

*Journal of Research Practice*  
Volume 10, Issue 2, Article M9, 2014



*Main Article:*

## **Giving Back Through Collaborative Research: Towards a Practice of Dynamic Reciprocity**

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### **Abstract**

In this thematic section, contributors critically examine their attempts to put community engaged scholarship into practice as a means of giving back. In this form of research practice, informants become community research partners, who work with academic researchers to co-create research questions, protocols, and outcomes. Following participatory and feminist research principles, the authors in this section describe their work balancing research and action, as part of a broader social change project. The authors also discuss their efforts to generate more even power dynamics in their research collaborations with marginalized communities, and the challenges that arise in doing so. As community engaged scholars, the authors find the research process to be as important as, and interconnected to, their research products. Thus, the collaborative research process becomes an ongoing and dynamic form of giving back in itself.

**Index Terms:** sustainability science; social networks; collaboration; research training; coauthorship; cosupervision

**Suggested Citation:** Sherren, K., Klovdahl, A. S., Robin, L., Butler, L., & Dovers, S. (2009). Collaborative research on sustainability: Myths and conundrums of interdisciplinary departments. *Journal of Research Practice*, 5(1), Article M1. Retrieved [date of access], from <http://jrp.icaap.org/index.php/jrp/article/view/163/167>

Collaborative research reminds us of being invited to a friend's home for a holiday dinner. We indulge in rich conversation and consume just a little too much pie. Our friends have graciously juggled all the preparations. We help with the dishes, but find ourselves wondering: Is this really enough? What can we offer in return that would adequately convey our gratitude?

The articles in this thematic section capture the experiences of four scholars who give back through community-engaged research. We authors (Diver, Vaughan, Higgins, and Sarna-Wojcicki) are all working in communities that we plan to be connected to, like family, for the long run. We recognize the history of extractive research in the areas where we work as an ongoing problem. We see collaborative research as part of a solution that addresses the need for benefit sharing and some of the inevitable power imbalances that are intrinsic to the relationships between academic researchers and community members. Yet we also recognize our limitations. In our efforts to contribute our fair share, we find that collaborative research methods resist an exacting measure of what is given and what is received. We may never know the long-term research impact, or fully understand the complex power dynamics that play out through our research. Despite our best intentions, the community benefits that we hope for may be limited, or may not be realized at all. Furthermore, our research might have unexpected negative consequences.

Starting from this premise, the Research Notes in this section consider the complexities of our attempts at "giving back," which we discuss in terms of collaborative research practices that break down hierarchical power relations and facilitate benefit sharing with communities. In the present article, we discuss some of the principles of community-based participatory research and feminist research that shape our work. First, we address some of the key questions in participatory research, including how we approach the concept of expertise. How are we engaging with the academy's expectations, while also recognizing the limits of our knowledge? We consider the work of feminist scholars who recognize the role that our particular class, race, and gender play in shaping social relations. How do we address the uneven power relations that inevitably arise from our respective positions as academic and community researchers? Second, we consider the many forms that giving back through collaborative research can take. We describe our common challenges and attempted responses to them, as we negotiate issues of expertise and partnership in our research practice.

Through this article, we discuss our desire to achieve *dynamic reciprocity*, which we define as an ongoing practice of exchange for mutual benefit between academic and community research partners. We examine our own efforts to achieve a more equitable distribution of research benefits, while being reflexive about our researcher role. We arrive at the idea of collaborative research as a reciprocal, dynamic process that requires humility, practiced both through our theoretical framings and our everyday interactions.

## 1. Applying Participatory and Feminist Research Frameworks

Community-based participatory research (CBPR) is an orientation to research that begins by identifying a research topic of importance to the community and proceeds with the aim of combining knowledge and action for social change that benefits the community (Cornwall & Jewkes, 1995; Minkler & Wallerstein, 2003). The objectives of participatory research include benefiting local people—not simply doing research for the advancement of science or academic careers. Participatory research is also intended to be a conduit for a broader social change project, which balances research and action (Freire, 1970, 1982; Minkler, 2010; Stoecker, 2003). We acknowledge that CBPR can take on multiple forms (Shirk et al., 2012), and that CBPR does not always achieve its intended goals (Pain & Francis, 2003).

Despite these caveats, we have found CBPR to be a useful research framework that intersects with our giving back project in three important ways. First, this framework requires us to ask the explicit question, who benefits from the research? How and when do benefits occur? And, how do we understand what benefits are meaningful to specific local communities? Second, the participatory approach is concerned with shifting the balance of power, where research “subjects”—who may come from a different gender, race, class, or nationality than ourselves—become our research partners. Third, participatory researchers value both process and product, meaning that the processes by which we interact with community research collaborators and the products for social change that we co-create with community members are equally important (Hall, 1982; Israel et al., 2010).

One of the main points discussed in the participatory research literature is the level of community participation, which is often viewed on a continuum (Minkler & Wallerstein, 2003). Many strive to deepen the level of community engagement in their research, especially in the formation of research questions. Participatory research suggests that addressing questions that are relevant to the community is essential for increasing community engagement, and deepens research impact (Minkler & Hancock, 2003; Sclove, 1995). Furthermore, it is when communities research their own questions and produce their own knowledge that social change becomes possible. Community members may leverage participatory research projects to build power within the community, and thereby create “new forms of subjectivity that offer enabling futures” (Cameron & Gibson, 2005).

As with participatory research, many feminist scholars identify social change as a primary goal and seek to disrupt the uneven power relations that exist within the communities where we work, and also between academic and community research partners (Alkon, 2011; Collins, 1986; Frisby, Maguire, & Reid, 2009; Maguire, 1996; Stephens, 2012). However, feminist perspectives distinctly contribute a framework for recognizing the “specificity of gender or other social positionings, in terms of what strategies are chosen and what sites of resistance are created” (Weiner, 2004). By explicitly acknowledging gender, class, race, ethnicity, and other social positions, we are

better able to identify the power dynamics that shape whose voices are heard, and whose voices are silenced.

Feminist scholars argue that we must directly engage with such power imbalances by exposing the partiality of our own perspective as academic researchers. As Donna Haraway (1988) has noted, “only a partial perspective promises objective vision.” We can only understand something from a situated point of view—and as Haraway argues, that view and the reality it perceives is forever partial and unstable:

How to see? Where to see from? What limits to vision? What to see for? Whom to see with? Who gets to have more than one point of view? Who gets blinkered? Who wears blinkers? Who interprets the visual field? (Haraway, 1988, p. 587)

Feminists also leverage *standpoint theory*, which suggests that our ability to learn increases when our inquiry starts from the standpoint of community members and their lived experiences. According to standpoint theory, all perspectives cannot equally represent the lives of communities that have been excluded historically. The researcher herself will not generate the same research questions or findings as when knowledge comes from community members themselves (Haraway, 1988; Harding, 1995, 2004, 2008; Sangtin Writers & Nagar, 2006).

In addition, critical feminist scholarship emphasizes the researcher’s responsibility to avoid reproducing social hierarchies through her collaborations with marginalized communities. As Kim England writes, “In our rush to be more inclusive and conceptualize difference and diversity, might we be guilty of appropriating the voices of ‘others’?” (England, 1994, p. 81). Therefore, feminists advocate for self-reflexivity—the self-critical scrutiny of oneself that accounts for the researcher’s own position in society, based on class, gender, ethnicity, and so forth.

In taking this approach, the researcher must address the hierarchies that are embedded within institutions for “higher” education, which privilege the academy as the sole source of expertise and contribute to a “dominant ‘class system of the intellect’” (Carroll, 1990; Nagar, 2013). Feminist and participatory researchers can facilitate the ability of community partners to interrogate and challenge the knowledge produced within the academy. For example, researchers can work towards shifting the language of the academy by rejecting hierarchical terms, such as research “subject,” or by avoiding unnecessary academic jargon. Another solution is to provide communities, as experts in their own right, with the opportunity to represent themselves (Fortmann, 2008). Co-authoring stories with communities is a helpful approach when the project supports a “polyvocal framework attuned to a complex politics of difference” (Connolly, 2012; Nagar, 2013, p. 5).

Yet researchers must acknowledge their own limitations in understanding community experiences, a process that itself engenders no small amount of humility (Tervalon & Murray-Garcia, 1998). Co-learning or “knowledge hybridity” is a central element of the community-engaged research experience (Reid, Williams, & Paine, 2011; Wallerstein &

Duran, 2010). In addition, feminist scholars recognize the multiple and emerging epistemologies that exist within the feminist research practice (Wolf, 1996) and that we academics are learners, too.

Feminist scholars further emphasize that their approach is a work in progress. For example, Nagar (2013) refers to the “messiness of representation in alliance work,” given the challenges of representing research findings with diverse communities. Or we may find that marginalized community members, who risk negative repercussions by challenging existing social norms, may prefer not to engage in feminist action research (Reid, 2006). Reid calls on us to recognize change at the individual and collective scale, and to stay modest with our goals: “Taking action can contribute, in small or big ways, to changing the lives of those involved in such projects. Life changes, if taken collectively, can eventually lead to structural and policy change” (Reid, 2006, p. 327)

## **2. Common Challenges With Collaborative Research**

We now consider the collaborative research experience of the authors providing the four Research Notes in this section. The authors connect the theory of participatory and feminist research to their respective giving back projects. They highlight examples from their field work that speak to their attempted solutions to common challenges with collaborative research. The four authors in this section also recognize some of the limitations to CBPR that they have experienced, and reflect on their ongoing questions regarding research practice. They specifically discuss efforts to negotiate their roles as community-engaged researchers and to achieve greater reciprocity in their research relationships, as challenges that are faced by many participatory researcher scholars (Israel, Schulz, Parker, & Becker, 1998; Maiter, Simich, Jacobson, & Wise, 2008; Minkler, 2004).

While all four community-engaged researchers here are “giving back” in different ways, they converge on a central question: Is it ever enough? They attempt to give back through their research, yet they still discover that the community gives more than they are able to contribute. For example, Sibyl Diver’s Research Note describes a collaborative timeline project, which she co-designed through a formal collaboration between University of California, Berkeley and the Karuk Tribe, located in northern California (supported by the Karuk-UC Berkeley Collaborative). Diver relates her surprise in learning that her assumptions about giving back as an “altruistic project” were all wrong; despite her intent of giving to community partners, she found the community was giving even more to her, by sharing knowledge, meals, homestays, and friendship. In the end, she found it was the time invested in establishing respectful and ongoing relationships with community member that mattered most. Giving back is therefore more fluid than she expected, and difficult to track.

In our effort to examine this dilemma as a common challenge, we recall the work of feminist scholars, who suggest setting modest goals and emphasize that desired outcomes for transformative change are co-constituted with the research process. Ultimately, we suspect that CBPR scholars can never really give “enough.” As all four Research Notes in

this section demonstrate, there are multiple sites for giving back through the research process, including daily interactions with community members, the research design process, collaborative workshops, or community review forums—each bringing its own challenges. Yet, all of the authors in this section still worry about whether their research outcomes are providing meaningful benefits to community partners.

All four researchers struggle with the power dynamics that are implicit to their privileged academic position, and strive to interrupt traditional power hierarchies and inequities through their work. For example, Mehana Vaughan, who is working with a native Hawaiian fishing community near her hometown in Kaua'i, expresses her concerns regarding community report-back sessions that sometimes place her in the uneasy and unfamiliar role of an authority figure. To address this issue, Vaughan has organized gatherings that allow community members to both share a meal and review research progress. This allows community members to talk with one another, and to collectively share impressions. Vaughan “craves immediate and tangible means of reciprocation,” and finds that is important to take the time to organize such informal sharing spaces that empower community members to engage with research results, and also with one another. It is in such spaces that we can set aside traditional power structures, if at least for a moment.

As another example, Margot Higgins works in remote Alaskan communities within and on the periphery of Wrangell Saint Elias National Park and Preserve, where she was formerly employed as the director of a non-profit organization. Many researchers preceding her have visited remote Alaska communities without returning with their results, or only sharing results among particular academic or agency audiences. This history has made earning community trust a challenging and necessary part of her work. Recognizing this, she initiated her research project by visiting the community during the less accessible winter season and presenting her initial research project at a community meeting. There, she asked what questions mattered most to community members. During her subsequent visits, she has spent a great deal of time exchanging experiences with community members, thereby establishing rapport and understanding how the community's interests have changed over time. She has also shared drafts of her writing with community members and incorporated their feedback.

CPBR scholars often strive to influence contentious political processes, yet such aspirations may lead them to fall back on the expert status that they are granted as academics—a difficult issue for those researchers who are trying to emphasize the value of community expertise. Daniel Sarna-Wojcicki's research on collaborative watershed management in the Klamath River Basin, which is also supported by the Karuk-UC Berkeley Collaborative, speaks to this challenge. Like the other authors in this section, Sarna-Wojcicki often gives back through community volunteering and small gestures. However, he has found it more difficult to resolve how to do research that matters to the community—while simultaneously taking academic courses that question the very nature of scientific practices and expertise. Sarna-Wojcicki's reflections consider the problematic nature of pursuing participatory research outcomes given the highly contested nature of Klamath Basin water issues. Even while his research engages with

ideas of partial knowledge, he is also sensitive to local needs for performing objectivity in multi-stakeholder debates. In some cases, community partners ask us to be experts, even as we try to reframe our position as learners. Thus, political realities may create tensions between emphasizing and deemphasizing our “expert” status as academic researchers.

Another common challenge is finding the time to fully engage with communities, given our limited energy and resources. By taking a collaborative research approach that involves multiple stages of iteration and review (McTaggart, 1991), we ask more of ourselves, and we ask more of our community partners. This is a challenge for busy communities who may not have the extra time to attend a community gathering or to sit with us over a long meal. And it is also a challenge for researchers who are struggling to study, teach, write, publish, and take care of responsibilities at home. For example, Vaughan writes about her discomfort with bringing research results to the homes of her community partners because of the time that it takes to go through preliminary findings. And Sarna-Wojcicki discusses an important, but time consuming process of designing a formal community research protocol with community partners.

As part of their solution to these limitations, the authors in this section focus on issues that are consistent with community agendas and long-range goals, many of which they take on as their personal goals. In striving to create more community-driven projects, however, they find themselves involved in a two-way conversation that takes their respective interests into account. Our collaborations require us to be transparent about our own needs and interests as academic researchers, even as we work to address community goals. In addition, the respective goals and needs of academic and community researcher partners often change over time, which may require us to adjust the research project midstream.

The Research Notes demonstrate the range of experiences that the authors have had with developing community-engaged projects. In Vaughan’s case, it was through her fieldwork that she learned about the fishing community’s interest in studying what happens with the fish that they catch. In response to community interest, Vaughan designed a study to track subsistence harvest and distribution patterns among family networks. For Higgins, her work began as an ethnographic study investigating how climate change is affecting the lives and livelihoods of park residents. As her work has progressed, she is working closely with community collaborators to determine how to make this knowledge more accessible to decision-makers, while remaining mindful of local power dynamics. In Diver’s case, she came to the community with a strong interest in co-management, which community members shared. Community partners then pointed her to a specific case study and primary research questions. In yet another scenario, following initial community discussions, Sarna-Wojcicki switched his research topic to address community concerns about local watershed management.

To further consider the question whether we are giving back “enough,” we return to the self-critical scholarship of feminist researchers. We look to the solutions that they pose, such as addressing uneven power relations through practicing self-reflexivity, making power relations more visible, and disrupting dominant discourses that are based on social

hierarchies. We reflect on our own attempts to emphasize partial and situated knowledges, change the language we use, and collaborate on writing projects through our respective research initiatives.

For Diver, the Karuk Lands Management Historical Timeline was a fundamental tool for starting from the standpoint of Karuk tribal land managers and shifting the “language” that we use to convey research results. Diver is concerned about the structural barriers of academic writing that prevent communities from accessing research findings. She therefore tries to create visual and artistic research outputs with which community members can engage. In the timeline project, youth artwork helped embed the research in the context of ongoing relationships between local people and the landscape, and to include visual storytelling. By creating a visually oriented, place-based educational tool that makes the perspectives of Karuk tribal members legible to a wider audience, Diver hopes that the timeline will help shift the balance of power in future natural resource management decision making. Having a key tribal collaborator as a co-author was also an important component of the research process. Thus, the collaborative timeline process and outcome are intended to play a role in empowering Karuk voices to talk back to existing historical accounts of local and regional land management.

Through her research, Vaughan has worked to reconfigure assumptions about concepts of expertise that have affected her own community. In addition, her work with local fishers in her home community also demonstrates how the imagined divide between research process and product can be collapsed through CBPR. A key moment in empowering local partners is exemplified by Vaughan’s participatory study to track subsistence catch and distribution among community members. By tracing the exchange of fish between family and friends, this study showed that Indigenous subsistence practices continue to feed community networks extending throughout the Hawaiian Islands and to the U.S. mainland. Following a request from community members, she has shared this research with the head of the state resource management department, as a way to make Indigenous fisheries practices and needs heard by state-level decision makers. As part of Vaughan’s research process, community members presented findings in public forums, which helped build the confidence of these individuals and strengthened new spokespersons within the community. In this way, the research process itself represented an essential project outcome.

For Higgins, the research process has provided an opportunity to engage in reflexivity that recognizes current knowledge hierarchies. Higgins is hoping to increase the credibility of local knowledge about land change events within the National Park, while also being reflexive about her position as a community-engaged researcher. By working with community members who are monitoring changes in the land, she has observed concrete changes in the local environment alongside local community members. Through this process, her own perspectives of land change events have shifted, along with her perspectives regarding the divisions and commonalities between federal agency scientists and local observers. The long-term observations of many native Alaskans, in particular, have become clearer to her. By documenting the richness of community observations that the National Park Service is not necessarily aware of—without simply giving this



knowledge away to government agencies and potentially harming local people—Higgins seeks to dispel agency stereotypes of community observations as “anecdotal” evidence. Thus, her goal is to support community members who want their knowledge to be used to address rapidly changing climate, social conditions, and local subsistence needs.

Sarna-Wojcicki’s work directly engages with the concept of “situated knowledge” in the context of science-driven decision-making processes. For Sarna-Wojcicki, doing research to support the needs of Karuk research partners means evaluating local watershed collaborations according to community-driven indicators, which incorporate principles of procedural and distributive justice. His work identifies who benefits from collaborative watershed management and uncovers places where Karuk knowledge is being excluded “in the name of science.” By engaging with Haraway’s (1988) ideas of “situated knowledge,” Sarna-Wojcicki has adopted a rich practice of reflexivity, which has transformed his understanding of science as a dialogue or negotiation among myriad actors. He is also working through an established community review process. Both Sarna-Wojcicki and Diver have teamed up with Karuk-UC Berkeley Collaborative partners to create a formal collaborative research protocol that establishes community oversight for their projects, as well as for the research that comes after them. Through this protocol, tribal members are recognized as research mentors, with the authority to approve or reject proposed research projects.

In reflecting on our collaborative research efforts, we have found that learning from feminist scholars helps us to acknowledge our own privilege and redistribute authority through the collaborative research process. We become more aware of the power that we hold in representing community knowledge through our academic writing, and we work to recognize our “partial knowledge.” We attempt to engage with community partners from the very beginning of the research process, and to gauge the community’s interest in a collaborative research project. We gain an appreciation for community standpoints, and envision strategies for shifting entrenched power structures. We are mindful of how power is exerted in the post-fieldwork write up and dissemination of research findings (Wolf, 1996, p. 2). We strive to co-author research outputs with community members or request community review of research findings.

Despite our best intentions, however, we often find ourselves in the role of “expert.” The institutional structures that we work within continue to emphasize the divide between academics and communities. Sometimes communities ask us to play the expert role, as part of addressing a current political issue. Thus, even while we seek to dismantle the historically engrained expectations of academic elites and reposition ourselves as collaborators, there are times when we leverage our positions of privilege to support the alliance-building that we do together with our community research partners. For example, as a researcher, we may help link allies across the different worlds of policy makers, scientists, and community members (Ballard & Belsky, 2010), or help create knowledge that travels (Turnbull, 2003)—although we do not always have control over where the knowledge ends up. Our individual efforts with collaborative research are sometimes contradictory, inevitably shaped by the contested politics of expertise.

### 3. Concluding Thoughts: Dynamic Reciprocity

This article discusses how the four scholars writing for this special issue on the theme of Giving Back Through Collaboration in Practice are engaging with participatory and feminist research principles. We aspire to building respectful community research partnerships, while we continue to ask ourselves hard questions about our research practice. How can we claim expertise as members of an academic community, while simultaneously putting questions marks around that knowledge and inviting critique from the communities we study? How do we shift academic norms to a new paradigm, where knowledge is co-constituted between academic and community research partners? How do we respond to the inevitable contradictions in representation that surface in working with diverse communities?

As our own experiences and those within this special issue show, giving back is not a purist endeavor: we are not able to give back to all community members, and we may only give back in small ways. Neither is giving back a one-way project. Rather, we give back through reciprocal relations, which do not operate simply on a tit-for-tat basis. Reciprocity extends far beyond individual acts of providing economic resources or sharing our research findings. It is not so much a direct accounting of exchange between researchers and communities, as it is a process for “seeking reciprocal relationships based on empathy and mutual respect” and sharing knowledge (England, 1994). Just as communities pass on their knowledge to the academic researcher, we may also provide communities with useful insights or additional perspectives from the academy.

Recognizing our limitations, we have found that giving back through collaborative research involves dynamic reciprocity. It is not a static process. It is time and context dependent—contingent on momentary circumstances and particular community needs. The extent and impact of our giving back changes over time, as do perceptions of our researcher role and local needs. Meaningful benefits may be intangible, fleeting, or they may not emerge for a long time. Sometimes we may not get it right the first time. We learn how to better give back as our community relationships deepen. As Sarna-Wojcicki writes, we hope that the relationships we build with community research partners can help keep us on the right track. We have come to realize that sometimes establishing a meaningful long-term relationship is, in itself, a form of giving back.

Finally, as we move forward in this dynamic endeavor, we recognize that our role as researchers, who are striving for ethical and authentic partnerships with community partners, is not always a comfortable one. Sometimes we feel the squeeze of responsibility pressing in on all sides, as if the new pair of pants we wore to that holiday dinner is now too tight after the meal. Yet after we stride alongside new friends and collaborators, there is a reshaping of the social fabric. Our role begins to take its form. We find there is give and take. There is a moment when we feel the garment fits better—even if it is not a perfect fit.

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Received 27 October 2013 | Accepted 17 March 2014 | Published 1 July 2014

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