

Conducting Research in Other Countries

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Abstract:

Over the years, we have participated in interdisciplinary collaborations with colleagues from various countries and disciplines as wide ranging as engineering, urban planning, architecture, medicine, and theology. As a result, we have learned a great deal about crossing not only disciplinary boundaries but also about the negotiations involved in the international research process. Along the way, we have found that collaborating with colleagues from other nations is one of the most rewarding parts of our academic careers. It takes a great deal of personal and administrative energy, but when it works the process has enriched us in ways that are difficult to enumerate. In this chapter we hope to provide the reader with a summary of some of what we have learned in the process of conducting international collaborative research. In every project we have undertaken, we have learned as much from our mistakes as from our successes. Some of the experiences were painful, others humbling, and some humorous, while yet others provided us with unexpected insights into our profession and ourselves. The sections below are a compilation of the collective wisdom we have gathered in that process. We note that we bring to this chapter our North American perspective and primarily rely on our experience working with colleagues in less wealthy countries. There are of course challenges inherent in work with colleagues in other wealthy countries, some of which are similar and some of which are different from the challenges discussed here.

Keywords: international research | interdisciplinary collaboration | collaborative research | cultural difference

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BRINGING COLLEAGUES FROM FOREIGN COUNTRIES INTO RESEARCH PROJECTS: TRUE COLLABORATION ACROSS BORDERS

There are several concerns we keep in mind when undertaking a project across cultural and national boundaries: collaboration, financial issues, language, validity, protection for human participants, engaging the study community, and being a guest researcher.

The Colleague Facilitator

Our first step in carrying out international collaborative work is putting together a research team that can truly help us get the project completed. In doing so, it is important to find someone who has experience working with government and research personnel in the place where we will carry out our project. This might not be a person in our discipline. What is important is that local colleagues have experience working through the bureaucratic, political, and cultural issues that are involved with research in the target area. We look for a colleague who is able to spend the time guiding our project through the local system. An individual who has spent time on the faculty at a local university is ideal. We often find that our collaborator is able to give our conclusions and analysis a “reality check,” placing our analysis in a context with which we may not be experienced. For further reading about collaborative research, we recommend Stull and Schensul (1987) and LeCompte, Schensul, Weeks, and Merrill (1999).

Reward Mechanisms

One of the first issues we often confront, and admit it is still a difficult one for us to overcome, involves differences in avenues for professional advancement between us and foreign colleagues. In many non-Western nations, advancement is not based on the number of publications or research grants but rather on seniority and the contract negotiated between the union and the administration. Academics in many countries do not earn enough to maintain their family and are working secondary jobs in order to make ends meet. Academics often consider such grants as an opportunity for supplemental pay. In many institutions in Africa, Asia, the Middle East, Latin America, and eastern Europe, there is no mechanism comparable to augment fixed salaries with external grant funding, as is the norm in North American academic institutions. This often means

that not only must we find creative ways to compensate local collaborators, but that we must also work with the financial disbursement structure of the institution managing the relevant compensation portion of the grant so that the financial relationship is acceptable to local colleagues.

Differences in Training, Research, and Professional Expectations

The implicit hierarchical structure within the Western academic tradition has at times made it difficult to bring foreign colleagues into every stage of the research process. First, the power differential between the principal investigator and all other participants in a project is exacerbated when the study is funded in a wealthy country but carried out in a foreign locale, particularly if we are working with colleagues in one of the secondary institutions in a nation where academic research funds tend to be focused at a single leading national university. It is helpful to remember that our location in a Western institution has allowed us a privileged position. However, this does not necessarily afford us access to the research site. Also, we try to remember that our colleagues are the persons who give us access to participants in *their* country and, as such, also have a more nuanced understanding of how research is conducted in their country.

One point worth reinforcing is that one should try not to become too focused on formal faculty degrees. In many places in the world, individuals with what in the United States would be considered an honors BA degree are teaching and doing research at major universities. In our experience, this is one of the hardest obstacles for Western-trained academics to overcome. We are bound to our notion that a PhD or other advanced degree confers authority over others who have not achieved that status. Investigators working with colleagues in other environments need to remember that there are different norms in other settings that may determine academic tenure, rank, and the criteria for promotion. In many countries promotion and/or salary increases are not based on one's academic track record. Instead, they are commonly based on longevity and service to the institution. Publications are secondary, as is research. Service, on the other hand, is primary. We try to keep in mind that only wealthy nations can afford the luxury of what we call "basic" science, and we try to be prepared to respond to foreign colleagues' questions about the project's benefit.

CHALLENGES IN STUDY DESIGN AND IMPLEMENTATION

Institutional Review Board Clearance and Informed Consent

In a foreign context, this can be a challenging and culturally loaded issue. We are not surprised if the local institutional review board (IRB) is more concerned with issues of relevance than with confidentiality and compensation to the participants. It may be concerned with the origin of the funding and who in the United States will be the ultimate recipient of the data. That is to say, the local IRB may be concerned with the possible harmful use of data not only against an individual, but also its institution or the nation. We try to answer such questions directly and honestly. In most of the places we work, there is much stronger awareness of the link between research and political and economic ideology than that to which we are normally willing to admit in Western science.

Privacy and associated stress and harm are cultural constructs. For example, in the United States we see domestic violence as a private matter, something to be dealt with between husband, wife, and the authorities—not as a public issue. In many places, domestic violence is a public issue. Men and women know when it is happening; they talk about it, and often it is because of this social collective pressure that change occurs, not because the spouse had to spend time in the local jail. In such situations it is much more stressful to “keep a secret” than to discuss it publicly. In many contexts the very act of placing the individual in a secluded environment will raise the level of anxiety and stress. Our participant may be concerned about what others are thinking about him or her, the community, or other family members behind those closed doors. These are real concerns. We cannot expect assurances of confidentiality either to the subject or to his or her family and community to alleviate these concerns. They will not. However, this is an opportunity to develop creative and sensitive ways to meet our IRB obligations. For further reading about issues of informed consent, see Fleischman, Collogan, and Tuma (Chapter 5, this volume) and Dunn and Chadwick (2002).

Informed consent and permission is another issue to be addressed. In many parts of the world, people are reluctant to sign anything because, more often than not, their signature on a piece of paper has resulted in harm rather than protection. What would a Mayan during the dirty war in Central America have thought if a stranger had come up and had asked him or her to read a document and to sign the line at the bottom, indicating that he or she understood the form and was in agreement? In all probability, the Mayan would either have refused to sign simply because he or she did not trust us or perhaps believed the researcher to be a collaborator with the military or government.

Clearly, we are not suggesting that one should not secure informed consent; we simply ensure that we do so in a manner that is consistent with the cultural constructs of the community with which we are working while at the same time meeting the needs of our own IRB. This is often a multitiered, time-consuming process, but the last thing we want is to have a community leader stop us and question our activities. Our explanation that the mayor gave his blessing to our study will not be sufficient. He will want to know why we did not stop by and see him before starting our work. Our recommendation is to ask for advice from local contacts about the appropriate way to obtain these forms. Our experience is that if a participant asks about authorization to do research, what he or she wants to know is not if the Ministry of Health has approved the study but whether we have talked with the president of the local community organization or the village elder and whether they have approved it. It saves a great deal of difficulty when we take the time to learn how local processes of authority and community structures serve to protect their citizenry.

Participant Compensation

Compensation for participants in research projects in host countries can be a complex issue. Undoubtedly, people’s time and effort should be acknowledged and recognized. We are constantly reminded by our IRB guidelines to specifically spell out the amount and type of compensation that we will provide for participants. At the same time, we are admonished to make sure that we are not coercing people into participating in our studies. When we conduct

research with low-income or vulnerable populations, we are also aware of the potential coercive nature of any incentives or the level of compensation offered. If we are offering \$10 for 2 hours of work to a person in a country in which the daily wage is \$5, it will be difficult for a person to turn down the opportunity, even if he or she would prefer not to participate. Incentives and compensation for study participants should definitely be decided after consultation with colleagues in each host country, and deference should always be given to local customs.

Use of Appropriate and Comprehensible Language

Language is critical. We assume that language is relatively constant and universal—English is English, Spanish is Spanish, French is French, or Hindi is Hindi. Nothing could be further from the truth. The internal variation within a language is extraordinary. In some places, one version of the language is spoken by the elite, and another is spoken by the common people. In other cases, a particular word may be different from one location to another. An instrument devised in the United States is generally not appropriate for work in Australia. Whether using romance languages spoken over large areas of the globe (e.g., Spanish, French, and English) or native languages spoken in several localities or regions of a continent (e.g., Swahili, Hindi, and Maya), all languages deserve equal respect. Each will have regional variations that will affect results and the ways in which we are perceived by our colleagues. When working in a foreign language, it is important to be conscious both of variations in language and of the particular variations in language used by specific audiences. This issue is probably most important when considering the validity of the instrument or interview guide that will be used in the field, and for interpreting participant responses.

Validity and Reliability

Validity is something we try to consider before going to the field. We will already have spent time and resources to get a research team ready and into the field, and we want to avoid, at a later stage in the process, retranslation, retesting, or even doing further ethnographic research to get a handle on the effectiveness of our protocol.

What is the validity of the translated version of our instrument? In other words, can an instrument translated in France be used all over Francophone Africa? Or, can a Delhi version of an instrument be used in other large cities in India or even in rural areas of India? Of course, this depends in part on the issues being addressed. Answering these questions requires some initial fieldwork. We take the instrument to the field and ask people what they understand by each question. Local translators are key to this process. It may take many hours to explain conditions and symptoms to a translator, but this is necessary to attain the appropriate local wording.

In cross-cultural settings, internal validity is challenged by the same issues as in the country where the instrument originated: changes over time due to factors other than the independent variable, contamination through repeated measures due to familiarity with the instrument, changes in the way the instrument is administered, and participant dropout. None of these propose significantly greater problems for cross-cultural settings. However, a local understanding of history and of potential developmental factors helps us provide alternative

hypotheses rather than assuming that the change in the dependent variable necessarily results from changes in the independent variable.

While language is the single most important factor influencing cross-cultural or external validity, there are other concerns. One is the willingness of people in different places to answer questions that may be considered taboo or shameful. Given a particular social or political context, the study participant might even give us an untruthful answer because he or she is not comfortable giving us a truthful answer. Working with someone who knows the general belief system of the study population is helpful for addressing these kinds of challenges to generalizability.

Another challenge to external validity is that the household composition and the geographic distribution and density may be quite different from that which we have encountered before. Thus, knowledge of the residence pattern and household systems will help direct appropriate sampling techniques. Of course, choosing control study sites or multiple research sites for study may improve generalizability. However, additional sites should be chosen for theoretical reasons and not just for external validity.

Engaging the Local Community

Not unlike the reaction we would have if a stranger came into our neighborhood and began asking probing questions regarding our health, our habits, our family, or our house, the communities in which we conduct research usually have many questions and opinions about the relevance, feasibility, and need for our project. We have found that we have been most successful when we have taken the time to dialogue with members of the community and hear their ideas, concerns, and questions regarding our study before we finalize our design and data collection procedures. The issues that are raised and the questions that are asked help us to think through our assumptions and strategies and, undoubtedly, result in tremendous savings of time, and money. Our greatest challenges have come from the times when we were developed our questionnaires, strategies, procedures, and timelines without consulting colleagues in the host country: questions they perceive to be disrespectful or dangerous to participants; procedures that that seemed reasonable and ethical but were impossible or potentially harmful for interviewers; and compensation schemes that might be hard for local investigators to meet in future studies.

One of the advantages of a presence in the community is the added potential to invite people to become part of the research process. Community consultants help us understand the possible pitfalls of our procedures, give us guidance regarding community dynamics and politics that can affect the feasibility of our study, and aid us in addressing the problems that arise during the project. Their voices are also essential in creating a more in-depth understanding of the findings of our studies and the latent cultural misinterpretations that, as outsiders, we might not fully appreciate. The insight that community members have given our research teams has been extremely beneficial to our writing and dissemination strategies once the project is finished. At the same time, the involvement of community members as recipients of the knowledge and information we gained from our study is a symbolic and practical way to give useful information back to the people from whom we obtained the original data.

LOGISTICAL CHALLENGES

Hidden Costs

International research contains hidden costs that affect all research budgets. First, are there currency transfer laws between the United States and the host nation? Many countries set limits to the amounts that may be transferred, or otherwise define the mechanisms for carrying out these transactions. The advent of ATMs has made it easier to access funds around the world, but there are limits to the amount that can be withdrawn at any one time. We have found ourselves making several trips to the ATM to withdraw our weekly payroll. In addition foreign banks often charge a significant fee for use of the ATM in addition to any charge our home bank may levy.

An option is electronic transfer from the United States to a local bank. This has the advantage of being able to move larger amounts of money in a single transaction. However, it has some drawbacks. First, there are often hefty transaction fees levied by both the sending bank and receiving bank. It is important to calculate these fees into your budget. Second, such transactions require a bank account in an appropriate banking institution in the host country. In each country, a different culture of banking exists, and different laws and regulations govern the system. It is not unusual for banks in some places to hold funds transferred from our country for several days or weeks before releasing them. Also, once the funds are in the local account, we might have only limited access to them, potentially not being able to withdraw more than a fixed amount at any one time, or we may be required to keep the funds in a local currency that is constantly fluctuating against the dollar.

We are always prepared to carry out all local transactions in cash. In many countries, even middle-class households do not have bank accounts. Thus, we have to be prepared to pay our workers or participants with cash and to adapt to the accepted pay period. In some places it is customary to liquidate all payroll debts on Friday or Saturday. We recommend that researchers never let the pay period go for longer than 2 weeks so that any issues are resolved quickly. This leads to the question of accounting.

Accounting and payroll practices vary across the globe. Most agencies and foundations that fund international research expect the local institution to adhere to “accepted” procedures or standards. We have had to work closely to establish a clear procedure for disbursement of funds that meets the requirements of our home institution, as well as what is expected at the local level. In many cases, this has required that we or one of our colleagues take on the role of “accountant”—that is, be responsible for the disbursement of funds, the justification of those payments, and the collection of proper documentation. We are careful to make certain that payments are made in accordance with local laws and customs. We do not want to assume, for example, that local consultants will be responsible for health insurance, taxes, and the like, only to discover that local law requires that we pay such costs.

It is usually far more costly to carry out a project across national borders than within a single country. Our experience is that, once we have a budget, we anticipate an additional 10–25% in each of our categories—the lower figure if we have previously carried out research in the location with the same researchers and institutions, the higher if this is our first attempt at such a project.

Hiring of Local Staff

This is a highly complex process, and how one goes about it depends on what tasks need to be performed. If we are looking for a specific set of skills—for example, laboratory technician or statistician—we use local colleagues to help us find these individuals. Our local colleagues know who in their institutions has the skills and how best to approach them. Hiring field staff is an even more complicated process.

Our experiences, and those of colleagues with whom we have worked, have taught us not to try to predict who will be the best interviewer or field data person. We are particularly cautious when the field research involves individuals of varying class backgrounds. The best solution for these problems is ensuring uniform and consistent training for all research assistants and interviewers and constant review of field work by local colleagues who are aware of the pitfalls that class and education bring to the process. If inadvertent bias on the part of a staff person is found, it can often be remedied by additional training and through role playing. This is one of those areas that requires constant vigilance by us and our local colleagues.

CONCLUSION: THE RESEARCHER AS A GUEST OF THE HOST COUNTRY

Along with the advantages and privileges that come with being funded investigators from North America, there is always the risk of forgetting that we are—and always will be—guests of the host country. Those of us who have spent long years working in another country are particularly susceptible to this error. We cannot think of a more harmful approach to the research project, the quality of the data we will be collecting, or the potential for future collaborations than the belief or attitude that our ability to provide most or all of the economic support for a project accords us special privileges. At times, the graciousness with which our invitation to collaborate is met lets us forget that it is a unique opportunity to be allowed to advance our fields and our personal careers and that we must reciprocate by making sure that we follow the unwritten rules of etiquette governing such cooperative efforts.

Although the expectations and understandings may differ from country to country, it is always best to err on the side of formality, as an informal approach to interactions may be taken as lack of respect. Negotiations and discussions are a given and must be carried out in such a way that they are not perceived as assumptions of entitlement. What we have learned is that flexibility is not only necessary but can actually increase the quality of our study and the potential to uncover information that, while not part of the original design strategy, can enhance our understanding of the issue we are studying. It goes without saying that criticism of host country institutions, people, society, etc., will not assist our research efforts.

Sense of Humor

As researchers we tend to take ourselves very seriously. As a result, our work may take on a critical and urgent attitude that often may not be shared by our colleagues and researched communities. This difference in priorities calls for a strong sense of humor to manage the anxiety that is provoked by delays, no-shows, changes in administrative staff, government office shutdowns, long holidays during which the entire country is off work, the intermittent

availability of electricity and other utilities, and equipment malfunction, just to name a few of the circumstances we have encountered. Our experience has taught us to laugh at the unexpected and to rethink, within the context of our entire lives, the meaning of our work and the knowledge derived from our studies.

Respect

Quite possibly, the quality that is most universally considered central to any cross-cultural collaboration is respect. Respect is a reciprocal association in which both parties expect to give and receive respect while being aware of the inherent differences conferred by social status. All of us are aware that people in positions of power in our host country have the ability to accept our offer of collaboration or refuse permission to conduct a study in their territory. Somewhat further down the hierarchical scale are our colleagues. Even further from the hierarchical top are the people who will be conducting the interviews or surveys and the community members from whom we will collect the data. We strongly believe that the quality of our data is closely tied to the degree to which the research team members from our host country and the participants of our study feel respected by and in turn respect the investigators.

Having Fun

Not everything about conducting research in other countries is about hard work and serious issues. There are naturally occurring opportunities for the research team to get together and jointly celebrate the work that is being accomplished. Maintaining morale in the field is of paramount importance. If researchers do not plan to be on site for the duration of the project, they would be well advised to take every opportunity to visit. The daily challenges, frustrations, and successes that occur as a natural part of any study of this type should be shared by both field workers and investigators. The researchers will undoubtedly obtain a better sense of the possibilities and limitations of the project and thus be able to make more informed decisions if there is ongoing dialogue with people in the field. These visits are excellent times for having fun together and enjoying the unique opportunities available to enhance the personal and collective understanding of the host culture. We hope that our experiences may prove useful to North American investigators thinking of conducting work that involves data collection in other countries.

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