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Main Article:

Giving Back, Moving Forward

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Abstract

While reflecting on her own experience with giving back in Zimbabwe, Fortmann considers how the idea of "giving back" sits at the intersection of feminist theory, participatory research, and the democratization of science. From feminist theory arises the question of how to reciprocate to those who have contributed to our research. The participatory research and democratization of science literature push us to recognize and consider the collaborative nature of our research. Fortmann concludes by identifying three categories of reciprocity in research: material, intellectual, and personal. Sharing must occur, regardless of the kind of research taking place.

Index Terms: feminism; democratization of science; participatory research

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1. Philosophical Underpinnings of Giving Back in Field Research

"Giving back" (terminology that I will return to) sits at the intersection of three literatures addressing research methods and methodologies: feminist theories, participatory research, and the democratization of science. Each of these recognizes the non-academics who make research possible and rejects the idea of academic researchers being the sole producers of knowledge. This is clearly articulated by feminist theorists Richa Nagar and Amanda Swarr in their assertion that:

> [A]ll academic production is necessarily collaborative, notwithstanding the individualized manner in which authorship is claimed and assigned and

> celebrity granted to academics as isolated knowledge producers. (Nagar & Swarr, 2010, p. 1)

This has been more pithily expressed as: "All scholarly work is co-authored including single-authored work." Alas, I cannot remember who said it. Nagar and Swarr's stance is grounded in a long line of feminist theories including Haraway's (1999) concept of *situated knowledge* that argues that all knowledge is situated and partial, and feminist standpoint theory which holds that:

> . . . those who are subject to structures of domination that systematically marginalize and oppress them may, in fact, be epistemically privileged in some crucial respects. They may know different things; they may know some things better than those who are comparatively privileged (socially, politically) by virtue of what they typically experience and how they understand their experience. (Wylie, 2012)

These theories and concepts make clear that not only are expertise and knowledge production not confined to academics, but that certain kinds of expertise and knowledge production are located outside academia. It is from this kind of perspective that the question arises of how to give back, or reciprocate, to those who have contributed to our research.

The work of Functowicz and Ravetz (2003) moves us towards participatory research and democratization of science. They argue that a "post-normal science" is needed for situations in which "facts are uncertain, values in dispute, stakes high and decisions urgent." Part of the post-normal methodology involves working with an "extended peer community," that includes anyone who wants to work on the problem, not just those who possess academic credentials. That is, they are similar to feminist theorists in expanding the understanding of who is an expert, who is a credible knower, and how knowledge is created.

This philosophical stance requires us to recognize the collaborative nature of our research, even when we think we are going it alone. While the term "giving back" is viewed as problematic by some scholars (see TallBear and Bhan in this issue), it does convey the necessity of recognizing that field research always depends on the willingness of the people in the field (who are better recognized as civil scientists) to share—their knowledge, their understanding, their cultural savvy, and sometimes even their material resources.

When Abraham Ndlovu, an organic intellectual and peasant farmer in Zimbabwe, says, "The knowledge of language, environment, and culture needed by [an outside researcher]—that takes a lifetime to learn—and you need a really good teacher" (Ndhlovu & Wilson, 2012), he is making visible the reason for reciprocity. The people we work with in the field literally give us our careers. We owe them big time.

This brings us to the question of how to conceptualize what we owe. “Giving back,” while an easily understandable term for some, has its own problems. What we need is a term that captures the long-term obligation of reciprocity. Native Hawaiian scholar Mehana Blaich Vaughan (2012) articulates this in her concept (learned from her grandmother) of an ethic of sharing of abundance. This can consist of sharing material abundance in personal relationships and interactions. In professional interactions it can take the form of sharing intellectual abundance. This obligation is often less likely to be recognized. I shall now illustrate sharing material and intellectual abundance as well as the more illusive concept of sharing friendship.

2. My Personal Experience With Sharing Abundance

My own experience with sharing abundance follows those of many of the authors in this special issue. At my last field site in Zimbabwe villagers shared their material abundance with me in the form of food including: many, many cups of tea, places to stay, invitations to share in the cooking, help with my vehicle, help pitching my tent, and much more.

I have shared my material abundance with them in the form of rides, school supplies including: laminated maps, food, supplies for the clinic, eyeglasses for the elderly, family photos of everyone who participated in the survey and various others, veterinary treatment for the watchdog of the family I stayed with, and throwing a big party when I left. I also paid my research team extremely well. Once this became known in the village, it led to jealousy in some quarters.

Civil scientists (i.e., my research team) in the Zimbabwe field site shared their intellectual and cultural abundance in the form of knowledge of indigenous trees and where they were located, cultural advice (e.g., “don’t do that”), including me on trips to collect firewood, introductions to other people in the village, suggesting changes in the questionnaires and the measures of wealth, interviewing other villagers, participating in reporting the research results to village and district officials, writing a chapter for my edited book, *Participatory Research in Conservation and Rural Livelihoods: Doing Science Together* (Fortmann, 2008) from which they (and the other civil scientists who wrote chapters) are still getting annual royalties.

I shared my intellectual abundance by doing Foxfire books on trees with kids in the primary school, co-authoring all reports with my research team as the senior authors (see the “Paying in Our Own Currency” section of Fortmann, 1996), organizing a community meeting attended by District officials and the principal of the secondary school at which the research team presented the results of the survey and school children read their Foxfire essays aloud, working with the team to prepare them for their presentations, having the Foxfire essays typed and bound for each child as well as village and district dignitaries. The Foxfire books were a source of great pride in the village. I wish I could say this inspired the students to persevere in their studies, but I only know the outcome for one promising student: pregnancy and dropping out of school. Others may have done well, but secondary education is beyond the financial reach for many village families.

Knowing what effect, if any, the Foxfire books had after the initial burst of pride (both mine and theirs) would be extremely interesting to know.

I organized a workshop run by people from the University of Zimbabwe to help the four members of the research team still living in the village write a chapter about their experiences in doing research. Three members of the research team were accepted into a training program or were hired for short term jobs at least in part because of their experience. This did not result in long term employment for any of them. The annual royalties payments, however, continue to contribute to their household income.

We also shared the abundance of personal friendship and the changing of each other along the way. When I returned to the village after a mastectomy, every woman wanted to see my scar and touch it, something none of my own female relatives have ever done. It was a profound experience of healing and how to be in the world. It was also a reminder that I could never give my research team and other villagers as much as they gave me.

3. What Should be Considered in Relation to Giving Back as We Move Forward?

We need to recognize how others share intellectually and materially in ways that make it possible for us to do research. With that recognition comes the further recognition that we also must share—not in the spirit of charity, but in the spirit of exchanging with equals. This is what I mean by the sharing of abundance.

Because different kinds of researchers will find themselves in widely varying circumstances, separating abundance into three categories: material, intellectual, and personal may help to identify the practices through which sharing may occur. But the take home message is that sharing must occur, regardless of the type of research.

Naming the kinds of sharing may also help to make it visible and therefore expected. An obvious implication of the concept of intellectual sharing is that academic researchers must give up the illusion that they are the sole producers of and "expert" arbiters of what counts as knowledge or doing research, and practice humility. Moving towards humility, recognizing the contributions of non-academics to scientific work, and the conscious practice of sharing may build the relationships that will allow us to do better and more responsible research.

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