Your culture, my values: the perpetuation of power relations in collaborative research in academic environments.
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Abstract

Questo articolo indaga i problemi associati alla ricerca collaborativa nelle scuole di specializzazione dei paesi più sviluppati, quando essa si interessa alle relazioni di potere tra paesi sviluppati e paesi in via di sviluppo. L'articolo esplora la mancanza di conoscenza dell'influenza del ricercatore, la partecipazione parziale degli stakeholder locali e la permanenza delle relazioni di potere pre-esistenti. L'autrice condivide una riflessione sulla sua esperienza di studentessa che, insieme ad altri undici studenti internazionali, supervisionati da due professori americani, provenienti da un'università americana, nell'autunno del 2019, hanno studiato e viaggiato in Sierra Leone, dove hanno lavorato in collaborazione con studenti e professori locali. Sebbene il progetto fosse pensato per essere collaborativo, ha finito per produrre una collaborazione parziale. L'articolo si conclude con raccomandazioni per evitare gli stessi problemi.

This article investigates problems arising from collaborative research in graduate schools in the developed world. It specifically examines how it relates to developed and developing countries' power relations and explores the lack of knowledge of the influence of researcher, partial participation of local stakeholders, and a predominance of power relations. The author reflects on her experience as one of the eleven international students, supervised by two American professors, from an American university, who, in the Fall of 2019, studied and traveled to Sierra Leone, where they worked in collaboration with local students and professors. Although the project was meant to be collaborative, it ended up producing partial collaboration. The article concludes with recommendations to avoid the same issues.

Introduction

This paper is the outcome of my reflections after graduating from an American University. Being from a developing country, I was used to collaborating with foreign researchers. My experience during my studies at an American university – when I had the opportunity to be on the 'foreign researcher' side – changed my perspective. It showed me how collaborative research, when involving developing and developed worlds, perpetuates power relations and results in partial participation of local stakeholders,

and unawareness of the influences of the researcher.

The research promotes a critical discussion about a field trip developed by the department of urban planning of an American university to Freetown, in Sierra Leone. Field trips are used in academic environments to promote intercultural exchanges, give students practical experience, understand abstract concepts, and develop interpersonal skills (Patel, 2015), as well as exchange cultures (Ogden, 2007). In this specific case, the goal of the trip was to understand the built and social environments and later propose ways of utilizing the assets for sustainable development.

Eleven international students, supervised by two professors, collected background information, which comprised of socio-economic, historical, and political data. After that, they traveled to Freetown where, with twelve local students, and two local professors, conducted in-person stakeholder interviews, on-street interviews, comparative photos, and architecture surveys. The experience was said to use a collaborative approach, where the American university cohort would work side by side with local students and professors. Collaboration in researches, especially the ones that happen in an international setting, is undoubtfully fundamental. Suarez-Balcazar, for example, explained that scholars and practitioners should «respectfully merge their skills with the knowledge of grassroots communities» (Suarez-Balcazar, 2020: 2). Bowen and Martens added that for effective knowledge exchange, not only communication, but also trust, collaboration at all stages of the research, and the development of a shared language and culture are fundamental (Bowen and Martens, 2005). They both agreed that local communities should be co-creators of knowledge since they know their realities better than researchers do, and they hold the knowledge of «what works and what might not» (Bowen and Martens, 2005: 2; Suarez-Balcazar, 2020).

However, the America-Sierra Leone exchange did not follow these precepts. Shreds of evidence in the process and results suggested power imbalances that endured during the experience. First of all, Sierra Leonean students participated in only one of the three phases of the process: the fieldwork. Additionally, in that stage, they did not have a seat at the table at strategic decision meetings, nor had they intellectually contributed to the project. Their participation resulted in little more than language

translation and assistance of the American university students. The participatory approach, in which the main goal is to promote «a reflexive form of knowledge and co-production» (Jirón, 2018: 160), ended up being overlooked. American university students and professors disregarded that members of the community are the best judges of their realities (Suarez-Balcazar, 2020) and that, should they be more involved, it would create a culturally-rooted solution, based on the community's demands, and most likely sustainable in the long term. Instead, local stakeholders worked as assistants, and not as co-creators of knowledge. This case-study reflects overall difficulties that universities face in international research, especially when dealing with cultural imbalances and maintenance of historically built power relations.

Methodology

This research is based on the author's experience as a student of the American university complemented by seven students' perspectives. The author was one of the eleven international students of a class that took place in the Fall semester of 2019. After conducting extensive background research, international students traveled to Sierra Leone for eight days, to conduct the second phase of the research. Considering the outstanding cultural differences between Western and Eastern cultures, lead researchers decided to work in collaboration with a local higher education institution. According to Sierra Leonean students, the twelve best students in the class were selected to participate in the project. To facilitate the process, students were separated into five groups comprising of two or three American university students, and two or three local students. Each group was assigned one area of the City, where they should conduct the research.

In addition to the fieldwork experience, the researcher consulted four local students. After the completion of the fieldwork, local students were asked by their professors to submit a short paper describing their experiences and perception of the intercultural exchange. The author had access to four of these papers, which were used to conclude this research. The author also consulted three students from the American university, who shared their perspectives and opinions about the studio.

After the finalization of the class, the researcher shared her insights about power relations and collaborative research with the professors in two different moments. As experts working internationally, they both acknowledged that this issue is a common problem in international work.

Sierra Leone System

In Sierra Leone, the devaluation levels when compared to external values surpass the experience of the studio. They are in reality embedded in the public policy practices of the country. Governmental systems in developing countries tend to be based on colonial government methodologies. If not inherited, typical methods of the Global North are usually adopted to suit particular local political and ideological ends, which are complemented by a strong resistance to changes (Watson, 2009) inequality, informality, rapid urbanisation and spatial fragmentation, particularly (but not only. Sierra Leone is no exception). As a previous British colony, the country, especially Freetown, has grown depending, on gran part, on external authorities, which has resulted in the prevalence of governmental systems still linked to the colonial systems (Fyfe, 1968). These schemes are usually politically compromised between the competing interests of elites and customary practices (World Bank, 2019). To further complicate the equation, there is an extra stakeholder in Sierra Leone: the poor and marginalized, who are usually struggling to survive.

Additionally, the constant presence of external authorities, for example, the long British dominance in the country, may have resulted in a low level of empowerment of local communities. To that point, few are the public policies that envision public participation, let alone the ones that promote empowerment and collaboration.

The Freetown government has been trying to change this panorama. An example of a recent participatory approach was the creation of Heritage Clubs in schools, which consisted of students' contests navigating around the cultural heritage and history of the country. Students, for example, produced videos and art pieces showcasing traditional rites and cultural values, which were shared on social media and official websites (Kargbo, 2018; 2019). The nature of the activity, however, demonstrates

that the strategic objective of the program was to educate the community, and not to empower or include their perspectives in the decision-making.

Discussion

This section will investigate the development of field activities, especially as they relate to the theories and precepts described above.

Integration between students

Research is not a neutral action. On the contrary, once researchers, regardless of who they are or where they are from, enter the researched space, they automatically change and influence it (West and Abu Talib, 2002). To such an extent, the researcher should always question their impact on the community they are working with, and especially observe the possible direct or indirect power relations (Ogden, 2007). Additionally, they should locate themselves culturally, explain the influence of the research, and ensure that participants have their voices represented (Suarez-Balcazar, 2020).

This case study presents an additional layer: researchers should have been aware of the potential maintenance of colonial structures and a consequent distance between international students and local stakeholders. A lack of awareness would result in a lack of cultural exchange and could be worsened by a lack of understanding of the place of study as someone's home, workplace, or social arena (Patel, 2015).

Before the trip to Sierra Leone, professors were aware of cultural differences and made sure to include in the class readings papers about local culture and practices. They also invited the United States-based Sierra Leonean professionals to lecture about the country, and highlighted the importance of being respectful with different cultures.

However, their efforts were not translated into practice, and distancing between local and international students perpetuated during the fieldwork. Local students reported, for example, that they felt «shy and disconnected» and added a lack of relationship between students. Another student mentioned that «it wasn't easy working with them [the international students], but we tried our level best». A third one noted the cultural barriers amongst

the students: «the familiarity and cordiality found in Sierra Leoneans are not seen in the Americans». Contrarywise, one interview pointed out that this lack of integration also happened because of the «xenophobia and skepticism of Sierra Leoneans». Several issues may have been the cause of this distancing. The research was conducted in a short time frame, and students had only eight days to collect as much data as possible. Additionally, the future proposals would be implemented by the City, which added a layer of pressure on the students and professors. The meticulousness of the data collection and the lack of time may have been one of the causes to neglect the local stakeholder's involvement. If the students and professors had more time or less pressure when in the field, they may have had more opportunities to locate themselves culturally and assure that local students had a voice.

Additionally, for some international students, the urban conditions prevented them from looking beyond. One American university student reported that it was her first time traveling outside the United States and that she felt worried about her health and uncomfortable with climate conditions, which made it impossible for her to think about participation or other issues. On the other hand, international students or immigrants from undeveloped countries showed themselves as more comfortable with the situation, and more integrated with local students. Although out of the scope of the studio, it seems like background and previous experiences play an important role in intercultural exchange and participation.

Methods and participation

In the present case study, the research was divided into three phases: background research, fieldwork, and proposals. Local students and scholars participated only in the fieldwork. Additionally, local students mostly worked as translators of on-street interviews (Krio to English) and watching over the safety of international students. Few were the contributions of local students to the methodology, background studies, or proposals. This division of work came from an external pressure placed on the research. As mentioned above, the research would be used to inform public policies, which required students from the American University to excel in collecting and organizing

information. However, local students were undergraduates, while international students were graduate students. In this sense, it would be necessary to allocate time to explain methodologies for collecting and analyzing data for local students. Due to external pressures, this time did not exist. Also, a change in the division of tasks would lead to changes in class calendars that none university could accommodate.

This structure resulted in imbalanced participation and gains with the research. International students reported that the research was fundamental to their professional development. One of them, for example, informed that he learned new research techniques, gained practical experience, and enhanced his curriculum. On the contrary, local students did not report such improvements. One local student, for example, mentioned that the biggest gain he had was to visit historical places that he had never been before. Another student complained that the international students «have access to sophisticated software whereas for us we only have access to the free software». Therefore, he would not be able to replicate any technical knowledge that he may have gained. As noted, this lack of involvement in all the phases of the project – which contradicts the best practices in collaborative research – led to lower levels of educational development by local students than could have been achieved.

The participation of local stakeholders can bring culturally-rooted solutions, entrenched in the concerns of the community (Suarez-Balcazar, 2020: 5), and most likely to be sustainable in the long term. Consequently, it is fundamental to listen to the community and discuss issues that they truly care about, and not the ones that researchers want to hear about (Suarez-Balcazar, 2020: 5). To that point, several on-street interviews, when asked about historical buildings, categorically mentioned buildings were not on their radars. They were worried, above all, about having food, safety, and sanitation. Moreover, some local students did not understand the relevance of the study. One of them, for example, mentioned that he had a different way of thinking, and added that «even with the knowledge I have acquired, I never saw these things as important as they took it». However, the research could not adapt to the precepts of the community and local students because there was pressure to produce knowledge about a specific topic. There was no flexibility to accommodate any issues that could modify the

research. At the same time, techniques and procedures were decided by the American university because of the previous knowledge of international students, and without taking into account limitations that local stakeholders might encounter in replicating the research.

The transposition of microcosm of the American university methods, for example, though the use of the software that would no longer be available to locals, or by investigating topics that the locals do not understand the relevance, is likely to «perpetuate notions of elitism, power, and domination» (Ogden, 2007: 9). These ended up intimidating local students' voices. For instance, when talking about an interview with the Mayor of Freetown, which was one of the key stakeholder interviews, one student reported that he did not feel that he should (literally) sit at the table, but in the back of the room. «I thought I should leave it to them [the American University students] because they knew what they were talking about». Moreover, one student mentioned that when he learned about the project, he was taken by fear. He could only overcome it once he internalized that «level of education doesn't matter», and that he needed that experience.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The research conducted by the American University in Sierra Leone produced fruitful results and proposals. However, although the technical quality of the professionals is unquestionable, several issues regarding the collaborative research arose during the process.

To allow for better collaboration researchers need to locate themselves culturally, acknowledge and address the impacts of their culture, values, and representation to the local community. They should also explain the research, and make sure that community members also have a voice, which is essential to alleviate segregation and the perdurance of power relations. In the case study, the lack of time tied into pressure for results prevented researchers to achieve this. Conversely, they led researchers to a rigorousness of action and, consequently, to a lack of active listening, flexibility, and participation.

Secondly, local stakeholders should be involved in all stages of the process: they should bring their rooted knowledge to frame the research problem, collect data, and propose solutions.

To that point, researchers should recognize that perspectives from the community members can be enormously useful for the investigation and should work to enable spaces of trust and participation. Time and pressure also were decisive factors not to achieve it. Due to a tight schedule, there was no time to adjust classes so that local students participated in all stages. Neither there was time to equalize knowledge or adapt techniques for the environment in which researchers were in. For example, to train and use free software that could later be accessible to local students.

Finally, it is essential that researchers listen to communities discuss what they care about, and not bias the research to be geared towards what they value and want. To that end, flexibility in the research topics plays a fundamental role, which was again, prevented because of political pressure, since the American university students had to produce knowledge specifically about heritage and sustainable development.

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