



Building knowledge across transnational boundaries: Collaboration and friendship in research



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1. Introduction

Transnationalism has facilitated increasing cross-border mobility and communication among researchers, enabling their ideas to travel more effectively across boundaries in time and space (Davis, 2007). When meeting with each other, interactions, negotiations and synergies are created that may benefit research, both methodologically and theoretically. Individual capacities are stretched across space when groups of friends are formed (Dixon, 2001), and researchers are shaping a geography of friendship in which private and professional realities are intertwined across time and space. In our case, as scholars from different parts of Europe and Asia, we have faced challenges in balancing our roles as professionals, mothers, wives, members of different local communities as well as parts of a global network of scholars.

Feminist and post-colonial scholars have emphasized the role of reflexivity and self in knowledge production. It has been argued that the personality and emotions of the various research partners often remain hidden in the analysis and writing processes, wherein positionality tends to be engaged within a detached and programmatic manner that conceals the significance of each partner's personality (Davidson et al., 2007; Lund, 2012; Moser, 2008). In the wake of this deconstruction's emphasis on values, friendship is still absent from most meaningful discourses (Kaufman, 1992).

Today, in larger research collaborations cross-cultural research partnerships are often a prerequisite for securing research funding,

and are therefore essential. However, scholars who have critically examined the role of North–South work relationships have claimed that uneven work relationships exist due to material and resource unevenness (Huxham and Vangen, 2013; Mohanty, 2003; Molony and Hammett, 2007). Several scholars have attempted to unravel the multiple meanings of research collaborations in specific contexts, such as ownership of data, roles in partnership and lack of distribution of resources and benefits (Brun and Lund, 2011; Lund, 2012; Phillips et al., 2013). However, there is an increasing trend amongst geographers and social scientists to acknowledge the benefit of shared knowledge among research partners (Harding, 2008; Lund et al, 2014, 2015a and 2015b; Ramazanoglu and Holland, 2002).

In this paper, we argue that there may be other forces at work in cross-cultural work relationships, such as friendship, mutual support and trust, which may be decisive factors for how research collaborations may be conducted in less hierarchical ways. We set out to investigate how such partnerships may succeed by exploring what friendship can lead to in terms of constructing knowledge. Given that friendship has often been criticized for being limited to the interpersonal, is there something to be said about how the growing importance of international research collaborations valorizes or provides a conducive context for transnational collaborations and associated friendships? How do transnational communications and professional collaborations further build friendships? In seeking to make the paper speak to these questions, we need to focus on the context in which our friendship started and how, through years of distance and collaboration on a one-to-one basis, we came together as part of a larger collaboration.

Bearing in mind the many ramifications of friendships among academics, Kaufman (1992) argues that a good friendship is a coincidence of the love and appreciation of each friend's art, and the desire to elevate that aspect and that through the medium of the texts that they write, friends will appreciate and elevate each other's academic performance. Here, we specifically explore how collaborative research can be strengthened by friendships. What can a friendship contribute? Does it make research better?

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Alternatively, is the benefit of a friendship more indirect – an effect of relational processes rather than the final product, as claimed by Clark and Watson (1998)? Does ‘friendship’ enable or result from the collaboration, or both?

Psychologists have argued that in ethnically heterogeneous contexts ‘direct friendship’ is effective in changing intergroup attitudes (Feddes et al., 2009). Our friendship rests on more than 20 years of acquaintance, which has developed into strong relations of mutual trust and respect for each other’s competency and cultural background, and hence cut across age and cultural dynamics. Nevertheless, grievances and tensions remained in the collaboration detailed here, but we tried to reduce those actions and emotions which could possibly lead to serious disagreement or discontent through discussions together in the group (cf. discussion below). When we started to work on this paper, we considered it important to reflect on our relationships in order to analyse how our friendship has influenced our research. We followed what Tynan and Garbett (2007) did when they self-analysed their friendship: they applied memory work as methodology and wrote their memories in response to a triggering question or statement. We have written our memories and feelings with respect to the following questions: (1) What does friendship mean to you? (2) What does research collaboration mean to you? (3) Do we need to be friends to conduct good collaborative research? (4) Does being friends strengthen the quality of research and how? We have attempted to write our perceptions supported by our memories of common experiences. Such experiences put on paper have enabled us to reflect on our relationships from a fresh perspective, and also lead us to understand why we wanted to work together in the first place, and now when we try to maintain our friendship through co-writing. Continued emotional labour is required to sustain that shared knowledge gained through our collaborative project to turn into this reflexive writing project.

The present paper describes a long history of friendship and collaboration among four researchers from different countries (China, India, Japan, Norway). Such nationality differences add another dimension to our friendship. In the following sections we describe what is generally understood about friendship and collaboration, before we turn to studying our own history of friendship and cross-cultural collaboration. Unravelling our individual memories of our common experiences we reflect further on our relationships and on how friendship has contributed to our production of knowledge, how we have created a shared work space, and worked to maintain our friendship.

2. Friendship and collaboration

There is a difference between research collaboration and friends working on research together. Research collaboration has often been measured in terms of numbers of co-authorships (Tynan and Garbett, 2007). However, this does not reflect the quality of those relationships. Sagaria and Dickens (1997) have identified four types of collaborative relationships: pedagogical, instrumental, professional, and intimate. Pedagogical relationships often occur between senior and junior researchers, whereby junior researchers learn from senior researchers through collaboration. Instrumental relationships are a type of collaboration whereby the involved parties have some common aims, such as the need to publish and when one finds it more efficient and productive to work with each other. Professional relationships are not as intense as intimate collaboration; the researchers have had a long-term stable collaboration, but their work and private lives are distinctly separate. Intimate relations are collaboration with very close friends, life partners, or even

family members. Hence, friends working together is one form of collaboration with a different relational dynamics from other types of collaboration.

Friendship as a relationship has been gravely understudied (Bunnell et al., 2012; Green, 1998; Kaufman, 1992). Communities as well as family and kinship relations have been studied extensively in gender studies, but friendships that construct communities and neighbourhoods, and that supplement, overrule, or challenge kinship relations have been seen as secondary to these institutionalized relationships. Friendships are fluid and considered dyadic and hence seen as unreliable relations in order to understand structures. Bunnell et al. (2012) noted the importance of geography in shaping and maintaining friendships. They listed three ways in which the study of friendship is relevant to geography: (1) it allows us to understand the making of the social world, contributing to geographers’ ontological investigation; (2) it contributes to studies of social network through friendships’ fluid relationships that transcend spatial boundaries; (3) it is essential to understand human spatial movements and social relations at a distance. Hence, friendship is an important social capital that is increasingly becoming relevant to having a better understanding of modern world. It can be both positive, in terms of providing support, and negative in terms of restricting freedom and controlling (Bunnell et al., 2012) thus it requires emotional labour such as mutual trust, reciprocal care and fondness.

Friendship is also boundary creating, although not confined to physical boundaries. People tend to be friends with those who are similar to themselves (Andrew and Montague, 1998; Gulapo and Gonzalez, 2013). Friendship is a process of affirmation of one’s own identity. By defining someone as a ‘friend’, we also define those who are not friends. As Andrew and Montague (1998, p. 358), says: ‘The attitude that feminism makes all women friends ... lacks common sense: If all women can be friends, no women are really friends.’ Hence working with friends creates a particular space where there is a stronger tendency to be similar. In this paper, however, we argue that the tendency for similarity allowed us to be critical with each other and actively debate with each other. The sense of “sameness” – sharing common problems, experiences and happiness – became important when working in otherwise challenging environments.

Other researchers have emphasized friendship and its positive function is seen in workplaces. For example, women’s workplace friendships are important since they combat women’s alienation in workplaces, which can often be male-dominated. Marks (1994, cited in Andrew and Montague, 1998, p. 355), discusses ‘work place intimacy’, which involves self-disclosure and personal talk, and not just ‘chit-chat’. Yet often such intimacy is dismissed by men as not serious and they ‘question our ability to “work”’ (Andrew and Montague, 1998, p. 360). Green (1998) refers to the ‘centrality of talk to women’s friendships’ (p. 178), and how, through talking, women construct a ‘collaborative floor’ for conversation (p. 179).

Friendship can also be part of, but not always, the basis for academic collaboration:

While the outcome of the collaboration, the product, is not unimportant to them, they [women academics] never speak of it as the sole or even the primary goal. But they do speak extensively and with some passion about the relational process and all that is involved with that in producing the final product (Clark and Watson, 1998, p. 73).

We see a need to unravel friendship as part of such relational process, and below we describe the history of our friendship and how we conducted our reflexive writing project before we discuss further how our friendship has impacted on production of knowledge.

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