RESEARCH FOR ALL

Rasool, Z. (2017) 'Collaborative working practices: Imagining better research partnerships'. *Research for All*, 1 (2): 310–22. DOI https://doi.org/10.18546/RFA.01.2.08

Collaborative working practices: Imagining better research partnerships

Zanib Rasool* – *University of Sheffield, UK*

Abstract

Collaborative research can bring communities to the heart of social research and provide a lens on the everyday experiences of ordinary people living extraordinary lives, capturing the funds of knowledge held in communities that exist outside the corridors of education institutions. If delivered in an ethical way, co-production can empower communities and elevate voices that traditionally have been on the margins. Through collaboration, we can bridge the knowledge gap that exists between communities and universities and raise community aspirations.

Keywords: co-production; communities; ethical way of working; creative methodology; marginalized voices

Key messages

- Universities need to create more research opportunities for co-production with community partners to gain a better insight into community identities, faiths, cultures and histories, and everyday interactions and different ways of knowing.
- Co-production is a democratic form of knowledge creation and a more ethical way of working with communities that feels less like 'doing things to communities'.
- Utilizing creative arts methods is an effective way to engage the voices of marginalized women and girls by bringing them into research through artistic approaches, such as poetry, art, photography and drama.

Introduction

In this article, I will share my experience of a five-year collaborative research project involving four British universities and a network of community partners across the country, some of whom were novices to research like myself. I was involved in the initial development of the University of Sheffield research strand, 'The social, historical, cultural and democratic context of civic engagement: Imagining different communities and making things happen' (known as the Imagine project), before it was submitted to the Arts and Humanities Research Council/Economic and Social Research Council (AHRC/ESRC) Connected Communities programme.

The Imagine project connected communities to research through arts practices, storytelling, writing, poetry and visual images, using arts to understand the everyday language and literacy practices of different communities in Rotherham. Our chosen arts methodologies helped us to create aesthetic ways of visualizing community

*Email: zanib007@aol.com

knowledge and of exploring the histories of a steel town, and its diverse identities and cultures, capturing experiences of migration and the language of racism, and bringing synergy to co-production through partnerships.

The Imagine project was funded by the Connected Communities programme, which was launched in 2010 by Research Councils UK and the AHRC to encourage collaboration between universities, community organizations, community researchers and artists to draw on expertise across disciplines and within communities. The funding application was made by the universities of Sheffield, Durham, Huddersfield, Brighton and Edinburgh, each of which identified partners within their own region and worked with those partners to write their work package strand of the project. Once funding was secured, we held a large number of local partnership planning meetings and awaydays. All five universities and partners also met at residential events and shared learning.

Each university was assigned a work package on the Imagine project. Our work package explored the cultural lives of communities, through reviewing previous histories and oral histories with older generations, and through writing and creating cultural capital. The key for all project strands was to focus on hope and imagining better communities, and making them happen, focusing on communities of practice, resilience, community development, community histories, community arts, visual narratives and creative writing.

The aim of the Imagine research was to bring community partners to co-produce research, involving them in all stages of research from design to methodology and dissemination. The approach sought to widen community participation in research, exploring new and innovative ways for universities and community partners to work collaboratively. The project had four main research questions:

1. What are the best ways of thinking about, researching and promoting connected communities that can accommodate social and economic differences and diverse opinions?
2. What does the history of civic engagement tell us about how and why the social, historical, culture and democratic context matters to community-building?
3. What role can imagining better futures play in capturing and sustaining enthusiasm for change?
4. Is community research being transformed by developments in social research methodology, particularly the development of collaborative methods?

My project

My project explored the cultural context of civic engagement. I focused on writing in the community, and took on input and ideas from partners who attended initial partnership meetings. I investigated how women develop resilient, intellectual and creative identities in a post-industrial, 'masculine' environment in Rotherham through writing, with a focus on creating cultures of resilience and transformation.

To do this, I was the community researcher on three ethnographic writing projects involving girls and women, creating safe spaces for them to write during a time of social and political unrest at home and abroad. Through writing, the women and girls I worked with explored the narratives of Rotherham's minority ethnic women's lives in social and cultural contexts. The Imagine project brought minority women into the heart of research to share their stories of migration, identity and hope.

We set up three groups in the community. These were:

1. A women's writing group at Mowbray Gardens Library – a small community library in Rotherham. The group wrote about their experiences of life, domestic violence, oppression, patriarchy, inequality and also hope. This was a global perspective, as the women came from different parts of the world and had made Rotherham their home. Through writing, they voiced their discontent.
2. Thornhill School women's group – a group of women who were parents of children at Thornhill Primary School in Rotherham. This parents' group was set up at the school to support parents into first-step learning and to encourage greater parent involvement in school life. The parents attending this group produced a herbal medicine book, sharing family recipes that had been passed down through generations.
3. Girl's poetry and art – a group of Pakistani-heritage girls who wrote poetry and Roma/Slovak girls who, through creative art, explored their identity. This group came together through a community centre in Rotherham. The girls' group worked with a poet, Helen Mort, and me. They wrote about issues that impacted on their lives, giving voice to young women's concerns and, through writing, visualizing their hopes of a better future.

Partners working together on the project

The partner organizations I worked with were chosen by me because we share the same values and ethos of supporting minority communities, and we all work (in our day jobs) with minority communities. We are value-driven individuals who in our work challenge inequalities and recognize the need to listen to community voices. I agree with Hutchins *et al.* (2013) that the decision to enter collaboration is influenced by a number of factors, including the perceived benefits of the collaboration and the participants' trust in the organization (Hutchins *et al.*, 2013: 3751).

The partners included: Clifton Learning Partnership who supported the Roma community, addressing the issues of deprivation, diversity and poverty within a particular locality of Rotherham; Mowbray Gardens Library, which has become a community learning hub for migrant communities, enabling them to improve their English-language skills and computer skills, and to receive information and advice; and the Friends of Thornhill School.

I had existing relationships with all the partners and Imagine helped to strengthen those links. I discussed the project idea with the partners, who helped to engage some of the women and girls. One of the biggest challenges was finding the right space – a safe space to engage women and girls. I see safe spaces as being enshrined in the everyday, where new knowledge is being created and shared. A school, a library and a community building became such spaces, which enabled the project to be carried out. Therefore, another benefit of the partnership was that all the partner organizations had buildings. The university was an integral partner that organized regular partner meetings and invited us to discuss Imagine at conferences. All partners were invited to Imagine awaydays hosted by the university, which helped community partners to gain a better understanding of the project and the work being carried out by the other partner universities, who we met at Imagine events. Professor Kate Pahl was the principal investigator for the Sheffield strand, and she has wide experience of working with communities. I met Kate regularly to talk through my ideas, I emailed her for advice and she acted as a critical friend and pointed me to a number of studies and writing that helped me develop my methodology.

Partnerships were also made with poets. The writing group girls worked with the poet Helen Mort. A workshop was delivered at the women's library writing group by Debjani Chatterjee, who shared her poetry exploring gender, patriarchy and women's identity. There is real value in artists, writers and poets coming together with universities and community researchers to create living knowledge by directly working in the field and capturing, through a diverse lens, moments that would otherwise often go unnoticed. Schutte talks of 'women needing creative language of their own to write their embodied position as women' (2011: 48). Poetry created a space for women and girls to write.

Methodology

We used arts-based methodologies to explore the cultural context of civic engagement. There is a growing interest in the 'use of creative or arts-based methods in social research that is opening a space outside of the boundaries of traditional methods of data gathering; developing creative, public and novel modes of doing imaginative and critical sociological research' (Back and Puwar, 2012: 18). Our project drew on this approach.

I chose poetry as my main method of data collection in capturing the emotional experiences in the lives of my female participants. The rationale for this included my own love of poetry and writing but also the fact that I have found that poetry captures raw emotions in a way that interviews often cannot. I was interested in studying the daily practices of women and girls from minority communities, and the role I can play in this. It is recognized that social researchers can 'cross boundaries and study our own indigenous culture and offer insider interpretations of the materials' (Kassam and Bashuna, 2004: 211), and this is what I sought to do.

The visual strand of the project explored visual culture, the identities and complex emotions offering us a diverse lens through which to view our understanding of people and communities. In a hostile environment, this co-production allowed us collectively to challenge racist ideologies and the current divisive political narrative. It was challenged through the artists on the project, including Zahir Rafiq, whose portraits of young Muslims living in contemporary British society explore secular identities through art. The artist Shaheen Shah, who also worked with us, provided images of migration and the trajectories of travel: a suitcase containing reminders of home; the young bride leaving her home to come to a dark and dismal place called Britain to build a better life for her children; the sacrifices our mothers made. South Asian artists are best placed to share stories of their heritage and their vision for the future. Imagine has given recognition to artists from my community, so we can see the world through their emic gaze - that is through their own terms rather than those of any other culture or system of knowledge.

Emerging themes

During the research, key themes started to emerge relating to community-engaged research. These were:

1. knowledge and the way it is valued
2. defining the role of universities and community partnerships in collaborations
3. empowering communities as agents of change.

I will explore these in turn.

Knowledge and the way it is valued

After 30 years of working in the community, I advocate the view that everybody holds the key to knowledge. It can be found in every community and every house in the land, although we put different value on that knowledge. People in our communities have life experiences and cultural experiences. Through these they acquire their own knowledge base, and we should not disregard this when we work with communities. Through this project we were able to celebrate 'funds of knowledge' (González *et al.*, 2005) in our community.

The question of what is legitimate knowledge is often argued and contested. We recognize that knowledge is hierarchal and stratified, with community knowledge often being considered to have a lower ranking than other forms of knowledge, such as academic knowledge. It can help to explore the work of Gibbons *et al.* (1994), which identifies different modes of knowledge production. Mode 1 is generated within a discipline, is accumulated through professionalization, is largely institutionalized, homogeneous and hierarchal, and is exclusively based in universities. It is usually given primacy over other knowledge. Mode 2 is trans-disciplinary, and is developed within social and economic contexts outside of higher educational institutions. It is seen as heterogeneous, hybrid, demand driven and network embedded. Community knowledge is often demand driven because individuals in the community need to acquire new knowledge in order to survive the everyday, for example applying for a job on the Universal Jobmatch website or bidding for a council house online. A lot of knowledge in communities is acquired through established networks in which knowledge cascades down from one organization or individual to another, thus creating a ripple effect. Communities are where political, cultural and social knowledge is created and histories are made.

We have to change how we perceive communities and give community knowledge the position it rightfully deserves on the so-called 'ladder of knowledge'. Before we tell individuals from minority backgrounds to speak English, we need to ask them what they already know. We need to respect the knowledge they possess already and put value on that knowledge, rather than pushing it aside because it does not fit with the knowledge favoured by education institutions. The colonialist way in which we sometimes work with new communities is disempowering. For me, Imagine has helped resurface community knowledge in the form of poetry and text, art and music, oral storytelling and artefacts in the home. We often forget that a rich tapestry of knowledge exists in our communities.

Working on the Imagine project made me question the validity of knowledge:

- Why is certain knowledge seen as being more important than other knowledge?
- Which knowledge is considered legitimate and who decides its importance?
- How is it decided which knowledge is relevant to communities and at what level? Do we share all of this knowledge or just a 'dumbed down' version, because we believe that people in communities will not be able to grasp it all?
- How can we reposition communities and their knowledge so they are not just passive recipients but agents for change?

Threads of Time: Art activities

As part of my work on Imagine, I undertook a small-scale research project (funded by AHRC's Connected Communities Festival 2016) and worked with Pakistani and Roma girls aged 11 to 19. The Threads of Time project explored minority ethnic girls' identity and their understanding of citizenship linked to place, culture, faith, history and

tradition, and examined what it means to be British. This type of research increases our understanding of how minority ethnic girls see themselves, and has been an under-researched area. The research questions were formed around British identity and the national narrative, exploring cultural heritage and how young people identify themselves, links to the past and visualizing a better future. Participants repositioned themselves using their personal lenses, thus defining their own citizenship captured through methods of creative writing and visual arts.

The Threads of Time project enabled a group of girls to explore identity and Britishness using minority ethnic young women's lenses. There have been a number of far-right marches in Rotherham, and the Union Jack is still being used as a symbol of far-right extremism, so it was important to explore the impact of that on minority ethnic girls. The girls talked at great length about all the things that they consider define Britain, their region, Yorkshire, and their home town, Rotherham: the rainy weather; the Queen; lambs and tulips in spring; Yorkshire fish and chips; the Yorkshire rose and Clifton Park in Rotherham. A Union Jack was created that contained images contributed by the whole group (see Figure 1). On the large flag, they added images of all the things they saw as defining Britain today. The girls talked about going to London, seeing red buses, black cabs, the London Eye, red postboxes and Big Ben. They talked about the diversity of Britain, and symbols representing Islam, Judaism, Christianity and festival celebrations such as Eid, Diwali and Christmas were included, as were images of hands covered in henna patterns. They also linked these things to their teenage identity, fashion and Jamaican music. The Muslim girls included an image on the flag of a young girl wearing the hijab. The Asian girls talked about Britain being multicultural and diverse: 'you have more freedom here'. They talked about wearing the hijab: 'I choose to wear the hijab, I like wearing it, when you wear it you are identified as a Muslim and it makes me feel protected'.

Figure 1: The Union Jack ('Threads of Time')

Credit: Shaheen Shah

During my research, I was able to use prompt questions to explore further why particular images were included on the flag, and this opened up further verbal communication with the Roma girls, who were able to give descriptive answers despite their limited English. Art is a powerful methodological tool that placed minority young women at the centre of research pedagogy.

Threads of Time: Poetry

Writing can also resurface hidden emotions. In Rotherham, young people are having a difficult time and experiencing a great deal of upheaval. Writing gave the girls the opportunity to express the issues that impact on them, and gave them a coping strategy through putting into words their feelings and emotions. One of the participants could not meet her friend in town one Saturday because there was a march organized by far-right political groups. She sat in her garden that day and wrote down her frustration about another march by the English Defence League (EDL):

> I write this sitting at home as EDL have disrupted another Saturday and created tension between communities long after they are gone, which hardly seems fair. We live in a democracy which is something we all value and the EDL have the right to peacefully protest and express their opinions but for the past few years they've been doing it in our small town. The EDL's motto is 'Not racist, not violent, and no longer silent'. Does anybody else see the irony in this? 'Not racist' EDL is a fascist group who are clearly Islamophobic; they are not silent when they are hurling racial abuse.
>
> (Threads of Time participant, 2016)

The girls' poetry group explored their identity, and produced some powerful poems and artwork on the identity of Muslim girls at a time when the world is hostile towards Muslims (see Box 1).

Box 1: My hijab, my choice

> When I started Year 7, I was the only person who wore the hijab. I wasn't really comfortable but now I have got used to it. Nobody really says anything to me, so I feel comfortable in it. Wearing it for one year and a couple of months I feel that it is a part of me. If I went out without my scarf, I'd feel like there is something missing. I'm happy to wear the headscarf, so if other people have an issue, it's their problem.
>
> (Threads of Time participant, 2016)

Figure 2: Self-portrait

Hopkins and Greenwood found in their study that wearing the hijab made Muslim identity more visible and that women saw the 'wearing of the hijab as an attempt to control one's categorization by others and to self-categorize' (2013: 445). I found the girls were proud of their Muslim identity, that alongside it they had adopted more global identities linked to travel, social media, food, fashion and music, and that they did not like to be categorized. They were citizens of the world, rather than 'British' or 'Pakistani'. Pente *et al.* argue 'that understanding people's lives, emotions and intellectual reasoning is crucial to explaining national identity and that the co-production of historical knowledge, provides an approach or methodology that allows for a deeper comprehension of people's self-identities (2015: 33). Our project provided an opportunity for young women to contribute their insights and knowledge, and reflect on their own identities.

The Threads of Time project challenged the current narrative of British citizenship as a unified concept. The girls' experiences are different to those of the policymakers. These different ways of knowing and seeing the world mean that the girls' citizenship was global and that currently the policy on British identity is too narrowly defined. The future that the young women's writing group imagined was linked to globalism, technology, place and multiculturalism. The one-culture pedagogy currently being taught in our schools did not resonate with their everyday experiences as young women from a minority ethnic background.

Defining the role of universities and community partnerships in collaborations

Universities today are working in a more ethical and just way with minority communities than was perhaps the case in the past. Research collaboration should be about capacity building – giving community members the tools to understand the dynamics within their own communities. Hart *et al.* (2013) argue that collaboration 'provides a particular lens and orientation to relevant issues, a mechanism for potential knowledge production', further adding that 'to be successful consideration must be given to how knowledge is used, exchanged, managed, contested within communities of practices' (Hart *et al.*, 2013: 3–4). However, in the past, collaboration has been used as a vehicle to secure knowledge from communities, and communities were given no ownership of that knowledge. Patti Lather (1986) is quoted by Sikes referring to 'rape research', where 'the researcher goes into the research setting, gets what they want and then leaves, never to return and giving nothing in return' (Sikes, 2004: 29).

Tuhiwai Smith (2012) argues that 'from the vantage point of the colonized, the term "research" is inextricably linked with European colonialism':

> … the West can extract and claim ownership of our way of knowing, our imagery, the things we create and produce, and then reject the people who created and developed those ideas and seek to deny them further opportunities to be creators of their own culture. Knowledge collected, classified and represented back to the West, through the eyes of the West.
> (Tuhiwai Smith, 2012: 1)

Tuhiwai Smith advocates for inclusion in research. One way to achieve this is through collaborative projects such as Imagine, where communities become part of the research team, and where research skills are left in those communities to enable them to make sense of their own lives. It can be argued that co-production champions new approaches by both practitioners and researchers, and a blending of roles, serving to

recognize multiple forms of capability, expertise, and ways of knowing' (Campbell *et al.*, 2016: 1262).

In order to understand this better, two of the community partners on the Imagine project share their experiences:

> Working across the Imagine project was both interesting and frustrating. Professor Kate Pahl [principal investigator on the Imagine project] had asked me what I would like to do on the project, so I was involved in the initial planning and proposal. I asked to be artist in residence across the whole project but I wasn't really sure what this would involve. Over the four years I did do quite a lot and I got an amazing insight into different aspects of the project. This came together at the events in Brighton, Durham, Huddersfield and Sheffield but I only really seemed to get noticed when I had a specific role that resulted in an output, such as photographs, an exhibition or a film. It hadn't been my intention for this to happen and I kept thinking I would make some sort of artwork about hope and communities and futures as part of my role in the project but for all sorts of reasons this didn't happen.
>
> I have kept a joint research blog with Kate Pahl, which has been very valuable for working through ideas and thinking, and I have been involved in some writing and conferences. The project has also led into many other things, like a recent conference on utopia and some of my work with community organizations. One learning I will take away with me is that if I had my time again on the project I would probably of invested more time in shaping expectations into what my role was and set clear boundaries around what I was able to do and contribute. Then again, it would be impossible to do this at the start of a project as the trick is to adapt and shape things to needs as you go along.

Shaheen Shah, artist on the Imagine project, writes:

> Imagine gave opportunities to South Asian artists like myself to work with university academics and develop different research tools to gain an understanding of the lives of people being researched, capturing our past history and journey and the possible future. An artist's own experience is central to the artwork they produce; the artist also situates herself in the experience of others in order to understand those emotions people feel, the fear and pain invested in the drawing and paintings, capturing participant's experiences with every brushstroke or every photograph; whatever the medium, art is another way of telling stories. This is an innovative way of working within different disciplines.

Shaheen's artwork captures the essence of the journey of a young bride from Pakistan (see Figure 3).

Figure 3: *The Bride* (Imagine)

Credit: artist – Shaheen Shah

Collaboration also relies on 'cooperative relations' (Lassiter, 2008: 73), and it can become challenging working with people from different disciplines and communities who have different expectations from the research. These expectations have to be managed or cooperation can be jeopardized. One key recommendation is to have regular briefings with facilitators and volunteers, so that any disagreements can be resolved early on. Critical self-reflexivity is also very important. Pajalic argues that self-reflection is crucial as a 'catalyst for learning oneself' (2015: 105). One's personal trajectory can prejudice one's vision of the world and influence the research, and researchers need to be mindful of this

The most exciting part of the project for me was the collective writing of our findings. The importance of co-producing text is argued by Lassiter (2005), who reflects that it is only recently that 'collaborative ethnography which encourages collaboration in both research and writing has begun to move more systematically from the field's margins to the centre' (Lassiter, 2005: 96). Every member of the Imagine Rotherham team contributed to the writing of the Imagine book. At our editorial meetings in 2016, Beth Campbell, the lead editor, talked of the expectations of different audiences, the community celebrating their social and cultural experiences through text, and the special events that linked to community cohesion.

Empowering communities as agents of change

The Imagine collaboration has enabled me to question how educators and institutions work with individuals and communities. The project gave me an opportunity to reflect, meet with the university partners and talk through my ontological positioning. This way of working is very empowering for community partners. It provides an opportunity to have ownership of the research and some control over how it is developed, synthesized, expressed and used. I was lucky to work with Kate Pahl, of the University of Sheffield, on

the Imagine research, whose early career in community development is similar to mine; she is someone who understands communities. I learned that collaboration requires empathy, patience, compromise, listening, teamwork and commitment to making a difference to the lives of the communities, and that research has to make an impact.

Community partners are experts on communities; they live and breathe communities. During the course of the Imagine project, the communities of Rotherham experienced a rise in hate crime, public discourses about Muslims that further isolated them, and the impact of welfare reform on poorer neighbourhoods. Imagine captures community resourcefulness and resilience. The learning has been shared with policymakers at Imagine events attended by representatives of the Department of Communities and Local Government. Community partners presented their findings at those events and advocated for their communities. Again, without the involvement of universities it would not have been possible for community partners to talk directly to policymakers. As a Muslim woman, it gave me an opportunity to challenge some of the current dangerous narratives about my community, and to put on record our contribution to British life.

I believe that through co-production we can bridge the knowledge gap that exists between communities and universities, and raise community aspirations. If you work in these ways, it is important to leave communities in a stronger position. Therefore, one question researchers looking at collaborative projects need to ask themselves is: When we go back to our universities, what do we leave behind for the community we have been working with? One of the legacies of Imagine is that, while the project was being delivered, some of the community researchers enrolled on doctoral programmes with the universities with which they had been working, and are now being mentored by the academics who they had been working with. This builds the capacity of individuals in communities to research their own communities and bring a more diverse lens to the field of research.

In 2016, at our Imagine book-writing awayday, I met two renowned academics from the USA, Luke Eric Lassiter and Beth Campbell, two of the editors of *The Other Side of Middletown*, a collaborative ethnographic study of the African American community of Muncie, Indiana, which involved collaboration between academics, local people and college students. Eric and Beth have written about their experience of collaborative research, calling it 'advancing reciprocal learning and democratic civil engagement' (Campbell and Lassiter, 2010: 371). I feel that collaborative research contributes to building communities from within, an assets-based approach in which universities give people in the community the tools to facilitate and bring about positive social change within their own community through research. After the Imagine project, the Mowbray Gardens Library group set up a writing group, the Thornhill group were involved in Rotherham Carnival and Love is Louder, an arts and craft project that promoted community cohesion, and some of the Muslim girls from the writing group went on to do the 'Building Bridges' project around anti-racism, using arts and poetry to challenge racism.

Conclusion

Imagine has shown me that we have to work with communities from their knowledge base. Co-production is an ethical way of working with communities and is not 'doing things to communities'. The paradigm of collaboration is an innovative way of working in which everyone's knowledge is given equal status and knowledge exchange becomes a two-way channel, rather than a one-way flow of information from academics.

I strongly advocate for collaborative research but only if it is an equal partnership at all stages, from the initial framing of the research, to its methodological design, the interpretation of the data and the write-up the findings. I have been involved at all of these stages. Facer and Enright argue that collaboration between universities and community organizations leads to the 'creation of a new public knowledge landscape' (2016: 7). Collaboration helps challenge negative assumptions about communities, and community research can be transformed for the better by collaboration, as it creates a common purpose and shared values, and empowers communities and puts them at the heart of research. Women have an important role in research leading to the building of a strong and cohesive civic society.

Notes on the contributor

Zanib Rasool MBE is currently studying for a Doctoral in Education on the EdD programme at the University of Sheffield. Her thesis will be on multilingualism and community knowledge. She is a community researcher on the university's collaborative project, 'The social, historical, cultural and democratic context of civic engagement: Imagining different communities and making them happen', funded by the AHRC/ESRC Connected Communities programme. She is also co-editor of a forthcoming book, *Re-Imagining Contested Communities: Connecting Rotherham through research*.

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