

“Communities,” Anthropology and the Politics of Stakeholding: The Challenges of an Inorganic Activist Anthropology

Kristen E.G. Hudgins

University of South Carolina, Columbia

ABSTRACT This paper draws on my experiences creating and implementing the South Carolina Migrant Farmworker Resource Project, an activist endeavour with an anthropological approach. My discussion of the project focuses on the difficulties of managing stakeholder interests while working among various community organizations and simultaneously accessing the input of the community to be served. I use community in quotes to problematize assumptions and to question what makes a community, if not self-defined. Challenges in definition, collaboration, planning, implementation, and sustainability are examined through a critique of inorganic, participatory research and the difficulties of trying to engage in applied anthropology.

Keywords: participatory research, community, collaboration, implementation, sustainability

This article is an endeavour to pull apart and discuss one of my experiences attempting collaborative and participatory research within the context of engaging in activist and applied anthropology. In many ways, this paper is more about me and the questions I faced in trying to design and execute a project than it is about the project itself. Therefore this paper is a telling of the pitfalls of trying to use a participatory approach to research, which even after all of this I still think is a goal that I will always strive toward. It is a reflection and a re-evaluation of what I attempted to do and what I actually managed to accomplish in a way that I hope may help others who find themselves in similar positions.

For the past four years now, I have lived and gone to school in South Carolina. In that time I have

worked in various aspects with the growing Latino/a community there, largely within research based contexts and often revolving around health issues. It was in this time that I became interested not only in collaborative and participatory approaches and how they might enhance and improve research design, but also in how to bridge gaps between community stakeholders.

Let me begin at the beginning. I received a year-long fellowship from North Carolina-based Student Action with Farmworkers (SAF) which is a non-profit organization “whose mission is to bring students and farmworkers together to learn about each other’s lives, share resources and skills, improve conditions for farmworkers, and build diverse coalitions working for social change” (SAF 2009). As a

SAF fellow I was tasked with developing a project related in some way to farmworkers, and we were to do so with a community-based organization of our choosing within our state. It should be noted here that I never found a community-based organization in South Carolina that was made up of farmworkers.

I knew that I wanted to do an applied project and from experience working with different, although largely Latino/a communities in South Carolina, I knew that healthcare access was an important issue in the state. For this reason, I chose the South Carolina Hispanic/Latino Health Coalition (SCHLHC) as my community partner in large part because I was already familiar with some of their work. Additionally, I felt they would serve well as an umbrella organization of sorts and that they would be able to facilitate my entrée to work with smaller community-based organizations. The SCHLHC lead me to the South Carolina Primary Health Care Association's (SCPHCA) Migrant Health Program, and it was with this community-based organization that I worked most closely with. The majority of the fieldwork and research that I did for this project was facilitated by the SCPHCA through their clinics for farmworkers and the summer interns placed with them by SAF. All of these influences led me to create—under the auspices and influences of many interested parties—the South Carolina Migrant Farmworker Health Resource Project.

Throughout 2006 I worked with several different community organizations on the project in order to develop a booklet, which was designed to help farmworkers more easily access low-cost healthcare resources throughout the state of South Carolina. The booklet is written in both Spanish and English, is organized by county, and gives basic information for all hospitals, urgent care centers, health departments, and community-based migrant health clinics. It is this applied research that I focus on. Additionally, this paper is concerned with whether or not this particular project merits the classification of having used a participatory approach, and asks the question: how does one do collaborative research when it is difficult to determine who constitutes the “community” you are working with?

Participatory research has been characterized in many ways, and here I provide only a small slice of the scholarship on the subject. Budd Hall (1993) describes it broadly, writing, “Participatory research fundamentally is about the right to speak” (xvii). Here Hall is referring to the collaborative course of action that a participatory approach necessitates in its goals to engage in “a process which combines three activities: research, education, and action” (xiv). Peter Park (1993) further states that: “participatory research begins with a problem...the sense of the problem arises from the people who are affected by it and whose interest demands that it be solved. And the problem is social in nature and calls for a collective solution” (8). I take heart in Patricia Maguire's (1993) approach that: “even the modest successes of *attempting* this alternative research approach may help others find the courage to learn by doing rather than being immobilized and intimidated by ideal standards” (1993:158). It is within her work that I draw a lot of inspiration for this paper to critically examine my role within the Health Resource Project.

In identifying an interest and commitment to doing participatory and collaborative research, I needed to decide whom I was collaborating with. I saw myself as working for the interests of farmworkers and I felt that this was the group that I was working for as I saw the health resource booklet as being for their use and benefit. However, as will become clear further on in the paper, farmworkers are a highly diverse and often mobile group and thus in many ways hard to define as a “community.” It was for this reason that the majority of my sustained interactions and participatory feedback throughout the project were with the representatives of community-based groups, service providers, and volunteers more so than with farmworkers themselves. In order to understand the process of how the project came about and was conducted, it is important to define the project stakeholders, whom I see as the farmworkers, the community-based organizations with whom I was working, service providers, and myself.

I had originally conceived of this project as participatory, collaborative, and constructed in large part along the lines that farmworkers saw as most pressing for them; however, in choosing to work with

healthcare-based community organizations, I had already predetermined my starting point for the project. This is a large part of why I see this project to be inorganic and not participatory, because *I* determined the parameters of the project, and not the farmworkers. What I have come to realize is that my project was not so much about farmworkers' needs as defined by farmworkers as much as those needs were defined by the community-based organizations that in some ways spoke for the farmworkers. It is here that I feel I failed utterly in the Freirian model of a liberation and participatory model (Freire 1974).

Throughout the project I easily involved the community-based organizations, but struggled to establish contact with farmworkers. In this way I was trying to follow what Rylko-Bauer and van Willigen (1993) state as the key to collaborative research, which involves "decision makers and other potential stakeholders (e.g. community members) in the research process so as to identify their information needs, develop relevant research design and methods that have face validity, identify ways in which clients can use the research and increase their interest and commitment to doing so" (1993:140). As I floundered through the project trying to figure out political relationships between groups—which could be complicated by funding issues for example—I found myself not only engaging in an activist, applied anthropology, but also engaging in an ethnography of community-based organizations in an attempt to understand their constituencies and agendas and where I fit in to the matrix of these relationships.

So whom exactly was I working for? I still struggle with this question. There were many cooks in the kitchen and I think that is the nature of collaborative work. The lack of bounded notions of who farmworkers were led me to rely more heavily upon community-based organizations than on any particular farmworking "community." The community-based organizations were my gatekeepers and my primary stakeholders as well, which in some ways complicated matters and yet made us mutually dependent upon one another to get the project done and the booklet produced. But it wasn't until recently that I realized that they were my primary stakeholders in this project, not farmworkers per se. In this work I

have often seen myself as a pinball bouncing off of different interests and groups while trying desperately not to fall down the chute.

The original goal for this project was to make it participatory in nature so that it would most accurately represent the needs of the "community" that I saw myself working with—being farmworkers. My first problem became obvious when I realized that I didn't know what constituted a community within this context (see Chavez 1994 for a discussion of Latin American immigrants and notions of community). Farmworkers in South Carolina, as in other states, are a diverse and highly mobile group from different national, social, and sometimes linguistic backgrounds—so are they a community on the sole basis of their shared occupation? Even this can be considered highly differential as farmworkers face different working conditions based on time of year, crop worked, and documented status. So what might constitute a farmworker community?

Statistics on farmworkers in South Carolina can be difficult to come across and their accuracy is questionable with regard to issues of census undercounts, and the invisibility of the farmworking labour force in the United States (Kingsolver 2007). The U.S. Department of Labor considers there to be "two distinct classes of farmworkers: migrant agricultural workers and seasonal agricultural workers" (Rosenbaum and Shin 2005:6). A migrant farmworker is someone whose primary employment is in seasonal agriculture, travels for work and lives in temporary housing. A seasonal farmworker may work in seasonal agriculture, but has a permanent residence in the community.

It has been reported that migrant farmworkers tend to be foreign-born whereas most seasonal farmworkers are U.S.-born (SAF 2007). The Department of Labor estimates that three quarters of the hired farm work force in the United States were born in Mexico. And more than 40 percent of crop workers were migrants, meaning they had travelled at least 75 miles in the previous year to get a farm job.

The main crops produced with the work of farmworkers in South Carolina are peaches, watermelons, tobacco, apples, strawberries, various vegetables (such as cucumbers, soybeans, and peanuts), forestry and

nursery work. “Seventeen percent of the state’s economic product and 1 in 5 jobs are linked to the food, fiber and forestry industry” (South Carolina Agriculture and Forestry). Generally speaking, hired farmworkers are largely recent immigrants from Latin America—although other groups such as African Americans, Haitians, and immigrants from the West Indies have also historically worked as hired farm labour in the state. According to Lacy (2006), most farmworkers who work in South Carolina live beneath the poverty level, are mainly Spanish speaking with a limited proficiency in English, lack transportation, health insurance, and access to other social service resources. The statistics for SC are that 1,400 farmworkers or so arrive on H2A visas specifically to do farmwork for a maximum of a 10 month expected stay (depending on the crop they are working) and are supposed to receive a minimum of \$8.00 an hour (Lacy 2006).

As per the SCPHCA’s Migrant Health Program staff, the majority (being about 95%) of farmworkers they work with are Latino/a—these same statistics were echoed by the representatives of five different health centres serving migrant and seasonal farmworkers around the state. My personal contact with farmworkers indicates that many people take advantage of different labour opportunities throughout the year moving back and forth between farmwork and other forms of low-wage labour—such as working in restaurants or in construction. It is posited by many who work with farmworkers that workers classified as migrants tend generally to be young men working their way from crop to crop for the short term, whereas seasonal farmworkers are more likely to include men, women, and children. The distinction between seasonal and migrant farmworkers can be an important one with regard to funding and access to certain benefits.

Armed with this knowledge, I set out to engage these different types of farmworkers, but caught myself wondering if differences and similarities in occupation across such varied national and linguistic lines could constitute a sense of community. Social scientists have conceptualized communities in several different ways throughout time as based on place, interest, and attachment around notions of inclusion

and exclusion (Wilmott 1986). Marx (1967[1867]) saw community as linked to labour, which was certainly my first assumption choosing a group with a similar labour background. However I did not know if that is how farmworkers chose to see themselves, particularly if they are engaged in other labour activities outside of farmwork. Anderson (1983) pointed us to think of communities as imagined and Chavez (1994) reminds us that immigrant communities in particular maintain many transnational ties linking them back to their home communities. I would contend that notions of identity and community are fluid and relative to the situation, context, and perhaps even the mood of the person whom you are asking.

Communities of place revolve around geography, whereas communities of interest may be seen as occupational groupings or organized around hobbies, and communities of attachment are a bit more nebulous and are often arranged upon notions of ethnicity, political leanings, and lifestyle, for example. But can one not belong to several different communities without necessarily privileging any one over any other? Watts (2000) notes that a community is: “an extraordinarily dense social object and yet one that is rarely subject to critical scrutiny” and “is often invoked as a unity, as an undifferentiated thing with intrinsic powers, that speaks with a single voice” (2000: 37). At this point, it is beginning to appear that “communities” to some extent are always somewhat externally defined. But to what degree did I feel comfortable defining farmworkers for the purposes of my project? I felt that I needed some sort of bounded group in order to be able to engage them in the participatory process: if you are going to use community collaboration, you need a community, right?

Needless to say, I grappled with this question over and over again. In an ideal world I wanted to work with farmworkers and have their feedback and their ideas about what they needed and wanted from the project. I quickly came back to this central question....who are farmworkers? Are they communities of interest as they share a general occupation? But aren’t the divisions within that occupation sometimes more important? Or the crops they work on? What about where they are from—does that count as a community of geography or of attachment?

Wouldn't it depend on how the farmworkers defined themselves, and wouldn't those definitions change based upon any number of variables? Considering the highly diversified farmworking community, who exactly was I trying to target? Was I talking about migrant farmworkers, family farm owners, immigrant farmworkers, native-born farmworkers, or seasonal farmworkers?

Given the mobility and high degree of variation among farmworkers in the state, I decided that I would take a two-pronged approach to looking at issues faced by South Carolina's farmworkers. I chose to engage in outreach and clinic programs run through the SCPHCA Migrant Health Program, in order to have direct communication with farmworkers, as well as working with the community-based healthcare providers themselves. By moving back and forth between these two groups and within the webs that connected them—firmly at times and tenuously at others—I was able to start constructing a picture of how the stakeholders were placed and how this shaped their perceptions of farmworker needs, as well as how these perceptions intersected or varied.

The community organizations I was working with had a keen interest in the obstacles that farmworkers faced in trying to get their health needs met. Through time spent with farmworkers, primarily in healthcare settings, it is my impression that it is those involved in seasonal work who most often take advantage of the healthcare opportunities targeted specifically toward farmworkers. It is difficult for me to say how representative this group is as they were all people who are already seeking healthcare. Moreover, as seasonal farmworkers they are more likely to be acquainted with the healthcare resources in their area than migrant workers might be. To this extent, the people I was interacting with were the people less likely to need the aid the booklet was designed to provide, indicating to me that I was missing the input of those who the project was developed to serve. This became a point of frustration for me, because even though I continued working on the project with the resources I had available to me in the frame of participatory collaborators, it was difficult for me to let go of the specific participants that I had visualized myself working with through the process of developing the booklet.

In order to compile the health resource book, I used the blueprint of other resource booklets—for the state and nationwide—that had been produced in the past and modified them to be what I hope is more user-friendly in language and layout. Throughout this whole process I would continually take my work back to the service providers, community organizations, and to SAF, as well as discuss the project with farmworkers I met in migrant camps and clinics in order to get their input. What I most felt through this whole process was that I was being pulled in different directions and being given varied instructions by different stakeholders (in this case primarily being SAF, the health coalition, and the Migrant Health Program and their affiliates throughout the state)—particularly with regard to the layout and design of the booklet.

Everyone was interested in having a final product, but all had different levels of investment in the project. The SCPHCA Migrant Health Program and service providers regularly got back to me about the content of the book as well as the formatting, the SCHLHC was interested in costs of printing the book, and SAF wanted to be able to say that I'd finished what I had set out to do. The onus fell upon me to determine the direction of the project and to decide what it would and would not include based on the support being provided (or not being provided) and the “manpower” being used to produce the booklet. Does this negate the participatory aspect of the project?

Elden and Levin (1991) argue that collaborative or participatory research is not empowering unless there is full participation at every stage of the research project. Does that then disqualify my work as participatory? Probably so, especially when considering the lack of farmworker input. I go back to Maguire (1993) and her endorsement of a participatory approach regardless of how neatly it may or may not fit within the parameters of “truly participatory work” to wonder how useful this project was.

What makes participatory research? Does it necessitate the formal process of working with a community group? Can it be truly participatory if the researcher defines the problem to be solved? Must the impetus for the research come from the

unbidden community? Other projects I have done have stemmed from questions emerging from community members themselves, but this collaboration with service organizations was different. I made use of certain aspects of a participatory approach, involving some stakeholders more than others. My purpose in writing about this project, with all of its pitfalls and snags, is to be honest about the messy truths of doing research with communities. This article is an attempt to be open about what I tried to accomplish, what I actually managed to do, and where I missed the mark.

In the end, regardless of my intentions to make this project representative and reflective of farmworker needs, I came to realize that this project is more representative of interests of the community-based organizations and service providers. Additionally, the booklet speaks to a much wider audience (I think) than just migrant and seasonal farmworkers and can be of help to anyone seeking access to low-cost healthcare resources in the state of South Carolina. Although farmworkers are the primary target audience, all information is presented in both Spanish and English so that a wider audience may use it.

So what did I actually manage to do? This is a source of great frustration for me. I finished the guide and presented it to the community organizations I was working most closely with as they had expressed a desire to print it so that we could distribute it at migrant health clinics and health fairs around the

state, as well as in other venues. I was asked to format and design the guide as well as research printing costs, and write formal letters requesting funding from different agencies, all of which I did. To my knowledge, however, the guide has still not been printed.

In terms of the next steps for the project, I think that printing the booklet and getting it out to the farmworking population would be the natural place to start. If this happens, I hope that it will continue and that future generations of Student Action with Farmworkers interns or fellows, or anyone interested in adding to the booklet or modifying it, perhaps to include legal and social services, will be able to work directly with farmworkers, however defined, and evaluate the work of service organizations acting on their behalf.

In conclusion, while this article has been filled with far more questions than answers, I have tried to unearth and to air my own assumptions about research, what makes a “community,” and about participatory research so that others interested in taking on similar endeavours might be able to benefit from the hurdles have encountered. I have often been frustrated by the gloss that often covers the pitfalls and missteps of trying to do research, and this is my attempt to give a glimpse into the messy truths that often accompany a participatory approach. I hope that the issues that I’ve raised here might be for others what Maguire’s (1993) work has been for me: a reiteration that research is not just about results, but a reflexive learning process as well.

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