Working Together: Feminist Perspectives on Collaborative Research and Action[1]

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Abstract In their commitment to reflection on the processes and methodologies used to create and apply knowledge, feminist geographers have devoted considerable attention to the politics of research, emphasizing such issues as reflexivity, relations with 'subjects,' representation, and voice, particularly to concerns about power. Most research questions continue to be defined by the single researcher, and publications to appear in a single authorial voice. Nevertheless, some feminist geographers have discussed how they involved community women in shaping research agendas and collecting data, and a few have taken up questions of collaboration with research assistants. In this paper, we

introduce additional considerations that arise when collaboration involves partnerships between researchers and community organizations and/or cross-national partnerships. Drawing on our experiences with colleagues and community health agencies at the Mexico-U.S. border, we consider themes of differences in conceptual and methodological orientations, access to resources, expectations about publication of results, and modes of communication. In the process, we reflect on motivations, building relationships of trust, the importance of flexibility, institutional reward systems, and 'turf.' We invite readers to reflect on how such issues can be particularly construed from feminist perspectives.

Introduction

Methodological issues clearly generate much interest in feminist geography. Over the years, our attention has emphasized the politics of research, power relations, and ethics, particularly relationships between the researcher and the researched, issues of positionality, reflexivity, representation, what it means to be 'in the field,' the places of qualitative and quantitative research, and the significance of context.[2] The geographic work draws on and complements feminist literature from other disciplines, such as the works by Haraway (1988), Harding (1987), Oakley (2000), Roberts (1981), Maynard and Purvis (1994), and Wolf (1996). We will not review this substantial literature but will rather turn to a theme that we consider to be still, and somewhat surprisingly, underexplored: perspectives on collaboration. 'Collaboration' has become something of a buzz word in agencies that fund three types of work – international research, projects that link universities and communities, and programs designed by community services agencies to address complex, interrelated problems. However, beyond the priorities of funding agencies, we see collaboration as consistent with long-standing feminist goals of challenging hierarchical relationships and of conducting research that is directed toward changing society. As academics who have been engaged in the Transborder Consortium for Research and Action on Gender and Health at the Mexico-U.S. Border for the last several years, we are interested in examining what collaboration means both conceptually and empirically. This paper is a beginning effort in that direction.

Our interest in collaboration spans several levels – among researchers who are working in multi-person projects, in relationships that cross national and disciplinary boundaries, and in those that link researchers and workers in community agencies. We also think that more consideration should be given to the roles of players in the research endeavor other than the principal scholar(s). These include people who, to varying degrees and in diverse ways, serve as facilitators and/or gatekeepers of our endeavors – research assistants, librarians, clerical staff, editors, reviewers, and funding agency personnel. A few feminist scholars have drawn attention to some aspects of such working relationships. Huntley and Logan (2001) examine gender dynamics in a multi-disciplinary project, including those within the team and with the project sponsors; Gaskell and Eichler (2001) reflect on their relations as foreign "experts" in a project with Chinese women academics; and Kelly *et al.*(1994) engage in a conversation about their inter-personal

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[2] Among the works that address an array of these themes are the collection of articles in *The Canadian Geographer* (1993); *The Professional Geographer* (1994 and 1995); the section on methodology in Jones, Nast, and Roberts (1997); McDowell (1992, 1997, 1999); Moss (2002); and the Women and Geography Study Group (1997).

relations as senior researcher, junior research fellow, and administrative assistant in a research team. In the paper that follows we first review existing feminist geographic writing that addresses processes of collaboration, then turn to literature from other fields that explores meanings of the concept. We next use our experiences in the Transborder Consortium as a case study to explore the evolution and challenges of a collaborative endeavor that crosses national and university-community boundaries.

What Have Feminist Geographers Written About Collaboration?

By and large, feminist geographic research continues the male tradition of the discipline in which research questions are defined by a single scholar and published in a single authorial voice. Yet even in those research and teaching works that are co-authored, we have noted that discussions of positionality and methodology, either by intent or default, are often presented as individual accounts, while discussion of collaborative processes is brief or missing. Two examples serve to illustrate this point. In the Women and Geography Study Group collaboratively-authored text (1997), one short paragraph is devoted to the 'hows' of the collaboration among the authors, but ten individual accounts explore how they came to feminist geography in order to demonstrate the significance of context and 'difference' in shaping scholarship. In their co-authored research volume, Linda Peake and Alissa Trotz (1999) devote several pages of their chapter on methodology and reflexivity to separate, parallel accounts. They note that they constantly interacted with each other in the writing process, and that their work involved members of Guyanese women's organizations in several key capacities, including serving as interviewers and as reviewers of draft questionnaires. Though Peake and Trotz provide an insightful account of how their own "racialised and national identities and subsequent (never fixed) positions on the sliding scale of insider/outsider" (Peake and Trotz, 1999, 21) shaped differences in their individual work, they do not elaborate on how their interactions mediated the research as a whole or influenced their interpretations of material collected by others.

A few pieces by feminist geographers do reveal more about collaboration and group methods. Most attention thus far has been paid to the implications of working with research assistants. Susan Hanson and Geraldine Pratt (1995) acknowledge that their student research assistants cannot be regarded as interchangeable bodies in their relations with subjects and that interviewers are neither passive nor transparent conduits of information, but rather are engaged in conversational performances which have implications for the ways in which questions are interpreted and answered. They report that their assistants challenged the project directors' interpretations and research practices, though assistants also acknowledge that experiences of working in the project affected their own developing research interests. Louise Johnson (2002), situating her remarks within the context of the increasing pressures in Australian universities to conduct externally-funded team research, reveals her anxieties as a socialist feminist of being placed in an employer-employee relation with research assistants. She reflects on the difficulties of knowing whom to hire, how to supervise, and most especially, her concerns over the boundaries between employer-employee versus collegial relations with a research assistant. She asks to whom do the project and data belong and laments the loss of both the pleasures and stresses of doing one's own work in the field.

Isabel Dyck, Judith Lynam, and Joan Anderson (1995) take up the layering of power relations in a project that involved research assistants conducting in-depth

interviews in a health-related study with Chinese Canadian and Indo-Canadian women. In particular, they explore the roles of research assistants as mediators between the researchers, clinic personnel, and women being interviewed. Interviews in institutional clinical settings, for example, exposed the vulnerabilities of the immigrant women. In other cases, the involvement of the assistants as translators for the women in their encounters with clinical personnel cast the assistants in varying positions -- as resources by the women, as colleagues sharing the power of the clinic staff, or as neutral bystanders. When follow-up interviews were held in the women's homes, additional aspects of interpersonal dynamics emerged – for example, in the ways in which the interviewers adapted the interests of the researchers to the context, took on responsibilities for serving as advisors, or were subject to specific social placement by the women being interviewed. In another paper, Dyck (2002) raises concerns about the ethical difficulties that arise when a project puts research assistants in emotionally stressful positions with women being interviewed.

From a different perspective, J.-K. Gibson-Graham (1994) has described how workshops with community women recruited as interviewers prompted her to rethink an essentialist category ('miners' wives'). While interactions in the workshops revealed the diversity within the group, they nevertheless permitted Gibson-Graham to find points of partial identification with and among the women. This recognition helped her to transcend the pessimism and immobilisation that post-structural perspectives about differences among women can generate in the researcher. Additionally, she indicates that the encounters among the women built a sense of group identification that supported their subsequent actions in the community. Finally, Janet Townsend (1995) addresses aspects of her collaboration as a peer with Mexican colleagues. Their backgrounds in different disciplines influenced not only the questions asked, but also tended to be displayed in the diverse skills team members brought to approaching specific topics such as sexuality. Overall, however, this feminist geographic writing focuses on collaboration by individual researchers and a relatively small number of other people in supporting roles. We are interested in such relationships, but think it is also important to address collaboration that crosses organizational boundaries. As Huxham (1996, 2) points out, such work is not only increasingly desired and expected, it is difficult: "It is a non-trivial practice because of a number of inherent hazards."

Defining Collaboration

To this point, we have addressed collaboration without acknowledging that the concept itself needs to be examined. One source we have found helpful in clarifying our own thinking on differentiating the forms of working jointly is Mattessich *et al.* (2001). The authors distinguish collaboration from other forms of joint effort which they label 'cooperation' and 'coordination' on the basis of how they differ in four key areas: their vision and relationships; their structure, division of responsibilities and styles of communicating; their understanding of authority and accountability; and the way they manage resources and rewards. In this schema, cooperation is the least demanding way of interacting in that it "is characterized by informal relationships that exist without any commonly defined mission, structure, or planning effort" (Mattessich *et al.,* 2001, 60). An intermediate form of interaction they call 'coordination': characterized by more formal relationships and an understanding of compatible missions. Some planning and division of roles are required, and communication channels are established (Mattessich *et al,.* 2001,

60). The most complex form of interaction they label 'collaboration', which "is a mutually beneficial and well-defined relationship entered into by two or more organizations to achieve common goals. The relationship includes a commitment to mutual relationships and goals; a jointly developed structure and shared responsibility; mutual authority and accountability for success; and sharing of resources and rewards" (Mattessich *et al*., 2001, 59).

Arthur Himmelman (1996) defines a similar schema in his work which draws on his study of different organizations in the field of health care. He identifies a continuum of change strategies of increasing levels of complexity and commitment, and three common barriers to working together successfully – dealing with time, trust, and turf. However, his schema includes an additional category which we consider a helpful refinement. At the simplest level, he says, is *networking* – "exchanging information for mutual benefit." He sees it as involving "an initial level of trust and commitment among organizations and ... best done when connections or linkages are made person-to-person rather than organization-to-organization" (Himmelman, 1996, 27). This seems a useful distinction to us in this 'information age' when information is regularly shared at will, rather than on an as-needed basis among actors who may never interact beyond such interest-based contacts. Himmelman's other categories roughly parallel those of Mattesich *et al*., though he inverts the definitions of coordinating and cooperating while making similar conceptual distinctions. Himmelman also draws attention to the importance of power in decision-making and ownership within these relationships.

There is relatively little literature to guide or analyze how such relationships might be created, maintained, or analyzed. A recent report from the Social Science Research Council notes "a fuller understanding of collaboration as a field of social action is long overdue" (Social Science Research Council, 2000, 1). Mattessich *et al.* (2001), evaluating studies of collaboration among community social service agencies in the United States, outline twenty factors that might be considered to assess 'success,' grouping them within six domains: environment; membership characteristics; process and structure; communication; purpose; and resources. Their work led us to several studies of collaboration between universities and local communities, especially those involving urban planning, that highlighted the importance of building trust and of making efforts to negotiate across differences in organizational cultures (Mayfield and Lucas, 2000; Rubin, 1998; Wiewel and Lieber, 1998).

Within the context of scientific cooperation between researchers and institutions of the 'North' and 'South,' the Social Science Research Council's (2000) examination of international scholarly collaboration identifies seven aspects of cases to review: agenda setting, goals, personnel, process, institutional structure, who pays, and results. In a similar vein, the Swiss Commission for Research Partnership with Developing Countries (KFPE) (2001) has proposed eleven principles: deciding on objectives together, building up mutual trust, sharing information and developing networks, sharing responsibility, creating transparency, monitoring and evaluating the collaboration, disseminating the results, applying the results, sharing the profits equitably, increasing research capacity, and building on achievements. An earlier study by the Commission (1998) described some of the more common barriers to forming genuine North-South research partnerships: the tendency to neglect issues of social importance to the South; the resistance to recognizing the validity of participatory research; the bias of funding sources towards 'hard' sciences and technical fields over social science questions or methods; and the lack

of attention to capacity building as a reciprocal and sustainable goal. Such considerations point to a history of the fundamental lack of appreciation of the agency and abilities of nominal partners from the South, and serve as clear examples of the kinds of assumptions which work against building the trust necessary for authentic collaboration. In assessing our own experiences in hindsight, we find all these frameworks useful. In what follows, as we analyze the work of the Transborder Consortium, we will draw on aspects of each.

Experiences of the Transborder Consortium

Since 1993, Mexican and U.S. feminist scholars and community agency personnel have come together in the Transborder Consortium for Research and Action on Gender and Reproductive[3] Health at the Mexico-U.S. border, crossing national, disciplinary, and university-community boundaries in conducting research, implementing action, and attempting to influence the educational practices of community health workers and faculty in higher education. The Consortium's central theme for much of that period has been cervical-uterine cancer as an aspect of sexual and reproductive health.

As Executive Director of the Southwest Institute for Research on Women at the University of Arizona since 1980, one of us (Monk) has been involved in many collaborative projects, but until this effort had avoided working in the nearby border areas of Mexico, to a major extent because of wariness of academic imperialism. She welcomed an overture to collaborate from a Mexican colleague (Norma Ojeda de la Peña) who was developing a new gender program in the border region at El Colegio de la Frontera Norte (COLEF). Ojeda considered that U.S. experience and cooperation would be relevant for her new program, complementing the perspectives of feminist scholars from elsewhere in Mexico, especially of those in Mexico City. In this recognition, we see that both parties exhibited a sense that the current environment was propitious for working together.

The relationship developed over several phases that can be partly defined in Himmelman's terms, and that reveal our intuitive understanding of some of the principles and domains articulated by Mattessich *et al.* (2001), the Social Science Research Council (2000), and KFPE (2001). We realized the need to explore common ground and to join in setting the agenda, and were aware that we would encounter complexities of culture, language, context, institutional politics, personalities, resources, and conceptual and methodological understandings. Figure 1 summarizes the incremental stages of our relationship, and identifies the main partners in an expanding group.

In this paper we will not separately explore all these phases of the Consortium's development and work, but will review selected aspects, commenting on both successes and problems within our experiences in order to illustrate some of the issues involved in developing and maintaining relationships. In Himmelman's terms, our relationships can be identified as having begun with 'networking' but having evolved into 'collaboration.' We should also note that some aspects of the Consortium's work, for example, the educational programs with community health educators, may be most appropriately defined as coordination. This component of our work, which was primarily led by COLSON, brought in the other lead partners as facilitators and presenters, and recruited as

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[3] The Consortium initially focused on gender and reproductive health but has subsequently broadened its orientation to 'gender and health.'

participants *promotoras* (lay health workers) from both sides of the border whose organizations shared the Consortium's goals of reaching out to women, but who focused more on their local communities than on transborder work. From the perspective of its overall agenda and management, however, the Consortium can be identified as a collaboration, as can the research-action projects that the Consortium supported.

I.   **(1993-94)**   *Networking*

Among overlapping feminist scholars (geographers, demographers sociologists, public health research/educators, women/gender studies scholars (see Figure 2).

II.   **(1994)**   *Exploration*

As above, plus program officers of private funding foundations; funding by the University of Arizona Office of International Programs

III.   **(1995-97)**   *Planning*

As in Stage II, with additional representatives of community health agencies, feminist leaders in health-related non-governmental organizations; introduction of additional feminist scholars and agency personnel; funding by the Ford Foundation (New York and Mexico City) and John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation (Mexico City)

IV.   **(1997-2000)**   *Building*

As in Stage III, with addition of staff, a wider group of scholars, community agency/non-governmental organization personnel; funding by the Ford and MacArthur Foundations

V.   **(2001-04)**   *Consolidation/Transformation*

Addition of staff, changes and continuity in scholars and community agency/non-governmental agency personnel (diminished role for COLEF); funding from Ford Foundation with ancillary and related projects supported by other agencies.

Figure 1. Development of the Transborder Consortium

We will first address some substantive, conceptual, and organizational matters. The relationship began through communication across overlapping networks: (See Figure 2). One partner (Monk, Executive Director of SIROW) had connections with feminist

geographers and demographers in Barcelona, Spain. While visiting, she met a local demographer who was planning to take up a residency at COLEF. That scholar reported the activities of SIROW to a second partner (Ojeda de la Peña, demographer at COLEF) who was hoping to strengthen research and teaching on gender within her own institution. Monk and Ojeda arranged to meet at a conference both were attending, and began to explore common interests, strengths, and approaches. Fairly quickly they identified economic and labor themes as one interest, and health as a second. With support from a small grant from the Office of International Programs at the University of Arizona, two joint seminars were designed to connect scholars associated with COLEF and SIROW: the first emphasizing economic themes, held at COLEF in Tijuana, BC, and the second, around health, hosted at the University of Arizona, Tucson, AZ.

By the time of the second seminar, the network expanded. SIROW had worked with several researchers on women's health at the University of Arizona, one of whom (Jill de Zapien) had deep connections with a colleague (Catalina Denman) at El Colegio de Sonora (COLSON). COLSON had previously established connections with COLEF, the two being Mexican government-supported research and graduate education centers in the northern border states. All three institutions had a history of support from the Ford Foundation. A program officer from the Foundation's Mexico City office expressed interest in the group, and was invited to the second joint seminar. Her inclusion moved the researchers to focus on gender and health for its prospective collaboration, more specifically towards reproductive health, a subject COLSON was already involved in and which was the focus of one of the Foundation's programs. The Foundation's goals involve social change and action supported by research and education, rather than pure research. This is compatible with our own histories, especially with those of SIROW and COLSON. A decision to include action implied bringing community agencies into the Consortium.

Given our history of experience in the region, we soon came to sense that topics such as abortion or rape, while critical, could be sufficiently contentious and inflammatory that they might derail a new partnership, especially its community relations. We therefore settled on a key but 'safer' issue – using a gender lens to approach research and action on cervical-uterine cancer and its prevention. This cancer, which is linked with sexually transmitted antecedents, is the prime cause of death among Mexican women in their reproductive years and a major cause of death among Mexican American women. To inform ourselves of shared understandings we organized three joint seminars in the planning phase – the first on gender, the body, health care delivery, and health care perspectives in relation to the household; the second on existing knowledge of cervical-uterine cancer and reproductive health in the Mexico-US border region; the third on the border context and experiences of linking research and action. Each institution took the lead in planning one seminar to which regional scholars and representatives of community health agencies were invited. These events also included brainstorming in small groups about possible future work. They clarified our common interests in gender/power relationships; in the importance of thinking about regional cultural constructions of masculinity as well as femininity; of diversity among women within our context; and of preferences for qualitative methods in creating 'insider' understandings.
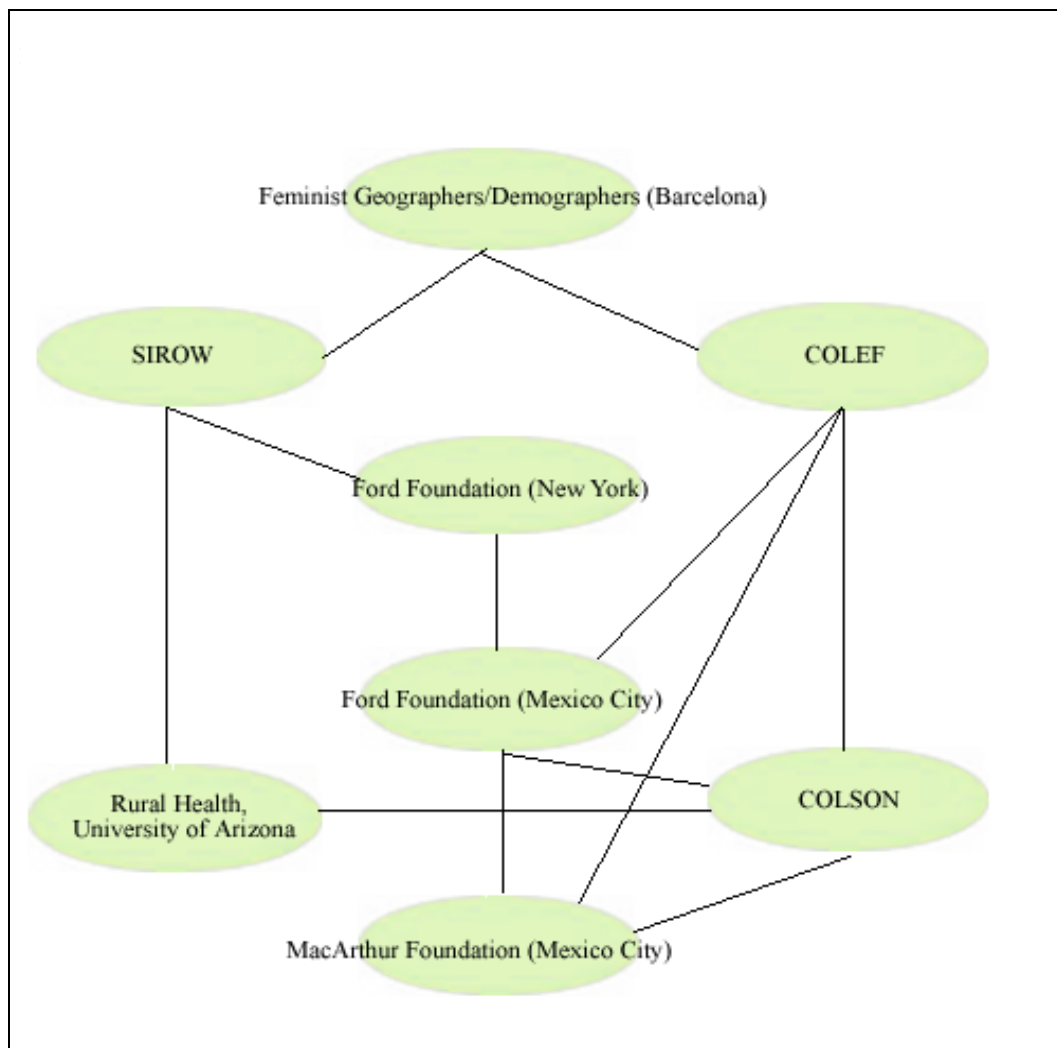
Figure 2. The Consortium Network

The seminars also revealed some areas of difference in conceptualizations and emphases that reflected national and disciplinary intellectual traditions. As they considered differences among women, U.S. scholars, especially those from women's and gender studies, were sensitive to assumptions that heterosexuality is normative. In general, across disciplines, the U.S. scholars also identified 'ethnicity' as a category for analysis. By contrast, the Mexican scholars were somewhat less attuned to issues of sexuality or ethnicity, but more sensitive to the status of Mexican-born women on their side of the border as internal 'migrants' from other regions. U.S. scholars did not use this category to talk about U.S.-born women in border communities, though those women may

well have moved to the region from elsewhere. Issues of class were not extensively discussed, but U.S. participants were aware that Latin American scholars were more likely to frame research within Marxist perspectives than they were. Specific terminology, such as the word 'promiscuity,' also came under considerable scrutiny. Was this a value-laded notion, or simply a way of identifying that a woman may have had multiple sexual partners over her life? Disciplinary distinctions were apparent between anthropologists, oriented to qualitative, ethnographic and 'insider' accounts, and public health scholars and epidemiologists schooled in working in positivist modes of inquiry.

To that point in the work of the Consortium, we demonstrated an awareness of the principles articulated in the literature we have cited above – developing (or, more accurately, building on) our networks, deciding on goals and objectives together, and sharing perspectives and information. The issue of trust was not articulated, but was assumed and/or reflected as a component of the previous, though partial, relationships among the partners. In hindsight, and as we reflect on the literature on collaboration, we can also see that our gradual approach, and our recognition that sharing information as well as maintaining joint responsibilities for planning and implementation within the leadership, contributed to building trust. As we moved forward, the Consortium's directors brainstormed on email, just then becoming readily available in Mexican institutions, refining and elaborating on one another's suggestions. As we identified the components of the Consortium's plans, we assessed our personal and institutional capacities and identified who would be best placed to take primary responsibility for particular components. To discuss the most complex issues we scheduled face-to-face meetings, rotating between the sites of the three institutions (Hermosillo, Tijuana/San Diego, and Tucson), and bringing in a wider group of colleagues from our institutions and community organizations. This process has continued as we implemented our work, including our approach to collaborative writing. We use electronic mail, phone conversations, and face-to-face meetings to identify themes and review specific points. Who initiates first drafts depends on the language (English or Spanish) and intended audience of the proposed work. In our communications, we agree to speak or write in the language in which each person feels most comfortable, recognizing our individual language skills range from limited to fluent bilingualism.

While we initially attempted to design one large, multi-site research-action project, it soon became clear that no member or individual in the Consortium was committed to, available for, or possibly capable of such an endeavor. This was possibly the most protracted and difficult decision to reach, coming after an extended meeting when we had tried to formulate such a project. It was apparent that no one person had the time, given other responsibilities, to manage a comprehensive project. Drawing on some earlier experiences, especially in SIROW, we therefore decided to move to a decentralized research model and a multi-faceted agenda that would recognize the strengths of each partner and also permit us to be responsive to the diversity of women and of border contexts. Leadership was designed to be shared, including academic directors from SIROW, COLEF, and COLSON plus three representatives of community agencies – one selected by each academic partner. Together, these six people comprised the Steering Committee. The Consortium implemented a program with five major components: (i) grants to teams within and beyond our own institutions that linked cross-border and/or researchers and practitioners; (ii) a conference to bring those teams together; (iii) workshops for lay health educators (*promotoras*) in community agencies or non-

governmental organizations;   (iv) mini-grants for capacity building within those community agencies or to support graduate students in the initiation of research; and (v) a week-long institute to focus on curriculum development in our academic partner institutions. We also proposed to build databases of researchers and of community agencies and a bilingual bibliography to support our work. We agreed to a budget that would distribute funds comparably among the lead academic institutions; though labor costs may be different in Mexico than in the U.S., infrastructure and support services require more funds in Mexico. We saw equal funding as a way of addressing power over resources. The academic institutions would be responsible to the funding agency for overall management, while the Steering Committee joined in policy setting and the allocation of funds to community agencies and researchers.[4]   Through these administrative mechanisms, and joint writing of the proposal for funding, we were assuming a sharing of responsibility and attempting to create transparency in our operations.

The Consortium's Research-for-Action Projects

We issued a regional call for pre-proposals and involved the Consortium's Steering Committee in screening over twenty applications, inviting full proposals from thirteen teams to which we provided feedback.   We eventually funded eight, some led by community agencies, some by researchers.[5] What 'research' meant differed among these groups. For several of the community agencies that applied, it implied large scale, quantitative surveys focused on ascertaining knowledge barriers to preventive care; their orientation was more biomedical than social, and 'women' rather than 'gender' was their central construct. Familiarity with the tenets of feminist methodology, as these have been discussed in the literature referenced earlier in this paper, was for the most part not evident. For the researchers, the orientation was largely to small, in-depth ethnographic studies. Some articulated perspectives on gender that included attention to masculinity as well as femininity, while others saw 'cultural differences' as their main frame of reference. The specificity of context and differences among women were generally recognized. We funded projects in rural, urban, and marginal settlements, in a community clinic, on masculinity and femininity, among young migrant workers, indigenous migrant women, on sex workers, and older women. We did not fund the large scale surveys but supported the ethnographic orientations. In that way, it appears that power in decision-making rested more strongly with the researchers than with the community agencies. But the decision also reflected the Steering Committee's research experience and its knowledge of what could reasonably be accomplished within the financial and temporal constraints of the project. In our judgement, neither the time nor the money available would support large-scale surveys, nor did we think these would yield the in-depth insights into the significance of gender, culture, and context as influences on women's health.

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[4] Subcontracts were issued to community agencies participating in the research-action projects.

[5] The results of these projects, together with comments on the experiences of collaboration, are reported in Ojeda de la Peña and Gavilanes (2001). A book (in Spanish) of selected papers is in preparation.

Each funded research-action team designed its own project. The diversity of projects has enriched our work, but different assumptions across teams also inhibit dialogue and comparison. In hindsight, we realize that some of the categories of 'difference' that we had discussed in the planning meetings were absent from the submitted proposals and thus not addressed. Methodologically, several of the teams chose to use focus groups, an approach that can be seen as collaborative in ways that are different from the 'collaboration' that feminists have written about as part of one-on-one interviewing. The assumptions about the timing of these groups within the research-action process varied among projects. For some, they served as an initial phase of research to identify themes for subsequent in-depth interviews. Others saw them as an integral and ongoing part of linking research and action, using the groups to generate culturally appropriate perspectives in creating and implementing community health education work by lay-health promoters. One researcher continually engaged personnel from the community agency in developing her protocols and in the interpretation of data. She commented on differences in their priorities and hers: the agency personnel brought 'practical' agendas, some, though not only, pre-formed interpretations, and a desire to proceed relatively quickly. By comparison, she described the researcher as one "who moves on leaden feet," desiring to immerse herself in and intuit from the material. In virtually all projects the leaders have reported that focus groups served not only as sources of research information, but were important in 'consciousness raising' and building relationships among participants. These comments confirm those few assessments of focus group methodology in the geographic literature (e.g. Goss and Leinbach, 1996; Longhurst, 1996).

We will now turn to some of the problems that arose in the collaborations. We funded one community agency which did not really have a research commitment but chiefly was motivated by an interest in extending their educational programs from the U.S. side of the border to their nearby Mexican community. Collaboration in this case meant a joint effort to implement an existing outreach services program, one in which 'women' but not gender perspectives were integrated. The Steering Committee thought that the agency's work and the community it served were important ones in the region. We therefore asked them to revise the proposal and funded a research consultant to assist in that process and to get the research off the ground. Although some research data were collected, we can find no evidence so far that it was interpreted or integrated into the action phase, or that perspectives on gender and power were developed. This project illustrates that the 'collaboration' did not, despite efforts on the part of the Consortium leadership, extend to a shared understanding of objectives.

Human relationships in collaborative projects can be fulfilling and harmonious or fraught with tensions which may or may not be successfully negotiated. They form part of the turf issues referred to in the literature. In one of our teams, the lead academic made a clear request to have discretion over procedural, theoretical and analytical matters, as that researcher saw the role of the community agency colleague not as another 'head,' but as 'the hands' – as someone who was to assist with data collection and implementing the action component. The scholar requested a signed protocol that all the data and publication rights be considered proprietary. Though the scholar expresses egalitarian values, the culture of the employing academic institution – which has had limited prior engagement with community collaboration, and in which annual performance reviews include a point system that does not encourage sharing – inhibits more complete

collaboration. It is not surprising that tensions arose and the project had difficulty meeting deadlines for research reports; nevertheless, despite these barriers, several positive outcomes stemmed from the project. For collaboration to be successful, we need to find ways to reward it within institutions that have narrow conceptions of assessing individual accomplishments. This recognition is articulated in several of the evaluations of university-community collaborations that we have reviewed (e.g. Wiewel and Lieber, 1998).

In another case, misunderstandings over the partisan implications around the choice of contacts and settings to host their workshops deteriorated into personal animosities that made transborder collaboration problematic. The history of resentments over power imbalances between Mexican and U.S. institutions, sparked by a lack of sensitivity by U.S. members to the major partisan struggles being played out at the municipal level in Sonora, soured the bi-national working relations. It did not help matters that the key researcher, a Mexican, and the principal U.S. partner, a Mexican American community agency educator, were the ones at odds. Several layers of turf issues came into play in that case, which, nevertheless, produced publishable results. Further information about the specifics of the collaborations is included in Ojeda de la Peña and Gavilanes (2001).

Concluding Remarks

We could address many other themes. Those discussed here serve as exemplars of the grounds that need to be negotiated within a collaboration. We conclude here by summarizing some points we have illustrated directly, others that we have implied. In a collaboration, sharing turf and building trust are critical; we had some successes in these areas but in other respects were less successful. Communication developed through the gradual approach we took to exploring each others' perspectives, especially within the leadership group, but was less completely developed with COLEF than between COLSON and SIROW. Personalities doubtless played a part, but institutional instability and programmatic and personnel changes at COLEF hindered continuation of the three-way equal collaboration.[6] In the latest phase of the Consortium's work, COLSON and SIROW have assumed leadership; a new institution, the University of Texas at El Paso, has been added for a specific component of the research and action; and scholars at COLEF will be included as affiliated individuals, rather than as institutional partners.

Collaboration was uneven within the research-action teams. Disciplinary and language differences were obstacles, although also routes to new insights which are the subject of a manuscript in preparation. Institutional cultures and reward systems presented obstacles that were exacerbated by personalities and differences in style and political affiliations. Sharing financial resources and engaging community personnel in allocating and managing some of those resources via the Steering Committee addressed some, but not all, aspects of power differentials and collegiality. Finally, we learned just how much time and commitment are involved in working collaboratively.

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[6] Under a new administration at COLEF, the gender studies and public health programs were re-organized into other divisions and the Consortium co-director at COLEF obtained a position in the United States.

From the perspective of this collection in *ACME* on feminist methodologies, the question remains: are these approaches feminist? To our way of thinking, our approaches to working together are feminist, in that they are alert to issues of power, to the ways in which research and action can be brought together in the service of women, and are sensitive to context and to diversity among women. They are not, however, exclusively feminist. Other literature on collaboration incorporates a number of similar and complementary perspectives, particularly in its attention to reciprocity within participatory methods, and in going beyond the goal of recognizing agency to one of empowerment. The unintended blind spots occasioned by academic professionalization processes, in addition to the institutional structuring of rewards, nonetheless may serve to constrain the application of avowed feminist values. Nevertheless, we think that further attention to questions of collaboration should be on the agenda for feminist geographers and other feminist scholars.

Acknowledgments

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