

43. How to Practically Co-Laborate? Opportunities and Obstacles of Collaborative Research within academia (Workshop)

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Since the Writing Culture debate, anthropologists have been questioning their role in ethnographic knowledge production. In the wake of postcolonial theory, global power relations and possibilities of decolonial research practice have been discussed. In response, forms of collaborative and participatory research have been developed. In this context, Jörg Niewöhner (2016), for instance, proposes the notion of co-laboration as the co-constitution of knowledge through and for different formats. Such co-produced knowledge enables critical, collaborative engagement and thus validation of findings. As "situated knowledge" (Haraway 1988), the outcome of co-laborative practice counters the often one-dimensional, epistemic mode of academic knowledge production.

Despite extensive theoretical engagement and an overall sensitivity to the need for collaborative knowledge production, anthropologists nevertheless often seem unable to do justice to their claims in practice. Attempts to work collaboratively often fail due to structural constraints or concrete local conditions. It becomes clear that collaborative/participatory research - understood as research 'together with' - is not necessarily able to eliminate the reproduction of knowledge along hegemonic, postcolonial structures.

Based on practical experiences of collaborative research, we would like to explore opportunities and obstacles for collaborative knowledge production within academia – be it interdisciplinary or within international scientific projects. To what extent can such research bring about societal transformation, and what structural obstacles (e.g., funding logic, academic bureaucracy, social norms) do they encounter? How can potentially contradictory forms of knowledge be made compatible within the collaboration as well as politically productive to 'the outside'? Moreover, what can we learn from these experiences in relation to a decolonial research practice?

Confronting Power Asymmetry in Knowledge Production: Lessons from Intercultural Collaborative Research

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This paper adopts a horizontal collaborative approach to research and knowledge production. It critiques conventional approaches to intercultural collaboration and explores ways to overcome structural and practical challenges often inherent in North-South collaboration.

The paper draws on the collaboration in the research project “Communication during and after COVID-19: (re)producing social inequalities and/or opportunities among African migrants in the United Arab Emirates and China”. The study involves scholars from the Global South and North as well as members of the communities under study in the two fieldsites. The paper adopts a critical, self-reflexive approach and draws on Homi Bhabha’s concepts of third space and hybridity in its analysis. It aims at making an empirically grounded contribution to the broader debate on collaborative and decolonial knowledge production.

Collaborative research in the Global South: De-colonizing expectations and disciplines

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Participative anthropology aims to integrate non-academic actors, engage in ‘knowledge translation’ between academic and non-academic discourses and induce social change. However, participative research in the Global South is challenged due to structural constraints, strong hierarchies and different expectations. Drawing on my involvement as a researcher in land conflicts in Central Kalimantan, Indonesia, I critically discuss power relations, positionalities, different assumptions on participation and impacts on social change. Moreover, I outline diverse interdisciplinary approaches of collaborative research coming from anthropology, sustainability science and transdisciplinary research which often stand alone. However, mutual exchange and integration is necessary, especially when working on strategies for collaborative research in the fields of global challenges such as climate change or the loss of biodiversity. I argue that not only individual expectations but also disciplinary approaches have to be critically discussed and de-colonized.

Learning by doing it together: Insights from a design-anthropological para-site

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Our contribution discusses experiences we – a design-anthropological collective – have had over the last three years. We are concerned with questions of collaboration between research partners from design (Lena & Luisa) and ethnographer (Isabella). Our collaboration emerged from Isabella's ethnographic research on designer's work cultures. We therefore understand our experience as rooted in "collaborative ethnography" (Lassiter 2005) and "para-ethnography" (Holmes & Marcus 2005): During fieldwork, we began to work collaboratively on (design) projects which changed the ethnographic setting: We encountered each other as "counterparts rather than others" and engaged in "epistemic partnerships" (Marcus 2008). By experimenting with methods from design and anthropology, our collaboration became a "para-site" (idib: 8). Since spring 2020, we have grown even closer through the intensive work on our participatory urban-activist project [StadtTagebücher Würzburg](#): We went from being research partners to being activists, co-authors, accomplices, friends and researchers who produce knowledge together. We have experienced that collaborative interventions empower us, create change and that writing/designing together is a great tool for (self)reflection/creativity. However, our multimodal experiments often do not fit into standard academic publication formats or do not accord to academic (examination) regulations. Given these challenges, we negotiate how academia conditions the exclusion of collaborative knowledge production, thereby solidifying hegemonic, anthropological practices (Escobar & Restrepo 2010: 87).

What is anthropological analysis good for? Additive-ity in studies of/with bioscience

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Contemporary challenges such as escalating climate disasters and the Covid pandemic make it increasingly urgent for natural and social scientists to find ways to work together. Yet, despite numerous efforts to collaborate, researchers often tend to confront each other across a disciplinary divide of skepticism, and perceived contradictory epistemologies and aims (Carlson 2022, Moats & Seaver 2019).

After first arguing for a critical sociological analysis of bioscience (Latour & Woolgar 1979), Bruno Latour later asserted that social scientists should turn away from the “sword of criticism” to attend to “multiplication, not subtraction” (2004, p. 248). Based on ethnographic research in a Japanese bioscientific laboratory, I review the difficulties anthropologists continue to face in practically realizing multiplication or “co-laboration” in the field (Niewöhner 2016). Building on Bieler et al.’s argument for “epistemic reflexivity” (2021), I propose the concept of additive-ity to outline, first, the ways cross-disciplinary epistemologies must be seen as always already overlapping. Second, I argue that additive practices and training in anthropology are necessary to position researchers in relation to ongoing conversations in the natural sciences. Thus, additive-ity argues for a broad scale perspective shift in both theory and practice, requiring reciprocal educational and institutional change, ideally across disciplines.