Living Research Six: Collaborations

Our research on Operation Vaken was rooted in several different forms of engagement, with the hope not only of intervening in social injustices (see Passy, 2001) but also of producing knowledge differently; a less elitist and collaborative knowledge. The root of the word collaboration, from the Latin *collaborare* – to work together – carries ambivalence. To collaborate can also suggest betrayal, even treachery. Here we discuss what was involved in our research relationships, from those between ourselves as academic activists and ‘resisting others’ (Autonomous Geographies Collective, 2010: 248) to our work with an established, profit-making research company, which we subsequently found also carried out work for the Home Office.

We will try to describe as best we can what we did to deal with conflicting pressures and approaches in our partnerships, highlighting what we learnt. As the feminist theorist Robyn Wiegman (2012) has argued so brilliantly, our attachments to radical alternative futures can often come at a price, including a seductive delusion in how we read and diagnose the *status quo* and possibilities for transformation. There can be a tendency to close down ambivalence, Weigman believes, in order to tell a particular version of a story – one in which we know best.

Building collaborations

Researcher-activists working across a range of social-justice platforms spend a huge amount of time thinking, talking and theorising about – and researching – how to make meaningful interventions. Researchers do not hold all the interpretative cards, but they may add something in terms of intellectual resources, skills and methodologies. In our case, our research funding was also able to support and recognise the research work of our partner organisations.

One of the most fundamental partnerships in our project was how we worked with each other. Noting the largely individualised accounts of activist researchers (Autonomous Geographies Collective, 2010), we believe that the very fact we came together as a group is important. As a large research team, we corresponded regularly in group email exchanges and scheduled intensive meetings over the course of the research to plan and to discuss troubles, successes and new ideas. We were able to write together, as well as to contribute and comment on each other's blog posts, draft papers and conference presentations. When our ways of working were sometimes questioned within some university regimes, we were able to defend and support ourselves by making reference to our commitments to the wider research team.

Our team comprised some people whose experience of activism was street-level and community-facing, while others were more academically based. Some team members already worked within the frameworks of the live (Back and Puwar, 2013), inventive (Lury and Wakeford, 2012) and real-time (Gunaratnam and Back, 2015) style of sociological research that underpinned the study; others were new to such approaches. The team included academics at all stages of their academic careers. As a group, we provided a critical mass of expertise that was important to the funding body and at the same time provided a support structure that allowed us to work together collectively, while operating individually with a variety of frames of reference, environmental contexts and employment statuses. Our sociological standpoints differed, yet we managed to collaborate and thrive as a large research group with a shared commitment to critical social research. Common leanings towards activist and anti-racist feminist research informed our approach and ethos and oiled the conversations, decisions and steps taken throughout the research process.

Collaboration also underpinned our work with our community research partners, many of whom we had worked with before there was any prospect of securing research funding. They helped to shape the questions we might ask and how we might ask them. It was important to us, and to the success (and ethics) of the project, that the work done by community groups to develop and support our research was properly remunerated – both because of their precarious funding and to formally value the time and expertise they provided. Our existing connections and working relationships allowed us to develop these connections relatively quickly, to exchange vital information about the project, and to engage locally.

Collaborating across sectors – in this case, between community-based organisations and large universities – is not without its challenges (Saltus, 2006). It is evident that such work requires constant negotiation and sensitivity to the different demands made upon partners, to different standpoints and sometimes to different agendas. In our working relationships, we were very much aware of the challenges faced by our community partners. These included precarious funding, staffing and time constraints and the need to prioritise face-to-face immigration work (e.g. dealing with destitution and deportation) and campaigning. Although a partnership template devised by the team was drafted, the programmes of work in our local case studies varied depending on the circumstances facing partners in each of the six areas and on the individuals who carried out the research. In some cases, we worked with more than one local organisation to ensure we captured a range of views and experiences. The degree of involvement differed, with some community research partners playing a significant role in key stages of the data-collection process (for example, facilitating focus-group discussions, and maintaining clear and steady lines of communication and engagement), with the commitments of other partners resulting in less involvement.

Our partners' approach to the research funding and their experience of this type of collaboration also varied. One organisation insisted that it could do more with the money allocated to organising two focus groups, while others took great care in facilitating access to local immigration activists and in planning for the interviews. We also had experience of the research being done more haphazardly or 'on the trot', because of staff shortages and the huge workload of a research partner. We felt unable to comment directly, knowing all the time that the organisation's services were in a precarious position and the research funding was vital. In effect, the empirical research bore the brunt of the challenges, uncertainty and instability faced by some of our partners.

On commissioning critical survey research: the questions we ask

The findings from the small-scale street survey conducted days after the launch of Operation Vaken and the Go Home vans suggested that attitudes to migration might not be so simply divided into 'for' or 'against', but were more complicated (with answers often having

a ‘Yes, but ...’ element). We wanted to produce survey data that could reflect some of the complexity and ambivalence of public opinion on migration and its control. Linked to this, our qualitative research had revealed the understanding that ‘being seen’ to be tough on immigration is about performance – captured in actions, gestures, costumes (uniforms), props (enforcement vehicles) and displays (for instance the documenting and publicising of immigration raids) (see Chapter 2). All performances use triggers that work to elicit an emotional response, and so we wanted our survey to test the kinds of responses such performances might elicit. Our focus was to identify public attitudes to immigration control when faced with the realities of the techniques used as part of that control.

A common practice in UK academic research aiming for large-scale polling data is to commission this work from external companies that have the infrastructure to produce such data quickly. This is a practice we followed, engaging a large market-research company to undertake this element of the project. In negotiating the design of our survey questions – which were going to be inserted into the company’s longer weekly ‘omnibus’ survey – the challenges of working across different epistemological approaches and across research cultures with very different priorities (academic versus commercial) became apparent. Many of the questions we originally developed, and the ways we wanted to ask them, appeared ‘risky’ and ‘emotive’ to the polling company.

Negotiations over the wording (which had been carefully discussed and crafted by the team and was rooted in the original survey work done during the Go Home campaign) often focused on reframing the language to be objective and neutral. This process derived from a need to arrive at a set of ‘unbiased’ questions, placed within the context of established wisdom and expertise in market research (see Living Research Four for a critique of this approach). For us, an underlying tension concerned differences in how we understood the limits and the basis of polling research. A problem for us was the largely unchallenged perception that the official framing of immigration questions routinely used in such surveys is not emotive (a separate but related matter being whether any survey questions can be without emotion). Another tension was the careful development of the draft survey questions and the collaborative, iterative effort underpinning them, which remained important as a methodological and analytic framework.

One question where there seemed to be a particular mismatch between our epistemology and that of the market-research company was our attempt to get a sense of public opinion on racial profiling

in immigration checks. The question of whether such profiling had been carried out was raised by Baroness Doreen Lawrence (see Chapter 1) and we wanted to find evidence of whether the general population thought such practices were acceptable. During the process of negotiating the commissioned research, this question went through several iterations. Our original version was as follows:

Eyewitnesses have suggested that white people are less likely to be questioned during immigration raids and checks. Do you think it is acceptable to target people for immigration checks on the basis of their appearance? [You can choose more than one option]

- a Yes, it saves time and resources
- b Yes, if you have done nothing wrong you have nothing to fear
- c No, it can lead to persecution of British people
- d No, it is racist
- e Something else [record open-ended answer]

(Original question in commissioning request
by Mapping Immigration Controversy (MIC) team
to Ipsos MORI, July 2014)

This question became something quite different in one draft we were sent:

ASK ALL

WU07. In your opinion do you think the Home Office Immigration Enforcement team target particular types of people during immigration raids, or not?

(DP: SINGLE CODE, RAN)

Yes

No

Don't know

IF WU07 = CODES 1, THEN ASK WU08

WU08. You said you thought the Home Office Immigration Enforcement team target particular types of people during immigration raids. What type of people do you think they target and why?

Please type in as many reasons as apply

(DP: ALLOW DK)

(OPEN ENDED)

(Revised question in email from Ipsos MORI to Hannah,
13 August 2014)

On receiving this draft, Hannah asked for 'a discussion of why this has been changed so radically, especially since I have explained our

objective with this question was to ask whether people thought racial profiling in immigration checks was acceptable/appropriate, not to ask the general population to guess at whether or not this goes on' (Hannah's email to MIC team, 13 August 2014). In the end, a question closer to what we wished to ask was restored to the corpus:

ASK ALL

WU07. Some people have suggested that white people are less likely to be questioned during checks or raids on suspected irregular/illegal immigrants. How acceptable or unacceptable, do you think it would be if immigration officers carried out checks on the basis of someone's skin colour?

(DP: SINGLE CODE, FORWARD AND REVERSE LIST)

- 1 Very acceptable
- 2 Fairly acceptable
- 3 No opinion either way
- 4 Fairly unacceptable
- 5 Very unacceptable
- 6 Don't know

IF WU07 = CODES 1–5, THEN ASK WU08A

WU08A. Why do you say that?

(DP: ALLOW DK)

(OPEN ENDED)

(Question used on Ipsos MORI Capibus survey for MIC project, between 15 August and 9 September 2014)

For us, the prompts (drawn from our preliminary street-survey work and qualitative data) were key in shifting the register in which immigration is so often framed in national polls. They did this in ways that allowed an exploration of concerns about the racist and violent impacts of everyday immigration control. This is an extremely challenging ambition when dealing not only with quite different starting points about 'neutrality' and the production of knowledge, but also with the commercial and political imperatives of potential survey partners.

Additionally, in the context of commissioning commercial survey companies to conduct research as an element of a larger academic study, matters of ownership and dissemination become important. Most companies place a high premium on their rights to, and ownership of, the data collected – and, moreover, wish to control how the findings are disseminated. Although to some extent understandable in terms of wanting to ensure the integrity and reputation of their

business – and to be able to build on the findings of previous polls in similar areas – the contractual terms and conditions in place risk subsuming the intellectual labour of the commissioning body, in this case the research team. Of equal importance, such contractual framings can work to sever the ties that may connect the survey activity with linked work programmes that stand outside the commissioned work. In our case, these were the qualitative elements of the project from which many of the survey questions emerged, and our ability to publish from that integrated work without interference.

Collaborative knowledge-sharing and representation

Towards the end of the project, we organised a national conference and a series of smaller, targeted events to share emerging analysis and what we had learnt. The aim was to create platforms in which to showcase the findings from the study and to offer collaborative spaces for the range of stakeholders to come together to explore immigration debates, campaigns and performative politics (see Chapter 2). As Ravensbergen and VanderPlaat (2010) have argued, although text remains a dominant part of the production, analysis and dissemination of research findings, this can involve exclusions, not least in matters of representation. For the end-of-project event, we set ourselves a task of finding ways to include people most affected by the anti-immigration campaigns. The conference placed ‘beyond-text’ methods (Spencer, 2011; Beebejaum et al., 2014) – such as film- and performance-based provocations – alongside text-laden presentations, and it privileged participant dialogue over ‘talking heads’. For us, the conference was as much about creating spaces for engagement and creative exploration as it was about problematising established forms of dissemination that can silence voices and knowledge outside the confines of academia.

A group of storytellers from the Hope Projects was one of the performance-based provocations at the conference. Founded in 2003 in the Midlands, the Hope Projects is a user-led organisation that works to empower destitute asylum-seekers and others barred from public funds. The organisation runs a number of activities, including a group for storytelling. The group performs around the UK, drawing on its own stories of forced exile, arrival and settlement journeys, as well as composite stories taken from the many other people they have met or have been told about who share a similar experience of forced migration. At the conference, the group gave

a performance, with each member telling a story; they then all shared their views and reflections in a short question-and-answer session.¹

Hannah asked the first question, enquiring how the group felt about performing their stories to an audience. The question, which pointed to something that had troubled us for a while, raises a number of issues in terms of critical research and its focus on collaboration, intervention and transformation. Of importance are the politics of storytelling – not least, storytelling by those whose personal narratives have been shaped by the move from what is understood as a personal trauma to an asylum application set within the context of political aggression and legal discourse (Shuman and Bohmer, 2004, cited in Pulitano, 2013: 117). In subsequent retellings (in everyday life), migrants must often respond to questions about their arrival and settlement.

However, the members of the Hope Projects responded to Hannah's question by explaining that for them the act of storytelling in this context was cathartic. Giving expression to painful stories can be an important part of a healing process, as the first performer stated when she stood to talk:

We are not actors; we are just a group of women from the Hope Projects. We will try and tell you our story ... I don't like to talk about my story because always when I start, I cry. But I will try today.

(Member of the Hope Projects, MIC End-of-Project Conference, June 2015)

Other performers said that narrating their own – and other people's – experiences was one way to ensure that they themselves became and remained visible; that their stories were told and heard. From the performance, we gained insights into how some people taking this particular journey have sought to understand and give meaning to their lives and their shifting social worlds. The group suggested that our conference and spaces like it provided a space to share what they wanted to share, and to tell their stories the way they wanted to tell them.

¹You can watch the whole performance, and listen to the questions and answers here: www.youtube.com/watch?v=RRqUAF5G1mY [last accessed 1 July 2016].

The research feedback sessions we held in each of the local research sites went some way to circulating stories that had been shared with us by research participants. Each session provided an opportunity for the researchers and community partners to communicate both local and overall emerging findings, so participants could hear our analysis of their own situations both separately and within the context of the wider project. Questions were asked, comments raised and further points made, and we used these interactions to inform our ongoing thinking and analysis. In some cases, participants added further context. In others, they seemed satisfied to have heard the outcomes of the research in which they had participated. These were some of the ways we sought to mediate the sharing of stories and experiences within the formal research-gathering context. Those who attended the end-of-project events were there to hear about the findings, and were given an opportunity to reflect on their views, experiences and knowledge, and to share these with others.

Of equal importance to us was finding ways to extend the research findings to different audiences. One way we did this was through a short film about the research, commissioned and produced for us in the last six months of the project by the feminist film-maker Samantha Asumadu.² Since it became available, the film has been used in university teaching and by activist groups, as well as circulating online. It can be considered an example of an output that has travelled beyond academic circles (see also Chapter 1).

We also disseminated findings through policy briefings in Westminster and Glasgow, to showcase the study's findings to government and policy-makers in particular, and to the wider immigration and asylum-rights communities in general. The London event, a breakfast policy briefing, comprised short presentations by the research team; reflections from Pragna Patel of Southall Black Sisters (one of the community research partners); questions and comments from the audience; and a showing of our film. In a space not necessarily conducive to dialogic creativity, the use of film to convey different facets of the experience of immigration control worked well. In all three contexts – the end-of-conference event, the focus groups and feedback sessions, and the policy briefings – we tested methods of creating new types of dialogic space, but not always without constraints or compromises.

²You can view the film here: www.mappingimmigrationcontroversy.com/film.

As we have shown, there are two factors that are crucial to us in our research: close engagement and sustained collaboration with those outside of the university; and an ongoing attempt to forge more equitable methods of knowledge production. In reality, not all of our collaborations were productive. There were also many times when we did not know how things would turn out. Sometimes we were pressured – perhaps even co-opted – into uneasy and pragmatic choices. And there were many things we wish we could have done differently. This is indeed the ambivalence that comes with trying to build alternative futures and knowledge.

How would you describe collaboration? Why is collaboration important in social-justice research? How can it ‘go wrong’?

What role do you think ‘beyond-text’ methods (e.g., performances and visual art) can play in understanding social injustice and/or in communicating social science?

What are the challenges and opportunities of critical survey design? What steps could be taken to address some of the challenges outlined above? What would you do differently?

Whose ‘voice’ is heard in the dissemination of research findings? What must be considered when producing multi-voiced research? What are some of the power dynamics at play?

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