

Balancing Rigor and Relationships in Collaborative Research

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Near the end of a two-week fieldwork stay in a rural Colombian village, I went to the small restaurant where the community had arranged for me to take my meals. As usual, I ordered the tender “sweated chicken” with a side of plantains, beans, and rice—the best dish on the menu. When it came time to pay, the owner and cook—a middle-aged woman with whom I had had casual conversations but never interviewed—dropped off a slip of paper with the bill. I noticed that she had accidentally mischarged me because the total was several fewer dollars (in pesos) than I had been accustomed to paying. I stood up to tell her and show her the check.

She looked at it, gasped, put her hand to her forehead, spun around, and exclaimed, “Oh no, I forgot. The *Gringo* price!” Yes, it turned out that for two weeks she had been amicably gouging me as an outsider. “What?!” I perplexedly blurted out. I did not have a problem with the surcharge, and we both had a good laugh. Yet, even as collaborative as many of my (research) interactions in the community had been, this was her way of putting me in my place, and the incident reinforced my nonlocal status.

As I would find, people have different motives in the collaborative-field context. Some are willing collaborators but not everyone is an enthusiastic participant in or contributor to research. This episode brought a greater awareness of my positionality and how others may perceive me as a researcher, reinforcing the need at times to make an extra effort to reach out and transcend social barriers. It also raised guiding questions, such as who are suitable collaborators in research, what are their motivations, and what is the nature of their involvement?

Academic political science research can be conducted by individual researchers or small teams as well as through larger engagements with many participants. Collaboration in research can represent a productive middle ground for political scientists that bridges rigor and activism—one that engages different stakeholders while still allowing scientific inquiry to run its course. At its best, collaborations are rewarding experiences for building human-to-human relationships and a crucial mode of social science. However, they are not without challenges and risks and must be pursued carefully and within appropriate environments.

Collaborative methodologies have been growing in political science, although their use still lags other fields (e.g., anthropology), whose modes of scholarship are more frequently interpersonal. The main analytical approaches in

political science had generally long been gathering information from administrative and historical records and datasets, surveys, and direct observation—in other words, “armchair” studies with limited interaction. As some scholars have increasingly gravitated toward field-based projects and more applied policy studies, it has become more important to consider the various people who may be involved. I draw on my experiences conducting academic field research to articulate the relationships between researchers and other participants and contributors. I also consider examples from my experience with policy-analysis projects involving partner institutions—which can have academic outputs—because these situations also provide lessons and training to political scientists, informing academic collaborations.

I identify three types of relationships and associated dilemmas that researchers may encounter in collaborative research. First, although not all collaborators hold activist visions of political or social change, on some occasions researchers may need to balance the goal of rigor with pressures to become activist. In other words, they may need to manage the pressure to balance toward the local collaborators. Collaborative research can offer options for activism, inclusivity, and respecting the needs and aims of collaborators without the depth of commitment of participatory-action approaches. Second, researchers may need to balance the collaboration among multiple participants or stakeholders with differing interests and viewpoints. Third, researchers may need to avoid or counter what some scholars call “academic extractivism” or balancing too far toward the researcher’s own interests and goals.

BALANCING ACTIVISM AND RIGOR

A first challenge that can arise in collaborative fieldwork or participatory-action research is balancing between collecting rigorous or impartial evidence for analysis and involvement in activism for broad social change or policy advocacy (Atalay 2012; Chevalier and Buckles 2013; Fals Borda 2001). In some situations, research participants or collaborators may be minimally engaged or view researchers as irrelevant outsiders (Merriam et al. 2001). In other contexts, some stakeholders may view them as *helpful* outsiders. They may view researchers as important allies who can promote their causes—and they may want researchers to tilt toward them and their interests (Angel-Ajani and Sanford 2006).

To be sure, activist motivations can play a constructive role in research by identifying relevant research questions and

answers. However, pressures to amass evidence in support of particular desired real-world outcomes from a stakeholder's perspective may push researchers away from their mode of scientific agnosticism—away from allowing answers to arise from the data. These pressures can skew research goals and create the perception of conflicts of interest behind the

clear about the degree and timing of researcher activism relative to research activities. This can be done by discussing the nature of the research and the results it is likely to generate as well as stakeholders' aims including, for instance, if they are simply seeking research experience or informational outputs or if they are working toward greater social change.

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research, if not actual biases in evidence. To be able to later inform a broader audience with the research beyond the community or partner, some separation can be beneficial to preserve perceived credibility.

In my field research experience with conflicted-affected communities and human rights accompaniers (i.e., observers) in Colombia and the Philippines, I was encouraged to join them in advocating for human rights and the protection of communities—especially to the government (Kaplan 2017). Paraphrasing, I recall being asked, “Why are you just collecting information and asking questions? Aren't you committed to advocating for change for *this* community?” Of course, these are aims with which I agreed but, at that time, I did not know enough about the history or processes of the communities to feel comfortable committing to being a long-term advocate. I also wanted to cover additional research locations and be able to draw more general conclusions. There were limits to what I could do and, despite pangs of guilt, I was not sure that I was ready to help any and every community while under pressure to complete a large research project.

One solution for these types of situations is: let the research do the talking. Although academics certainly can and should take on activist causes that they feel passionately about (as they may so choose individually), there is also a path of activism *through* research. I realized that my activism did not have to occur in or be limited to the moment of the field collaboration. My research could begin by allowing the communities—with their activist questions and processes—to shape my questions and approach and then embody a longer-term type of accompaniment of communities more akin to participatory *action* research—and, indeed, it has. However, this involves taking on a future commitment to do so. On completing some phases of my research, I have been more able and comfortable in advocating for the security of particular communities as well as civilians in general to diverse audiences (e.g., Kaplan and Serna 2018). Furthermore, from having framed my research based on particular communities more broadly, my evidence and findings have been better able to speak to other contexts.

Researchers may have different levels of comfort mixing advocacy with their research, coming down more on one side than the other, and there is no problem with that.¹ To manage this dilemma, it is prudent to establish and agree on research relationships with partners early on so that expectations are

Researchers should also discuss which activist steps they are willing to take as well as any activism “redlines” past which they believe their research could be weakened or compromised. Researchers and collaborators might also develop a plan for how to dialogue about activist issues or pressures if they arise in the course of a project.

BALANCING MULTIPLE PARTICIPANTS AND VIEWPOINTS

A wise man once said, “Many of the truths we cling to depend greatly on our own point of view.”² This is true in collaborative research as much as in other aspects of life. Researchers may encounter participants who bring their different viewpoints, interests, and concerns to the table. Tuning in and listening to these vantage points in the generation and pursuit of research questions can bring greater inclusion, buy-in, and—ultimately—wider reception of the research. Including and listening to perspectives can help participants to feel that they have a voice, that outcomes are not predetermined, and that their positions will be represented in the final research product or policy recommendations (even if they do not necessarily get all that they may seek). Such a process can also identify areas of consensus and shape the appropriate scope of the project and outcomes.

In one experience with multiple stakeholders (in a prior nonacademic life), I had the opportunity to staff an advisory group on a regional labor-market policy study with the San Diego Association of Governments (SANDAG) (Cox, Eary, and Kaplan 2002). The group was composed of individuals and organizations representing labor, business, and government with divergent and some passionately held positions. A key goal of the project was to develop the first comprehensive estimates and guidance for a living wage for the San Diego region, or the amount of money individuals and families would require to live comfortably and have their basic needs met. A first step of the collaboration involved discussing the research questions and identifying the central aspects of living wages on which to focus. Labor interests wanted a recommendation that the estimated wages be mandated for employers, whereas some business interests were wary of endorsing a report that called for a mandated wage. Contemplating these different perspectives informed the kinds of evidence and indicators that would be drawn on to compute and assess the utility of wage estimates.

As researchers, our task was to generate empirical evidence and analysis with input from interested sectors. However, in

managing the process, the question arose, “Why not go all the way and call for a wage mandate?” We held several open discussions and, in listening to the participants, we allowed areas of consensus to emerge among the group. It was evident that calling for a mandated wage floor would go beyond the consensus, but not doing so would also leave some participants frustrated. Nevertheless, being circumspect in our recommendations did not mean discarding the wage research as an effective tool to advocate for and address poverty and pay-inequity issues. We realized that the study could still identify and encourage good-paying jobs for future cultivation, locate subregional areas needing special assistance to close equity gaps, and promote the Earned Income Tax Credit to targeted communities to boost incomes through tax refunds.

In this case, to win the “battle” of achieving positive progress meant knowing where to draw the line in our recommendations—to leave aside the larger “war” for a wage mandate. It also meant recognizing that research and policy making are processes and that others can carry the baton the next leg forward. Generating information and analysis while leaving some decisions as open ended at least provided localities with options and set the stage for them to further assess wage floors and adopt them later if they chose to do so. By preserving the participant consensus, the collaboration ultimately made the research output stronger and more welcomed.

A second example involves managing differential power bases among different stakeholders in the midst of a collaboration. In some instances, certain voices can drown out others because of differential degrees of prestige and power or different communication abilities. Such was the setting of a kickoff workshop I was involved in for the design of an impact evaluation for a USAID program in Colombia (which held the possibility for spinoff academic research projects). The aim of the meeting and evaluation was to include diverse interests so that all views on the programming and key outcomes could be understood and accounted for in the eventual study.

To this end, the program officials invited a former mayor as well as community leaders who had participated in previous programs. Although the mayor (a politician) patiently waited his turn, he was the dominant force in the room. With his oratory experience, education, popularity, and prestige, the community leaders were deferential to his remarks and ideas. Noting this, the other researchers and I were concerned that community-member interests might go unvoiced or be underweighted by the program and evaluation teams.

We applied our good classroom and focus-group skills and facilitated more “aggressively” to ensure that the community leaders had the opportunity to share their views.³ To guard against bias and exclusion in such situations, a general helpful decision criterion is to prioritize the voices of the most marginalized or vulnerable participants to ensure that they are heard. One option to redress power imbalances is to invite more timid or less powerful participants to share their views first. These types of more applied projects that explicitly call for interaction and collaboration can provide good reminders and helpful training for academics to recognize and engage with diverse sets of stakeholders.

AVOIDING “ACADEMIC EXTRACTIVISM”

Researchers interacting with participants should seek to avoid or counter what some scholars call “academic extractivism,” or guarding against collaborations being balanced too far toward the interests of academics to the neglect of other collaborators, participants, and so-called beneficiaries (Ohja, Hall, and Sulaiman V 2013). If research is viewed as too positivist or removed from participants, it may be criticized as not benefiting communities or worse: primarily using local actors to generate information for the benefit of academic careers. Academic research also can be perceived as “reinventing the wheel”—simply “discovering” or restating facts that locals already know. This is more problematic when research processes may impose burdens of time, energy, or risks to participants or generate research fatigue without the promise of direct material or other benefits (see, e.g., ethical guidance in Fujii 2012).⁴

In the extreme, some scholars may argue that all collaborative academic research is inherently extractive—and perhaps should not be conducted. I disagree. Academic extractivism certainly presents a tension and nagging fear that is healthy for us as researchers to guide our conscience. I have wondered in relation to some of my past research if I only took information from communities or imposed burdens without contributing to them or learning anything new. This is always a risk in the scientific process because outcomes are not preordained. Yet, I have found that whereas some participants may be reluctant or averse to participating, others have warmly embraced research collaboration and are glad to have their voices heard. Although some findings are banal, other findings are helpful for communities, could not have been anticipated beforehand, or have broader impact.

A first step to stem extractivism is to identify the fitting local partners—those who want a relationship or are willing and able to accept the potential costs of time and energy inherent in partnering in research. Although researchers should not ignore potentially vulnerable collaborators, guarding against the imposition of burdens in some cases may require engaging actors with at least a base level of capacity or resources. At the outset, researchers should ask potential collaborators how they view the potential pros and cons of their involvement.

A second key step is guaranteeing the deeply informed consent of participants and considering their goals in relation to the research. By providing detailed information about how research is expected to proceed, collaborators can decide whether they want to contribute and what they may require for participation to be worthwhile. Researchers can also then consider steps that help to prioritize the interests of participants.

Third, as appropriate, the ideas and contributions of local participants and researchers should be distinguished and given credit.⁵ The academic’s added value and conclusions can be fairly noted while still crediting the participants as generators and sharers of information. How this is accomplished and what forms of acknowledgment are acceptable to different collaborators is another point for early discussion and may depend on the depth of contribution and number of contributors. Whereas some collaborators may not feel

strongly about being referenced (or may be precluded from being referenced by confidentiality concerns), others may appreciate a citation, quotation, footnote, or some form of coauthorship.

At the time of collaboration, research may be seen as simply repeating what is already known or of questionable purpose or

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value, but such views may change over time. Participants or others may later see research as serving a larger purpose, such as providing corroboration or new insights. In one instance, a Colombian media outlet covered a research publication of a colleague and mine on the Colombian peace process with the headline, “Desire for Peace Is a Reason for Optimism” (Caracol Radio 2017). Unprompted, a Colombian peace NGO tweeted the response, “Look at what the *NY Times* says [referring to the optimism of our research].... Sometimes we need someone else to say it to believe it.” As in this case, sometimes (though not always) outside views that are not beholden to local debates or actors can provide more removed, independent, and reflective perspective on social issues—even for insights that may have enjoyed prior consensus.

A final way to ensure that research avoids being extractivist and is conducted for some net gain is to make good use of it. This can involve first bringing back and sharing findings with communities when possible—and in dialogue with them—for greater reciprocity in the relationship (e.g., Knott 2019). There is no guarantee of how these findings will be received and whether they will be viewed as novel or helpful, but the effort behind the gesture can go a long way. Additionally, researchers may use locally collected information to generate broader comparisons and findings beyond single research sites for wider audiences. In my research on how civilians protect themselves from violence, sharper insights from broad comparative analysis were helpful for encouraging scholars and policy makers to consider the findings in contexts beyond Colombia. To complete the circle, whenever possible, I strive to inform communities that participated in the research about the reach of their contributions to other policy audiences or communities (Kaplan 2015).

In making these arguments, I am conscious of my positionality as a US-based academic and that it is in my interest to put forward arguments elevating research relationships as generally beneficial (Rose 1997). I recognize that I may present an optimist’s view and that there are always risks of disappointing participants. The research process or findings are not usually completely under our control. However, with awareness, professionalism, and the right motivation and sensitivity, it is possible to guard against extractivism. By being aware of our own position and interests in a research project, researchers can better consider how potential collaborators may hold different views and see the work as unfulfilling or even harmful. The question of whether to push ahead, adjust, or scrap the project will then come into starker relief.

REFLECTIONS

Collaborative research provides a route for political scientists to benefit from the knowledge of different stakeholders without taking on the commitments required of deeper research modalities (e.g., participatory-action research). Wisdom in the conduct of collaborative research is often gained through hard-

won experience and initial stumbles (at least it was in my case). There are several relational dynamics that arise between the individuals and groups involved, and socially and self-aware researchers can work to manage them successfully.

Fortunately, options and solutions exist to guard against risks of harm or bias and elevate new voices and new ideas. A main method for practicing effective collaborations—as well as teaching how to conduct them—involves asking a series of questions to gain a greater awareness of the aims and motivations of different stakeholders and potential collaborators. Another approach is to gain additional experience with collaboration through policy engagements and other activities that are a step removed from the basic research aspect of political science.

There are also likely to be other “balancing acts” among researchers and participants beyond those elaborated on herein. One example may be whether the depth of collaboration in a single setting could restrict the generalizability of findings to other settings involving different conditions, collaborators, and stakeholders. Collaboration, therefore, requires adaptability, and it means we may not always end up where we thought we would when we started. However, even with its trials, collaboration remains an enriching and productive research road to travel.

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NOTES

1. Reasonable people will differ on how much activist involvement is necessary or appropriate on the part of academics during versus after data collection.
2. The wise man was Obi-Wan Kenobi.
3. Cyr (2016) is a helpful resource.
4. The ARC Bibliography contains additional resources on these topics. <https://advancingconflictresearch.com/resources-1>. Accessed March 8, 2021.
5. See, e.g., the (Silent) Voices blog, “The Bukavu Series.” Governance in Conflict Network. www.gicnetwork.be/silent-voices-blog-bukavu-series-eng. Accessed March 8, 2021.

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