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Collaboration Anxiety: What Do We Do About It?

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Abstract: *The growing momentum of collaborative and participatory research initiatives is raising new issues in social science research. Collaborative research projects differ dramatically in their theoretical and methodological approaches, but they all involve personal risk-taking by the researchers as well as the researched. We believe that the most critical topic in collaboration is the commitment to changing the power dynamics in a research relationship.*

There is much talk in the academy and among funding agencies in support of cooperative work, but aside from a few exceptions, there has been little change in the institutional structures and everyday practices that constrain it. As collaborative researchers, we are struggling to develop strategies for working within or around institutional values and responsibilities.

Depending on the collaboration, there can be increasing forces influencing and constraining research relationships. There may be one or many organizations influencing decisions about who will participate in the research and how and some of these rules might collide. Researchers are caught within a web of rules and responsibilities beyond their control that affect the direction of their relationships and the course of the research project. Within the university alone, we must negotiate our way through a raft of policies and procedures including ethical reviews, confidentiality requirements, and competitive pressure to “publish or perish.”

Working outside the certainty of a traditional institution/researcher/subject relationship can be a source of anxiety for all potential participants. No matter how experienced we are in our academic disciplines or fields of practice, creating a new collaboration is a venture into the unknown. Most North Americans are used to thinking of research as a relationship where the researcher is in charge and other people are passive subjects. To work collaboratively, however, researchers and community members must seek ways to learn new roles, and to talk about roles, expectations, and power relationships. Our own experiences echo the literature of collaboration. We have learned that all parties must be willing and able to devote a great deal of energy

to communicating with each other about their expectations and the ways the relationship can develop. A great deal of time is usually spent in building a team, exploring the collaborative process and laying foundations for positive working relationships. Omitting this step can lead to alienation and may imperil an entire project.

Research is more likely to be a high priority for researchers than for other participants. Too often we arrogantly assume that participants will share our enthusiasm for reflecting on and writing about their lives. Collaborative research demands more time from all of its participants than conventional research. Active involvement means more than passively supplying information. Researchers are required to invest in negotiating research questions and analyses with other participants.

As collaborative researchers, we have found ourselves in new and uneasy situations. We have felt uncomfortable and exposed to have other people describe our work, and we have become far more aware of how studying others can be used to control, judge or criticize them. We have shared research responsibilities with people with very different values, life experiences, social, cultural and educational backgrounds as well as economic status.

We are still trying to deal with the dilemmas that arise from acknowledging and addressing changing the power dynamics in our research relationships. With each new project, we ask ourselves how we can address the dilemmas of working across differences – in economic status, in language, literacy and cultural assumptions. How can we work across the divides of privilege without patronizing or inflicting pain?

“Collaboration anxiety” may never appear in a counseling textbook, but it certainly can be found in university hallways. It often appears when researchers are preparing to step into the uncertainty of sharing power and control of a research project. It is known to manifest as a form of “hypochon-

dria,” oversensitivity to power relations. So far there are no prescription drugs available – and no prescribed standards for measuring what we gain, and what we lose.