

## **C4.3 Caldicot Wednesday 5 December 14.15-16.15**

### ***Co-generation of Knowledge Through International Research Collaborations in Higher Education? Multiple Perspectives from the SARIHE Experience (0354)***

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#### **Introduction**

This paper considers the extent to which international research collaborations aiming to address social inequalities in the Global South can challenge the dominant models of such research partnerships. The SARIHE project is Newton funded ([www.newton.ac.uk](http://www.newton.ac.uk)) with two budgets, one managed by ESRC (Economic and Social Research Council, UK) and one by NRF (National Research Foundation, South Africa), with two principal investigators, one for each country and funding strand. The three authors, two from South Africa and one from the UK offer multiple perspectives, without homogenising their voices (Prior et al, 2009) of the experience of working in this collaboration.

Abbas & Milligan (2017) in the context of a collaborative partnership with Chinese universities examine the possibilities for framing ‘socially just knowledge’ in collaborative partnerships employing Bernstein’s notion of pedagogic rights, which argues that access to ‘powerful knowledge’ allows for new possibilities and space for transforming existing power structures and contexts. De Sousa Santos (2016) takes a different position, arguing that local knowledge systems and epistemologies from the South are often subject to ‘epistemicide’. This silencing of southern knowledges is part of the continuing domination of scientific and western knowledge. He calls for a recognition of an ecology of knowledges — embracing other knowledges requires ‘intercultural translation’ through searching for common concerns, revealing underlying assumptions amongst cultures and developing hybrid forms of understanding (de Sousa Santos, 2016). Leibowitz (2017) further suggests that ‘a hegemonic knowledge system lacks a dialectical or dialogic relationship with non-Western knowledges’ (2017:107).

These ideas of an ecology of knowledges, intercultural translation and dialectical relationships have occurred at different levels in the symposium through our positionings, methodologies and findings, but can arguably apply equally to the collaborative partnership itself. In this paper, we offer a critical reflection on our multi-voiced experiences of the process of knowledge co-generation. To achieve this, we discuss issues around (a) funding for the project, (b) centre/periphery dynamics, (c) knowledge co-generation, (d) data analysis and (e) power and knowledge hierarchies.

#### **Funding models as social shaping**

Under the auspices of the Newton Fund, the bulk of funding has come from the ESRC, with a much smaller amount awarded by NRF after cutting the requested funding. The fact that the aims of the project are focused on South Africa (a funding requirement) and most of the data for the project is generated by researchers from three South African universities (Johannesburg, Fort Hare, Rhodes) and their students, highlights imbalances and inequalities. The NRF grant is only linked to the University of Johannesburg. An exploration of structural inequalities and constraints is vital in such a funding model, not only in terms of the South African universities but, most crucially, also between the SA and UK Co-investigators. Decisions about when and where meetings take place, who can attend, what resources are available, had to be balanced with ideals of equality between institutions, their students and researchers.

### **Knowledge generation and Northern hegemony**

SARiHE has attempted to combine a centre/periphery approach to avoid “epistemic violence” (De Sousa Santos, 2016). In this presentation, we ask several questions: Is that possible? What are the mechanisms and forms of negotiation built in to allow scholars from the South to challenge and contest Northern hegemony? Who sets priorities for which questions to explore, which papers to write and where to publish? If the discourses are still mainly framed by theories and ideas from the North, how do we successfully negotiate this as equal partners? Although researchers from the North and the South co-wrote the final proposal, the ESRC funding framework has had a strong influence on how the research is conducted, as well as on requirements and expectations.

We then explore the extent to which it is possible to engage in knowledge co-generation in such a collaboration when the subjects of the study are South African rural students. Asking students to participate in the study as co-researchers is an attempt to avoid a deficit positioning and rendering them as objects of analysis. However, what are the limits to this? How do we allow approximately 70 students to be equal in the process of knowledge creation? Do you name them? Do they become authors or a footnote?

Furthermore the notion of co-production of knowledge is proving more difficult (though not impossible) than initially anticipated. This is due to the manner in which resources are allocated, distance between universities involved in the project and the differences across South Africa and between universities. Also, the funding differentials are again relevant here, where salaried labour is linked to ESRC but not NRF funding. Because of this, the initial thematic data analysis was done in the UK by a salaried researcher as part of the agreed role. This involved structuring data into preliminary themes, which, may not always have been contextualized, but served as starting points for interpretation. We all acknowledge that the theoretical framing of data

analysis draws on theorists from the North, although local knowledge and southern theory were added to counter or balance the knowledge hegemony. The question, however, is who has authority over voice – understanding, interpreting and narrating students' life-worlds? We will explore these tensions and the extent to which we can claim to be adopting a participatory methodology within a research project with pre-determined research questions.

Finally the Newton fund's aim to 'develop science and innovation partnerships that promote the economic development and welfare of collaborating countries' (Newton fund, 2018) also places heavy emphasis on capacity building for researchers from the South. So how can researchers from the South be constructed as *equals* with *capacity building* as an outcome? This seemingly unrecognised contradiction is an unavoidable manifestation of power and knowledge hierarchy. We suggest that this and the other matters raised in relation to structures, requirements and parity need urgent attention in considering new funding models that aim for co-production of knowledge and equal partnerships. Embracing the ideas of Leibowitz (2017) and de Sousa Santos (2016) is perhaps a starting point in challenging the dominant models and power structures and towards more socially just alternatives.

1000 words

## References

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