From Confusion to Co-Creation: Bridging the Community-Academy Divide in International Research Collaboration

By Nazita Lajevardi, Maria Martinez-Cosio, Mirle Rabinowitz Bussell and James Stauch

Research collaborations are almost always seen as desirable. Studies that compare practices across international boundaries and that engage researchers and practitioners require individuals to relate to one another across a vast array of cultures, languages, professional practices, and research expectations. Such partnerships can in turn produce new skills and expertise, improve access to funding, and raise visibility for the research topic area (Bammer, 2008; Vasconcelos, Steneck, Anderson et al, 2012).

Canada invests millions of dollars each year into building an understanding of social and human phenomena through disciplines such as sociology, political science, economics, social work, urban studies, cultural studies, and languages. Despite the tentative rise of community-based research, community service learning, social R&D spaces, and other emerging means of connecting academia with community entities, the pressures to remain siloed, cloistered, and self-referential remain strong within the academy. Old habits die hard, especially when those habits are where merit, advancement, and money reside.

Canada's Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) – the federal granting agency charged with investing in the creation of new knowledge and talent with respect to post-secondary research in the humanities and social sciences – places strategic value and emphasis on partnerships between institutions and organizations. It also values community engagement, fostering "interchange with and among key audiences on university and college campuses, in communities, and across public, private, and non-governmental organizations."[1]

As one of SSHRC's *Partnership Development Grant* objectives states, effective research partnerships are "designed to foster innovative research, training and the co-creation of new knowledge on critical issues of intellectual, social, economic and cultural significance through a process of ongoing collaboration and mutual learning."[2] Pursuant to SSHRC requirements, partners commit formally to financial and/or in-kind resources, a three-year commitment of time, active engagement on research teams or advisory bodies, and a pledge to help mobilize knowledge into the broader community or industry field. The value proposition is in co-generating new and better knowledge – grounded in real world practice, informed by analytical rigour, and analyzed through a critical lens. We are part of a research consortium – The Montreal Research Laboratory on Canadian Philanthropy[3] – that has taken the SSHRC challenge to partner with practitioners (in our case, professional grantmaking foundations) quite seriously. The experience to date has prompted us to reflect on what has worked, what hasn't, and what others might consider when embarking on such collaborations.

One of the four research clusters under the project umbrella seeks to deepen the general understanding of the grantmaking foundation milieu in Canada as compared with international trends in philanthropy. [4] This type of research requires access not only to literature, but also to practical experiences and reflections of practitioners and researchers beyond Canada's borders. When we think about "partnership" in this context, it has at least five dimensions: 1) Canada-US; 2) French-English; 3) multi-university; 4) interdisciplinary; and 5) practitioner-academic. This article focuses on the latter – i.e. how practitioner partners and research partners collaborate effectively.

Practitioner-academic partnership implies symmetry, so that, in theory at least, there is an equity of voice in the selection of research questions, research design and knowledge production, the process and timelines for implementing the project, and agreement on dissemination of outcomes (Bowl, Tully and Leahy, 2010). In this spirit, an academic and a practitioner co-chair our research team, with vital and substantial support from two PhD student research assistants. The advisory structure for the research consists of three practitioners (two professionals working within private foundations and one operating an umbrella organization for foundations), as well as three academics.

Reflecting on the experience to date, there are certainly many benefits to this type of collaboration. Researchers have access to more grounded, real-time knowledge. Partnering with practitioners allows the research agenda and focus to be benchmarked and evaluated by practice-informed peers (after all, the sanctity of peer review is a delusion if none of the peers have any grounding in real-life application). When the vast majority of literature on foundations is US-based, it is all the more important that Canadian practitioners be at the table to filter which theories, models, and findings are relevant to the Canadian scene, and which are not. Partnerships also open doors, particularly to additional opportunities to access and disseminate knowledge. Two such examples are People, Power, Planet a community-based renewable energy research partnership in Ontario, and Social Prosperity Wood Buffalo, a partnership in Fort McMurray involving a variety of players, led by Suncor and the University of Waterloo.[5] Furthermore, with these types of collaboration there is a greater likelihood that people in the field will read and perhaps even utilize the knowledge produced; a rare phenomenon in the social sciences.

Community partners benefit from such partnerships too. They can provide an opportunity for reflective practice as well as increase evidence-based programming. They also engage those practitioners who are passionate about research, but who are not in academia. These individuals may have the opportunity to utilize their skills of analysis, synthesis, and reflection, and even to publish or co-publish. Such partnership also affords the opportunity for greater profile and transparency of "industry" activity and impact. Data produced from the research can provide evidence needed for funders, as well as information necessary to modify or revise existing initiatives. It can also help justify new programs.

However, there are also challenges, worth exploring in more detail, along with suggestions for addressing these:

Formality of the partnership agreement: The requirement for a formal agreement, and for an online profile and forms completed by the partners themselves, accompanied by a cash or monetized in-kind commitment, can be a deterrent to many potential partners. Commencing the process with a memorandum of understanding (MOU) can effectively delineate expectations (Ross et al. 2010). However, in our experience the best exchange of information, highest trust, and deepest insight typically happens through informal interactions.

Partnership agreements also result in some confusion as to the definition, roles, and responsibilities of a "partner." Some of the partners in this broader collaboration are funders, others are co-investigators, others are advisors, and still others are infrequent/ad-hoc symposium participants. Partnership agreements are no substitute for personal communications, so keep those lines of communication open through regular email updates, and occasional one-on-one calls or meetings with each partner.

Achieving agreement on research questions and design: Partners bring distinct and diverse expectations about research questions, focus, and outcomes to the table. Additionally, practitioners may not arrive at specific research questions or processes in the same as researchers. It is worth taking the time and effort to manage, mediate, and – especially – formulate a shared research question (or set of questions) together.

The imperative to publish: Academic partners, and in particular research assistants, who are looking to establish their bona fides in the academic world must publish in peer-reviewed scholarly journals. While community practitioners might see value in these publications in the abstract, the permeability and mobilization of knowledge between publishing and practice in the social realm is not nearly as robust as, say, the medical field. Practitioners may not have access to the publication (or it may be unreasonably priced), the text may be baroque and obscure, or the publication may lack profile altogether. Many academics regard open access journals as inferior to elite journals with paywalls, although this is increasingly regarded as myth-based as we see elite schools like MIT pursue institution-wide open-access policies. There is an active debate about readership in traditional academic forums, with some claiming that half of all scholarly articles are never read by anyone other than the author, editor, and peer reviewers (Remler, 2016). As an academic, if you are not interested in publishing primarily in non-academic fora, you should not be doing community-based research. Academics must demonstrate the practical relevance and potential application of their research to community, communicating in a simple, understandable manner. We need to highlight, praise, and incentivize publications, universities, and academics that prioritize and value open, public access as well as writing and speaking in non-academic fora.

Particularity of practitioner work and focus: While researchers are always looking for broad patterns, and often gravitate to conceptual models that help explain organizational behaviour over a large sample size, the focus of each practitioner's organization is inherently particular. As the cliché goes, "once you know one foundation, you know one foundation." It also does not follow that foundation practitioners as a "field" are interested in foundations per se as a unit of analysis. In most cases, they are far more interested in their subject of focus (e.g. homelessness, forest conservation, early childhood learning, etc.). Where such divergence of interest exists, researchers need to make the case that there is a broader *public* interest (not just their own particular research interest) in their focus and pattern of inquiry.

Public interest versus practitioner interest: Building from the previous point, some research questions may be uncomfortable for practitioners, as the motivations, roles, focus, and impact of foundation activity can serve as legitimate points of inquiry. Questions might cast a critical lens on the profession or industry, but may be important to raise in the broader public interest. For example, an important question in the international context: is the influence certain foundations wield with respect to public policy desirable, as a form of plutocratic influence? Conversely, are they too timid? Should they be wielding*more* influence given their depth of focus on the communities or issues they serve, or where they are witnesses to injustice or inequity? It is important to make clear to all partners upfront that community-based research does not mean research that is affirming to the community partners' current mode of practice. Community-partnered research can, and should, permit scope for broader, critical questions that may have the potential to illuminate blind spots or new avenues of opportunity for a community. If the community partner is not open to this, they should stick with consultants that will provide them the answers they are looking for, and stay clear of the academy.

Misaligned expectations about the purposes of applied research: In general, providing public and scholarly understanding of a poorly understood and understudied field is what motivates researchers. This can strike practitioners as navel-gazing and too general to be of much applied use. If a practitioner's organization wants to investigate "x" for their own programming or evaluation purposes – "what's really interesting to us is. . ." – how much latitude and comfort does the rest of the group have in pushing back on this? There may also be different expectations about which party "owns" the research – and who benefits from it. Where does the intellectual property reside? Does any party have a veto on what should or should not be included? In a cross-cultural context, certainly in an Indigenous community-partnered context, these questions take on a particular urgency and gravity. The use of an MOU outlining roles and expectations, alongside clear and regular communication between the parties, will help achieve a mediated, shared set of expectations. Avoid the patina of "community-first," if, as a researcher, you have other needs and requirements that might not be simpatico.

Communication and frequency of partner engagement: It is vital to be clear with partners early on about the frequency and depth of engagement. Do all partners need to be on every monthly check-in call, or does it make more sense for there to be certain deeper dive touchpoints or milestones? In our experience, it is challenging for researchers to share findings continuously and efficiently with the broader research advisory team. Preparing for, and responding to, regular meetings can hamper the rhythm of research, and create not only inertia, but also a lack of confidence in the research direction. You can have partners lending their voice at every stage of the "sausage making" of research production, but it doesn't necessarily guarantee a coherent outcome. Researchers need breathing space. Busy practitioners crave not frequency (usually), but depth, and ideally in-person engagement.

Language and definitions: Our research project has had to grapple with a series of concepts and definitions about which there is no universal agreement, and which morph dramatically depending on geography, culture, and legal frameworks. The concept of a grantmaking foundation, for instance, has a very "philanthropic" character to it in the US, whereas in Europe, it is much more commonly a creature of the state. "Social innovation" is still a new, hotly contested concept that quickly loses solidity as international borders are crossed. In continental Europe, for instance, social innovation typically refers to public sector innovation. In the US, it usually refers to private or non-profit sector innovation. In the UK and Canada, it straddles both those divides, more typically referencing multi-sector complex systems. It is imperative to discuss definitions early on in the process to avoid confusion. Nevertheless, this does not mean that all parties necessarily have to *agree* on a definition. What should be agreed-upon are not definitions *per se*, but rather the level of comfort with ambiguity alongside general agreement about scope. In our case, it was a high-effort, low-reward task to agree on a definition of “social innovation,” a concept deemed less integral to the research. On the other-hand, it was a relatively low-effort, high-reward task to agree on a definition of “grantmaking foundation,” the primary subject of analysis.

Pressure on research assistants (RAs): RAs, by default, often end up becoming the backbone of such collaborations. Everyone else only has so much “skin in the game.” As such, partnerships continually challenge them in the role of bridge between practitioner preferences and academic imperatives. There are items that are challenging to reach consensus on, and the direction taken depends often on which mix of participants are able to take part in a particular meeting. In our case, the research continually bounced back and forth between a case-study emphasis and a comparative meta-focus, a dynamic that is frustrating for RAs, and likely doubles the work. Yet RAs arguably have the most power to set the agenda because they are responsible for synthesizing the material and demands, are up to date on the literature as they research the topic areas chosen, and have the time to dive deep into the research. RAs represent the next wave of community-engaged scholars, so we must ensure we are not burning them out, and that community-based research is integral to advancing their careers, not just as scholars, but also as community builders and change makers. A key element in supporting their growth as scholars is supporting presentations in conferences, and allowing them to participate as budding scholars during calls and meetings.

Knowledge mobilization: Research must not only meet scholarly requirements, it must be shared in a way that comports with the professional or plain language needs and expectations of practitioners. Effective knowledge mobilization is critical to partnership success. Those looking to engage in these types of efforts should consider a web presence, social media, blogs, plain-language bite-sized research snapshots, webinars, and presentations at practitioner conferences all part of the mix of a solid knowledge mobilization strategy. *Nonprofiit Quarterly*and the *Stanford Social Innovation Review*do this well in the US. In Canada, *The Philanthropist* plays a critical role in mobilizing knowledge between academics and practitioners.

In the end, is there a public benefit from such collaboration? Is SSHRC money well spent encouraging partnership development?

Certainly, more time and effort are needed to build trust, to clarify and avoid confusion, and to use language (both written and verbal) that can cross the divides. As these international partnerships develop, the use of translation services or other strategies for bridging these linguistic divides must be recognized and discussed. In the end, the knowledge that is produced is more likely to be bulletproof, meeting the “sniff-test” of real world practice and application. It follows that the knowledge would be of more enduring value and engaging to a wider audience of learners.

All parties should embrace the power and potential of collaboration, but we must ensure expectations are tabled clearly, that we have opportunities to deeply understand each other and respect the legitimacy and value of each partners’ knowledge and experience. We are also cognizant of the need to write the results for different audiences. Practitioners seek to access the results in relevant documents that clearly present direction towards policy change; researchers seek to influence their fields through scholarly publications; funders want “the bottom line” in terms of impact of their investment in a broad collaborative effort. As a rule, we need fewer teleconferences and more of our energy into deeper in-person dives. Partnerships may be awkward and full of inadvertent traps, often avoidable by being clear upfront about our interests and expectations. However, if we learn to step well, we can bridge the chasm and move from confusion to co-creation.

References

Bammer, Gabriele. 2008. Enhancing research collaborations: Three key management challenges. *Research Policy* 37, 875-887.

Bowl, Marion, Liz Tully & Jennifer Leahy. 2010. The Complexity of Collaboration: Opportunities and Challenges in contracted research. *Gateways: International Journal of Community Research and Engagement*, 3, 38-54.

Remler, Dahlia, 2016. (Blog post) “Are 90% of academic papers really never cited? Reviewing the literature on academic citations,” in LSE Impact Blog. Retrieved from http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/2014/04/23/academic-papers-citation-rates-remler/

Ross, Lainie Friedman, Allan Loup, Robert M. Nelson, Jeffrey R. Botkin, Rhonda Kost, Georg R. Smith, Jr., Sarah Gehlert. 2010. The challenges of collaboration for Academic and community partners in a research partnership: points to consider. *Journal of Empirical Research on Human Research Ethics* 5, 1, 19-31.

Sonia M.R. Vasconcelos, Nicholas H. Steneck, Melissa Anderson, Hatisaburo Masuda, Marisa Palacios, José C.S. Pinto & Martha M. Sorenson. 2012. The new geography of scientific collaborations. *Science and Society*, 13, 5, 404-407.

[1] Retrieved from: http://www.sshrc-crsh.gc.ca/society-societe/community-communite/index-eng.aspx

[2] Retrieved from: http://www.sshrc-crsh.gc.ca/funding-financement/programs-programmes/partnership_development_grants-subventions_partenariat_developpement-eng.aspx

[3] The Montreal Research Laboratory on Canadian Philanthropy (LaboMTL) was originally created in 2014 to host a three-year SSHRC Partnership Development project entitled “Social Innovation, Societal Change, and Canadian Grantmaking Foundations.”

[4] Four members of “this international comparative perspectives cluster” had the opportunity to reflect on the notion of practitioner-academic research collaboration at the Urban Affairs Association conference in San Diego in 2016.

[5] See peoplepowerplanet.ca and capacitycanada.ca/social-prosperity. See also McGowan, K. “Tending the Social Innovation Garden: Social Prosperity Wood Buffalo and Creating the Space for Change,” in *The Philanthropist*, Sept. 14, 2015.