local (and transnational) contexts. Second, even

when immigrant organizations are ready to work with implementing agencies, they do not always have the capacity to carry out the activities asked of them. Therefore, training may be necessary to build skills and capacity, and policies should include funds for capacity building of partner organizations. Third, although increasing tangible assets and skills are important, the examples here show the importance of building social capital and networks as well. Especially important in this process is the creation of bridging social capital as it brings together people who would not otherwise have much regular contact. This coalition building allows groups to create allies from other constituencies who support their efforts and develop policies that should include funding for efforts to increase social capital.

### International Organizations

Many of these strategies would also be useful in international contexts, where similar problems of marginalization comparable with those faced by immigrants in developed countries arise, in projects that seek to involve poor or disadvantaged people. One example is development-caused forced resettlement, which displaces residents who live in areas of new infrastructure construction and development as discussed by co-author Koenig at the meetings. NGOs and social scientists have pushed for changes in international policy to encourage more progressive approaches to social change, including the creation of policies that avoid negative effects, and promote development and enhancement of the participation of those displaced (Cernea 2005). Many international funding organizations require that the displaced receive compensation and formal resettlement in a new location. They recommend ongoing consultation and accent the importance of local participation and the use of NGOs in planning, implementation, and monitoring resettlement programs. However, contemporary forced resettlement in developing countries is usually analyzed separately from similar activities in developed countries. In part, this is due to

different funding streams. While most social change in developed countries depends upon internal national, provincial, municipal, or private voluntary sources, many developing countries depend upon international foreign assistance. As described in co-author Koenig's research, the 2002 Mumbai Urban Transport project to improve railroads and widen major roads displaced and resettled 20,000 households. Those affected were generally disadvantaged as indicated by their lack of formal residential tenure, but they varied in other ways. Some were established business owners, while others were relatively recent migrants. In a city where religious differences have led to conflict, this displaced population included both Hindus and Muslims, each of whom had different cultural requirements. In this situation, the NGOs engaged to implement resettlement were faced with a challenging task and a desire to involve the affected but were given little formal training in forced resettlement. Initial efforts led to problems and consequent criticism, but formal training for NGOs based on anthropological insights such as those presented here would likely have improved outcomes.

### Conclusion

In this article, the authors sought to contribute to a community of practice on collaboration among anthropologists and NPOs or NGOs. We sought to develop a dialogue that integrates the viewpoints of various stakeholders and includes our interlocutors. It is our hope that this article continues a fruitful dialogue that includes promising practices from applied anthropologists collaborating with NPOs and other organizations as well as applying their research in the community.

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