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NGO-Research Collaborations and Conflicts

A view from the field

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ABSTRACT | Ethnographers collaborating with non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and non-profits while simultaneously researching their organizational structure, practices, and beliefs about service, advocacy, and activism face myriad challenges. However, collaboration – as it exists in a dialectical relationship between stakeholders working towards common goals – may also generate ethnographic insights that add to anthropological knowledge of NGOs. According to Lassiter (2005a, 2005b), researchers undertaking collaborative ethnography have four commitments: (1) ethical responsibilities to stakeholders; (2) honesty/transparency about research; (3) accessible writing; and (4) collaborative reading, writing, and interpretation. Collaborations may be interrupted at various points, but especially where bureaucratic structures and operations intervene. For example, agreements and documentation (e.g., memoranda of understanding, or MOUs) often challenge the interests and affect of collaborative work. In this article I draw on five years of collaborative NGOgraphy, Lassiter's conceptualization of collaborative ethnography, and respond to Hymes' (1972) call for a personal ethnography, in order to discuss the challenges and opportunities of NGO-researcher collaboration.

Keywords: nonprofits; non-governmental organizations; bureaucracy; collaborative ethnography

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Introduction

From graduate training to practice, anthropology across its sub-disciplines is, in scope and process, still predominantly concerned with researching, analysing, and writing about others, not the self. In 1908 Franz Boas posited that 'with the increase of our knowledge of the peoples of the world, specialization must increase, and anthropology will become more and more *a method* that may be applied' (10; original emphasis). According to Hymes, the creation of 'a bureaucratic general anthropology, whose latent function is the protection of academic comfort and privilege' resultant of increasingly specialized training is at odds with recent historic and contemporary calls to cultivate 'a personal general anthropology, whose function is the advancement of knowledge and the welfare of [hu]mankind' (1972: 47; gender-neutral added). Although the roots of ethnographic collaboration between researcher and researched are deep, these relationships are sporadic, produce variable results, and the extent to which there is true collaborative enterprise in ways that mitigate power asymmetries is debatable (see Bernard and Pedraza 1989; Boas and Hunt 1895; Morgan 1851; Redfield and Villa Rojas 1934) and debated (Mintz 1989). Collaboration, variously defined, in contemporary anthropological practice has sought to remedy these failures by emphasising active participation and research that warrants vested interest from participants, particularly where the ethnographer is working with disenfranchised groups or studying topics in which there are social problems and power asymmetries, such as human rights, development projects, and social justice movements (Clifford and Marcus 1986; Field 2008; Fluehr-Lobban 1991, 2008; Marcus 1999; Rappaport 2008; Ridington and Hastings 1997; Stacey 1988; Wolf 1992).

Such calls for increased participation are a result of recognizing that the knowledge gleaned by anthropologists often imply ethical and political responsibilities, and today the 'others' that anthropologists have studied fortunately make those responsibilities explicit and unavoidable. As anthropologists, we must consider the consequences for those among whom we work by simply being there, by learning about them, and of what becomes of what is learned (Hymes 1972: 48).

Anthropological knowledge is 'inherently personal and situational' (Hymes 1975: 869) and requires an examination of the ways in which ethnographic inquiry, methods, and questions more generally are a very human responsibility, rather than a strictly professional ethical responsibility. As anthropological foci and process has shifted as a result of feminist movements, post-colonial scholarship, decolonizing pushbacks, and changes in ethical standards, the calls for truly collaborative work have increased (see Fluehr-Lobban 2008; Lassiter 2005a).

In keeping with anthropological calls for and interests in considering ethnographic planning, processes, and outcomes as a human endeavour requiring thoughtful reflection and consideration, this article draws on five years of ethnographic research with/in non-profit organisations and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) to analyse collaborative enterprises in research. This work falls within the realm of 'NGOgraphy' – ethnographic anthropological research with/in NGO and nonprofit settings. Following the NGOgraphic tradition (see Lashaw et al. 2017), the application of ethnographic inquiry, historically considered a 'lone-wolf' enterprise, is subject to scrutiny within collaborative efforts with NGOs and nonprofits. The additional pressures and constraints created by both academic and NGO bureaucratic regimes compound the challenges of collaborative ethnographic endeavour. Framed in NGOgraphic inquiry and collaborative and reciprocal ethnographic work, I leverage my research with alternative justice organizations to examine the possibilities of collaboration as a way to subvert asymmetries in access to knowledge production, as well as address the challenges of collaborating with/in the bureaucratic contexts of NGOs and nonprofits.

NGOgraphy

Since the neoliberal turn, states have discarded much of their social welfare obligations to their citizens (Harvey 2005). As responsibility for provisioning for human rights to housing, healthcare, and education has been abdicated by the state as part of neoliberal strategies, they are often taken up by NGOs and nonprofits (Ferguson and Gupta 2002; see McGuirk 2019). Anthropological inquiry with/in/on NGOs thus initially began with interest in development studies, human rights, and democratic transformation in states. NGOs were studied as part of a global civil society with unique language (e.g., capacity-building), funding and donor processes, and the associated rituals and practices of their work (see Comaroff and Comaroff 1999; Hann and Dunn 1996; Lewis 2017; Sampson 2017; Schuller 2017).

'NGOgraphy' has emerged as a methodological and conceptual framework for imagining and implementing collaborative relationships and research between anthropologists and NGOs and nonprofits. NGOs are now a common part of the socio-political and economic landscape. These organizations are mundane entities in our communities that require analytical engagement because the mundane provides deep insights into the socio-political everyday (Lewis and Schuller 2017; Sampson 2017). Anthropologists continue to study NGOs from various perspectives. 'NGO-ization' or the appropriation of social movements by NGOs (Alvarez 1999; Choudry and Kapoor 2013; Hodžić 2014; Lang 2004), the political economy and neoliberalisation of NGOs (Bernal and Grewal 2014), and the ways in which these organizations can perpetuate and further entrench the state and its violence have been subjects of critique (Reinke 2016). Recent anthropological scholarship on NGOs recognizes the multifaceted and dynamic challenges of defining these organizations, their complex relationships to the state, and our own analytical and methodological power and reflexivity as we work collaboratively in these spaces (Bernal and Grewal 2014; Fisher 1997; Lewis and Schuller 2017; Mertz and Timmer 2010). Other work examines NGO workers and volunteers as part of an often precarious and contingent workforce (Vannier and Lashaw 2017).

The dynamic and diverse field of NGOgraphy requires researchers to grapple with methodological challenges, such as power dynamics between researcher and NGO, access to participate in and observe daily activities, and collaborations within what may be, whether informally or formally, a hierarchical organizational structure (see Lashaw 2013; Sampson 2017). NGOgraphic inquiry often blurs the boundaries between the 'field' and 'home,' making ethnography personal in process and outcome (Sampson 2017). The messiness of blurred boundaries requires a reciprocal ethnographic approach that examines the researcher-researched relationship as a participatory and collaborative endeavour that is mutually beneficial throughout planning, process, and outcome (see Lawless 2000; Vannier and Lashaw 2017).

From a methodological perspective, many NGOgraphies and NGO-graphers can be conceived of within Lassiter's collaborative ethnographic framework (2005a, 2005b). According to Lassiter (2005a, 2005b), collaborative ethnography requires the active partnership of researchers and participants in the co-production of ethnographic research and texts. Collaborative ethnography is founded upon four commitments: (1) an ethical and moral responsibility to participants and students; (2) honesty and transparency about the research process; (3) accessible writing that engages the community and can be understood by the public (however defined); and (4) collaboration in the writing, reading, and interpretation of ethnographic texts with the community and students (Lassiter 2005a, 2005b). In many ways Lassiter's framework also subsumes reciprocal ethnographic frames (Lawless 2000), which rely on a reciprocal and equitable (inasmuch as this is possible) relationship between the researcher, community, and students or assistants. In both frames, there are co-commitments between the ethnographer and participants. The research topic, scope, methods, process, and outcomes are subject to negotiation and those negotiations must be made on equitable terms that are amenable to all and will produce usable information or outcomes. Thus, while collaboration requires co-commitments, it is also a co-production of knowledge and materials. In essence, this perspective requires the anthropologist to be aware of the socio-politics and economics of ethnographic work, to deconstruct otherwise 'bounded topographies of 'the field' and subsequently create space for new possibilities of collaboration and production (see Elinoff 2018).

My own work emerges from the NGOgraphic and collaborative ethno-graphic traditions. For me, 'community' is rooted in a particular location and with a particular group of people, while a research 'collaboration' is the deliberate and explicit engagement between all those involved in the project or research lifecycle. As an academic and applied ethnographer who analyses justice processes and frameworks in my own nation-state, my fieldwork is often multi-sited and the boundaries between 'researcher' and 'the researched' are frequently blurred. My role with/in the NGOs and nonprofits is negotiated on equitable terms. As a result of these negotiations and my own training as a mediator and conflict coach, I typically have the requisite research and practical experience to volunteer or do *pro bono* work for the organizations I study. In this capacity I work closely with paid and unpaid laborers, donors, and the communities they ostensibly serve.

While conducting fourteen months of ethnographic research in the San Francisco Bay Area, I worked as a volunteer on case intake and management, as well as volunteering as a mediator. This put me in everyday contact with paid staff, such as directors and managers, but also with the volunteers who perform the bulk of case intake and conflict resolution processes. Although my own perspective does not always align with the organizations with whom I work, my approach to collaboration requires that I work side-by-side with non-profit and NGO employees and volunteers to better understand their perspective, process, and desired outcomes. Taking this NGOgraphic approach illuminates both emic and etic perspectives but also generates new frictions as me and my collaborators continually negotiate our roles, positionalities, and expectations (see Lashaw et al. 2017). Following Charles Hale (2001), research *participants* are an active component of the research topic, questions, process, and outcomes as a collective endeavour, rather than utilizing key *informants.*

Collaborative ethnographic inquiry is particularly well suited to NGOgraphy, where research participants need data-driven approaches to evidence the successes and failures of their work, and yet have no time and often a lack of expertise to fulfil that need. The NGO contexts I have worked in, for example, have limited financial resources for part- and full-time staff. These staff positions are dedicated to the necessary tasks of running an organization, such as fundraising and financial management, executive director, and case management. They do not have the training to do their own data collection and analysis, or if they did have the expertise, they did not have the time needed for this work. The ability to generate knowledge academically, while providing outcomes that meet organizational interests (even if that knowledge is not as flattering as the NGO might like) also overlaps academic and applied anthropological spheres.

As an anthropologist, my training and theoretical groundings do not necessarily align with the practitioners' philosophical ideologies or practical methods. We often disagree on fundamentals, even as I agree with their social justice goals and endeavours. It was not uncommon, for example, to hear practitioners claim that community-based justice methods that emphasize harmony and healing are the 'original,' 'natural,' or 'innate' form of justice for all human beings, especially Indigenous peoples. This ideology of sameness, of homogeneity, in the beliefs that undergird justice processes is something that is decidedly against my anthropological training, as is the notion that all Indigenous peoples universally value nonviolence, harmony, and healing over and above other justice frameworks and ideologies. The NGOgraphy framework, grounded in collaborative ethnographic inquiry, allows the potential for the researcher and participants to understand our differences and similarities as we construct a project that will be fulfilling for all participants in conceptual, procedural, and outcome-oriented ways. However, collaboration poses as many challenges as opportunities.

Challenges of Collaborating in the Juridical Grey Space

I have conducted NGOgraphic work with alternative justice nonprofits and NGOs since 2014. Defined by advocates in opposition to the state's formal legal system, alternative justice practitioners seek to provide a socially just form of conflict resolution that avoids the legal system's deleterious effects on marginalized communities. Alternative justice is an umbrella term that encompasses a wide variety of practices and processes. Generally, these diverse forms share philosophical roots in principles and values of healing, active participation, redressing harm, and community. Alternative justice mechanisms, such as community mediation and restorative justice, gained popularity in the US during the 1970s amid powerful social critiques of tough on crime policies. Such policies undermine communities, are financially and temporally inaccessible, overly professionalized and abstruse, and disproportionately harm particular social groups, such as racial minorities, LGBTQ members, non-native English speakers, and the working class (Alexander 2010; Calkins 2010; Enslen 1988; Galanter 1985). Thus, practitioners are typically working to subvert state violence, tackling pervasive problems such as mass incarceration, reintegration post-incarceration, and the school-to-prison pipeline.

In practice, many alternative justice NGOs have close connections with the state. These groups, while simultaneously seeking to subvert the state and the violence it enacts in communities, seek political and economic legitimacy from the state (Reinke 2018). This complex relationship is constructed by choice (as variously understood), but entails significant trade-offs as the NGO loses flexibility in defining success and goals. In exchange, they enter otherwise closed arenas, such as juvenile judicial processes, and economic support. These connections between alternative justice NGOs and practitioners and the state make research collaboration tricky. The juridical grey space is fraught with bureaucratic requirements, including background checks, memoranda of understanding, and extensive paper and digital files. However, the most significant challenge posed to collaborations comes from the process of navigating relationships within the juncture between formal and informal legal processes and entities.

In 2018, an alternative justice NGO where I had conducted *pro bono* research and writing with from 2016-2017 as part of my professional service in an academic institution, reached out and asked me to conduct a project that would ‘provide evidence’ demonstrating that their services are best practices in their field. As part of findings reports for the non-profits with whom I collaborate, I provide an analysis of ‘areas of improvement’ with associated ‘actionable recommendations’ for improving those areas. In this sense, the non-profit was aware that I may discover that their practices were not, in fact, the best. However, making those claims is challenging and puts stress on the already somewhat difficult and tenuous relationship between the researcher/collaborator and non-profit organization. Examined differently and framed in a positive light, this request is indicative of a great deal of trust and respect on the part of the requestor. However, this single request could be unpacked in many different ways, from their definition of research and evidence to how they delimit best practices and expect research to prove they are already achieving ‘best,’ however defined. Upon further probing, the requestor was unable to produce a list of variables or measures they would like to use for the research. The best they could derive was to track recidivism; however, this can only be tracked by the Department of Corrections and is typically done rather poorly at that. Furthermore, they were unable to guarantee that there would be regular access to the correctional institutions for study; nor were they able to state that an adequate control group could be identified and included in the research. This is a larger issue that all researchers working in state institutions face but is particularly frustrating for collaborative ethnographers who rely upon a few select gatekeepers for long-term access to participants. Even though my relationship with this NGO was positive and ongoing throughout the couple of years prior to their request, internal organizational changes and shifting relationships with the DOC and other legal groups meant that collaboration could be jeopardized by external or internal factors at any time.

In many ways my situation parallels that of Lashaw (2013), whose work necessitated 'adopting a discomforting, possibly duplicitous position' (518). Lashaw details a request from her NGO's research director to conduct a literature review of critical theory education. Although initially envisioned as a 'precious opportunity' for her research, it quickly became evident to Lashaw that the director was uncertain about where to begin, how to articulate the specific categories of interest, or how to define their substance (2013). Confusion and an inability to clearly define relationships, goals, and analytical work is often central to the challenging process and sometimes elusive outcomes of collaborative ethnographic work with/in NGOs. Furthermore, NGOgraphy scholarship that is applied often collapses the relationships between researcher and the researched and blurs even the most bureaucratically-defined boundaries. Despite communication between myself and the NGO about my role as an academic and positionality in regard to their framework and organizational mission, and their clarity about their positionality and needs, we still experienced friction in trying to develop clear research goals, parameters, and outcomes.

The nexus between informal and formal law is a frustrating space for NGOs, practitioners, and legal actors associated with the state. While memoranda of understanding might formalize the relationships between NGOs and state entities, these are not legally binding agreements. During fieldwork, an alternative justice NGO's MOU with the Department of Corrections (DOC) was struck down by the incoming DOC director. All of the NGO's activities within facilities under purview of the MOU were immediately halted with no indication of when, if ever, they might resume. This certainly has implications for the practitioners and their clients, but also for ethnographic inquiry and collaboration. If I agreed to take on the requestor's project outlined in the first paragraph of this section, would *they* even have access to the institution for the duration of the research? What will happen when the next staff turnover occurs?

The unspoken assumption underpinning their request is that I believe that they are using best practices. My identity as a collaborator in the field is interpreted by practitioners as an advocate of their paradigm. This is compounded by the fact that, in the process of participant observation, I typically have the credentials to resolve conflict at a similar level to some of their own volunteers and paid staff. Even where there are understandings of what research is and the specific methods that might be used in the course of data collection, it is still often unclear to NGO and non-profit practitioners that credentials do not equal advocacy. The misunderstanding of positionality is difficult to undo once entrenched and, in my experience, often becomes entrenched unbeknownst to me. In the context of the 2018 request to 'provide evidence' of their best practices, our collaborative work from 2016-2017 that entailed *pro bono* research, report writing, grant writing, and even constructing a toolkit for best practices for another organization was interpreted by the non-profit leadership as my whole-hearted belief in their efforts as unilaterally 'best' in the field – an interpretation I was blissfully unaware of until that time. Under these conditions, the lack of clarity in our positionality as collaborators, and their lack of clarity about the measures that should be used for the research project, meant that we were unable to continue constructing a project that would meet all of our needs and could be done effectively within their unstable relationships with the DOC.

Opportunities from Collaborating in the Juridical Grey Space

Although there are many overlapping challenges for collaboration, there are also many opportunities for both the researcher and other stakeholders. The most salient, and one which has been detailed elsewhere (Hymes 1972; Lassiter 2005a, 2005b), is the reduction of power asymmetries between the researcher and the researched. Although we cannot make a unilateral claim to better research findings or results, we could likely claim that collaboration cultivates higher quality information among participants and that our findings are more enriching for the practitioners who will utilize that information (see Hale 2001). Collaborative approaches require the active participation of the researched, historically termed 'subjects' or 'informants.' At a fundamental level, collaboration is a social justice endeavour reflected in the transition from 'subject' to 'participant,' 'collaborator' or even 'co-investigator.' Using collaboration as a foundation, ethnographers are pushed to consider and challenge dominant power structures that privilege our education, voice, and capabilities. Our access to and attainment of higher education constructs real or imagined 'expertise' that can be leveraged in particular ways. In my own research contexts, NGOs are often pleased to say that a researcher with a doctorate has collected data evidencing their programs; this is taken seriously by their donors, policymakers, and stakeholders in the legal system with whom they seek to work. When I attended Board of Directors' meetings as part of research projects in 2016-2017, I was often be introduced as 'Dr Reinke' and asked to provide a summary of my work and experience. I have also been able to co-produce knowledge by publishing annual reports and toolkits for best practice with a non-profit executive director, as well as providing independent reports of my research findings back to non-profit leadership to assist in program evaluation. For NGOgraphers, especially those researching social justice topics, working directly with practitioners to develop research scope, questions, methods, and outcomes that are tangible in their benefits and uses to the participants is ideal.

Beginning fieldwork with the range of collaborative ethnographic possibilities in mind, as opposed to tacking on collaboration somewhere midway through, is the key in my experience to the successful collaborative project. Since 2014 I have conducted collaborative ethnographic work with/in NGO contexts. This has only been successful because I begin with a conversation that lays out my own experience and training and ask the question 'Is there anything I can do for you?' Yes, I want to conduct research with them as part of my own academic interest, but I also want that research to be a topic, scope, and methodology that is appropriate and valued by participants, in addition to producing outcomes that are meaningful.

In my research context this makes perfect sense to potential collaborators. Their own justice philosophies demand full and active participation of all parties in conflict and emphasize meaningful dialogue that manages relationships in effective ways. My calls for collaboration that necessitate active participation from all of us, the inclusion of diverse voices throughout their hierarchical institutions, and willingness to renegotiate relationships as issues arose fit into their worldview. The ability of research participants to understand the foundations of the collaborative research process is a privilege in my own work that makes creating and developing projects easier than it might be in other contexts.

Research outcomes are many and highly variable based upon negotiations with the NGO or nonprofit that the NGOgrapher is working with. With regards to my collaborations, research outcomes have taken the form of oral or written findings presentations, grant-writing support, toolkits for best practice, program evaluation, and assistance in writing annual reports. These may be single-authored but are often co-authored with participants. The co-authoring process is perhaps the most difficult for me as an academic – writing often moves slowly and is pitted with the technical yet empty discourse of NGOs (e.g., capacity-building; empowerment). There are many negotiations that occur just in the process of writing a single short piece.

However, in follow-ups with NGOs it is clear that some of these outcomes have been used to inform strategic planning meetings and to change internal policies and procedures. Although the outcomes may not always flatter the NGO, the firm foundation of respect and understanding from the beginning negotiations and throughout the subsequent relationship allows me the freedom to pursue evidence that may critique but also provides substantive information upon which to build. The fact that these are negotiations means that scope of evidence gathered is of interest to the NGO and is generally given serious consideration.

Conclusions

Collaborative ethnographic work has a long and storied history in the discipline, a history which has been recounted elsewhere (Lassiter 2005b). Collaborative ethnographic work with NGOs in particular reaches across academic and applied foci and asks us to construct a research process and set of outcomes *with* research participants, not simply for them. In the process of chopping down the ordinarily hierarchical modelling of relationships between the ethnographer and participants, collaboration becomes the point of success and ‘not simply a fortuitous by-product of work with communities’ (Fluehr-Lobban 2008: 174).

For NGOgraphers the opportunities and possibilities afforded by taking a collaborative ethnographic approach like that outlined by Lassiter is also fraught with challenges. Negotiating formal relationships between ethnographer and the NGO often requires documents, such as MOUs, letters of support, and background checks. The precarious position occupied by NGOs and their workers adds a level of instability to the research as well; high turnover rates and unstable relationships between NGOs, the state, and the communities they seek to serve may make for an uncertain field experience. This is compounded by shifting relationships between various stakeholders and power plays within and between organizations that may jeopardize the negotiations initially agreed upon. The consistent conversations required in order to manage these relationships may also be intellectually, if not emotionally, draining.

In my own work, this manifests as processes of negotiating positionality, responsibilities, methods, and outcomes with an eye towards carefully considering destabilizing the normatively hierarchical relationships between researcher and researched. As an academic, my work is intrinsically shaped by these collaborations. I generally begin a research project by finding collaborators and then proceeding to define collectively the research questions, frameworks, and methods. My writing tends to be more accessible and less theoretically abstruse, and I typically write as many public pieces or NGO reports as I do peer-reviewed academic articles in any given year. I also have more respect for practitioners and the constraints in which they work than I might otherwise if I did not get 'in the trenches' with my participants in every stage and step of their work.

In NGOgraphy writ broad, this endeavour can be difficult as others have elaborated elsewhere (see Lashaw 2013; Lewis 2017; Sampson 2017). Moving forward will require continuing to examine how we can articulate our own position in relation to the NGO, and effectively navigating those relationships in a dynamic and ongoing way. While this may seem daunting, NGOgraphers have been working through this individually and relatively informally amongst one another in casual conversations at conferences. What is needed now are collective conversations, such as that herein, that further explore the potentialities and pitfalls of collaborative ethnographic work in NGO spaces.

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