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Partnerships as knowledge encounters: A psychosocial theory of partnerships for health and community development

Emma-Louise Aveling[1] and Sandra Jovchelovitch[2]

Abstract

In this article, we present a psychosocial theory of partnership, illustrated with case studies from Cambodia and Brazil. Partnerships are conceptualised as encounters with the knowledge of self and others, entailing processes of representation and communication between all stakeholders involved, and shaped by institutional and sociocultural contexts. We argue that partnership is an evolving practice that requires critical reflection and the creation of enabling institutional contexts. As such, it must be understood not as a tool for intervention, but as *part of* the intervention and definition of success.

Introduction

Since the mid-1990s, the delivery of interventions through 'partnerships' of various hues has become a ubiquitous feature of international health and development policy (Crisp, 2010; Fowler, 2000). Such partnerships are rarely binary couplings but more often entail a multiplicity of interdependent partners; partners may include international donors, aid agencies, academics, government, civil society organisations and affected communities. Whether ethical concerns or efficacy are emphasised, partnership is often portrayed as a more equitable alternative to top-down approaches that perpetuate relations of dependence (Crisp, 2010; Mosse, 2005). Within community health psychology, such visions of partnership tend to be influenced by Freire's critical pedagogy in which

dialogue between partners is not based on a notion of knowledge transfer but aims for 'joint action between agents who hold different knowledges' (Campbell and Jovchelovitch, 2000: 259; Nelson et al., 2004).

The growing literature surrounding partnerships paints a contradictory picture, however. Critiques suggest that mutuality is rare, noting the deleterious effects of (mis)appropriation of partnerships by development organisations seeking political legitimacy and financial security

[1]University of Leicester, UK
[2]London School of Economics, UK

Corresponding author:
Emma-Louise Aveling, Department of Health Sciences, University of Leicester, 22-28 Princess Road West, Leicester LE1 6TP, UK.
Email: eea5@le.ac.uk

(Aveling, 2010; Li, 1999). Health partnerships in particular have been criticised for their failure to deliver on goals of equal stakeholder involvement, local ownership and reciprocity (Nair and Campbell, 2008).

These portrayals reflect the very real challenges of putting aspirations for equality and reciprocity into practice. Such aspirations require communication and co-operation between institutions and actors who differ in status and resources, and who bring to the interaction competing interests and needs that extend beyond the intervention itself (Campbell, 2003). The reality of partnership working thus entails complex, evolving systems of social interactions open for multiple modes of realisation.

Yet, tools for conceptualising partnerships remain rudimentary (Dowling et al., 2004). There is a paucity of research examining the dynamics of partners in interaction. This situation can be partially explained by a tendency to focus on instrumental criteria for evaluating partnerships as a mechanism for delivering aid rather than an evolving and situated process of social relationships that requires conceptualisation.

In this article, we set out a psychosocial theory for understanding and analysing the dynamics of partnership working, enabling exploration of the tensions evident within partnerships between the normative and the pragmatic, the ideal and the actual. We draw on two case studies of partnerships in Brazil and Cambodia to argue that partnerships are not only tools for intervention but a practice which forms an uneven and evolving part of the intervention itself, and which requires support, reflection and prioritisation. We conceptualise partnership working as developmental encounters with the knowledge of self and others, encounters which entail processes of representation and communication between *all* stakeholders involved, and which are situated in, and shaped by, material, institutional and socio-economic contexts. While many partnerships thrive or break down as a function of these relational components,

these issues are rarely made explicit in the practice and reporting of partnerships. For community health psychologists, redistribution of power and recognition of multiple knowledges are central to the promotion of health (Nelson et al., 2004); this requires analysis not only of relations between individuals but also between communities, organisations and the wider sociopolitical context (Campbell and Jovchelovitch, 2000). Our article offers insights into the role of psychosocial processes in helping or hindering these aims.

Partnership working as knowledge encounters

Partnership working creates complex encounters between different and interdependent actors who must work together across institutional, socio-economic and psychological differences. Partners bring to the encounter a variety of understandings about the nature of the problem at hand, the role they and others ought to play and of what constitutes best practice and appropriate solutions; they come with a history of previous experiences and trajectories of relating to other constituencies and regimes of knowledge. At all levels of the intervention system, interactions between partners are instantiations of encounters with the experience and knowledge of others.

We define partnership as a situated encounter between the different knowledge systems of concrete partners (cf. Jovchelovitch, 2007). This conceptualisation builds on the theory of social representations (Marková, 2003; Moscovici, 1974/2008) in which knowledge is understood to be a polyvalent representational structure – at once psychological, social, historical and cultural (Jovchelovitch, 2007). Systems of knowledge are systems of meaning and understanding that actors use to make sense of the world and their place within it (Moscovici, 1974/2008): they are not reified, impersonal cognitive accounts, but lived and situated action, an ongoing dialogue between persons, communities and contexts. Thus, encountering

the knowledge of others may involve not only struggles over the content of representations but also struggles over the identities, ways of life and group projects that a system of knowledge expresses: knowledge is never disinterested (Duveen, 2000: 17).

While meeting and co-constructing projects, partners retrieve and renew ways of representing and understanding co-actors and goals, establish patterns of communication and interaction among themselves and express interests, identities and future-building aims that are carried within the representational systems they wish to promote and sustain. As a knowledge encounter, partnership working depends on three key, interrelated dimensions: (1) representations of self and other, (2) styles of communication and (3) representational projects, each crucially intertwined with the socio-institutional context in which encounters take place.

These dimensions also provide, as we discuss below, criteria for assessing the transformative or monological potential of partnerships. Transformative encounters are underpinned by a dialogical orientation in which partners strive to take into account the perspective of the other and recognise it as legitimate. In contrast, monologising encounters are characterised by attempts at domination which ignore, or deny, the knowledge of the other in the effort to impose one's own. While domination may still imply some change on the part of the one who is dominated (e.g. the acquisition of new knowledge), we use the term 'transformative' with the intention of referring to the potential for transformation on the part of *all* interlocutors and so a more equitable (re)distribution of power and influence.

Representations of self and other

Representations that partners hold of each other – and their respective identities and systems of understanding – are crucial to the nature of the encounter. Representations of self and other position partners in the social field and define how their perspective, identities and interests are recognised as legitimate (or not) in negotiations. For, in addition to material power (such as the ability to control resources), the *source* of knowledge is crucial in establishing its credibility, legitimacy and authority (Foucault, 1980). For instance, representing the other as vulnerable and needy and oneself as a knowledgeable provider has great constitutive power on the way the other is approached and considered.

Styles of communication

Interlocutors sustain and evolve specific patterns of communication while working together. Different groups may not speak the 'language' of the other – literally or figuratively. The kind of communication that is considered appropriate is also socially, culturally and historically patterned (Marková, 2003), and closely intertwined with representations of self and other. Castro and Batel (2009) distinguish between consensualisation and reification as communicative styles with different consequences for recognising or dismissing the perspective of the other. Reification uses argumentative strategies to displace the other and protect one's own representations and projects: actors presuppose that their own knowledge is best and use prescription of actions and representations to construct semantic barriers that silence and dismiss the position of the other (Gillespie, 2008). Consensualisation implies acknowledgement of alternative representations and identities, of multiple contexts and courses of action. It uses argumentative strategies that build on conflict and mutuality to generate forward ways of acting and thinking. Which styles of communication are deployed shapes the nature and outcomes of knowledge encounters.

Representational projects

Representational systems propose perspectives and identities that showcase ways of life, cultural traditions and the interests of a community. Shaped by the social conditions in which they emerge, representations carry projects that

are functionally related to the material and symbolic interests, identities and future-building aims of actors (Bauer and Gaskell, 2008). Actors promote and/or defend representational projects powerfully conditioned by the socio-economic and institutional setup in which partnership working takes place. How development agencies choose to represent themselves, for example, is not simply a neutral description of the nature of their work: it is also tied to the representational project of persuading donors to award funds to legitimise their existence and operation. Such projects necessarily influence the way actors accept, reject or promote their own knowledge and that of others.

The practice of partnership: Examples from Brazil and Cambodia

We illustrate the theoretical framework proposed by drawing on cases from international community and health development partnerships operating in Cambodia and Brazil.[1] Situated in radically different contexts, and organised by a different array of institutions and people, our examples provide a comparative framework to explore the conceptualisation proposed. We start by presenting each of the cases succinctly and proceed to discuss how they engage the psychosocial processes described above.

The Brazilian partnership: Researching underground sociabilities in Rio de Janeiro's favelas

Underground Sociabilities is an international inter-institutional research partnership between academia (two universities in Brazil and the United Kingdom), two Brazilian non-governmental organisations (NGOs) that self-define as grass-roots social movements (AfroReggae and Central Única de Favelas (CUFA)), United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO; Brasilia Office) and Itaú Social/Itaú Cultural, the charitable foundations of a large Brazilian financial institution. The partnership evolved over a period of 5 years: following 2 years of development and consolidation, it emerged as a collaboration to study pathways of exclusion and social development into the favelas of Rio de Janeiro. The London School of Economics (LSE) led the research effort with the academic support of the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro. Fieldwork was enabled by partners AfroReggae and CUFA who negotiated the entrance of researchers in the favelas, helped recruit participants and supported the research process throughout. While some level of funding was contributed by all partners, Itaú Social/Itaú Cultural were the main sponsors. Itaú Cultural played a central role in organising and sponsoring research meetings and Dialogue Seminars in Rio and London. UNESCO worked with academic partners in facilitating access to the field and to elite informants in Rio de Janeiro and Brasilia, discussing and revising research outputs and managing the communication between all partners.

Each project milestone involved a 'Dialogue Seminar' between partners to evaluate what had been done, to discuss and to decide how to proceed. Each stage of the research was planned and co-decided by all partners. Dissemination has been, and continues to be, a shared collective effort: Itaú Cultural, UNESCO and LSE led the production of research outputs and the organisation of two international public dissemination seminars in Rio and London. AfroReggae and CUFA mobilised favela communities and with UNESCO used their channels of communication with social movements and Rio's media to push the research into the public sphere. One important aspect of the partnership context is the increasing recognition and acceptance within the national sociopolitical landscape of the importance of grass-roots involvement in positive social change.

Underground sociabilities experienced multiple clashes of demand, expectation and mismatched representation. As with other multi-stakeholder partnerships, partners

confronted different institutional cultures and calendars, divergence in priorities and the need to build trust across people working together for the first time. As the research came to its end, the dissemination process consolidated a consensual view about the value of the partnership itself and the conviction that without it, what has been done would not have been possible (Jovchelovitch and Priego-Hernandez, 2012). The partnership evolved through differences in language, capabilities and institutional culture to find common ground in a joint commitment to the research and its goals.

The Cambodian partnership: Peer education for reproductive health

The partnership studied in Cambodia was established in the course of a peer education intervention which aimed to improve reproductive health among Cambodian military couples. The intervention brought together an international donor, Global Fund (who funded and monitored the intervention), an established international NGO (who designed and managed the intervention), two local NGOs (involved in implementing the programme) and the Cambodian armed forces. In selected camps, soldiers' wives and soldiers were trained by the local NGOs to act as peer educators, using a curriculum written by an ex-patriot consultant to the international NGO. Formal peer education sessions were co-delivered by peer educators and local NGO staff monthly in each camp. The curriculum promoted condom use, faithfulness within marriage as well as an agenda of equal rights between men/husbands and women/wives. The programme also provided free access to reproductive health services.

Although the Cambodian sociocultural context is rapidly changing, hierarchical dynamics within social and political spheres remain marked. After decades of violent conflict, Cambodia is rebuilding its social, economic and political infrastructure, yet many areas of public services, including health, remain heavily reliant

on international financial and technical assistance (Landau, 2008). Within the Cambodian partnership, the transfer of funds (from Global Fund, to international the NGO to local NGOs) created material dependencies. These were reinforced by Global Fund's stringent system of performance-based funding, wherein continued funding depended on grant recipients evidencing the achievement of measurable quantitative targets (e.g. number of people attending peer education). This emphasis on quantitative targets privileged an instrumental focus on the delivery of inputs, rather than the quality of practices and their impacts (Aveling, 2011). In important ways, then, the partnership context entailed numerous axes of asymmetry and unidirectional demand.

Representations of self and other

In both cases, partnership working was affected by the representations partners held of themselves and others and how they positioned and understood each other. In Cambodia, despite stated commitments to 'working more as partners, not us telling them what to do' (international NGO deputy director), the international NGO tended to represent its local partners as lacking capacity in programme management. Reflecting a hierarchical positioning of self and local-NGO-other, the international NGO represented itself as possessing all the necessary skills, knowledge and experience to successfully implement interventions such as this one. Interactions evidenced little recognition for the expertise local NGOs could contribute, observed in the lack of attention given to their concerns about the appropriateness of the peer education curriculum. Rather, dominant representations and the donor's demand for reports and high targets encouraged a relationship of tutelage and control. The NGOs' dominant representations of military families portrayed them as similarly 'in need' of 'development'; the potential value of their knowledge and contribution was obscured by a problem-focused representation that emphasised their vulnerability

to HIV/AIDS, lack of knowledge and the health-damaging consequences of their adherence to 'tradition' (Aveling, 2010).

In the Brazilian partnership, initial dynamics were dominated by favela organisations' suspiciousness of research and academics. As a leader of CUFA stated, 'we are tired of being treated like mice; I don't want anyone telling my story, I will tell my story, thank you very much'. Academic partners, who were seen as lacking understanding of the object of the research at the sharp end of favela life, were told that they lacked the knowledge of local context and know-how needed to 'access' community members. These interactions immediately subverted power imbalances between 'academics who know' and 'ignorant favela-dwellers'. Furthermore, favela organisations were being studied on the basis of their strengths and effectiveness, which divested them from a position of 'vulnerable people in need' to one of symbolic capital: they were gatekeepers to the community, controlled access to the field via communication with drug bosses and had academics from Europe, UNESCO and a powerful sponsor wanting to study their work to disseminate what they do.

These representations evolved as the partnership developed. Discrepancies in self–other representations constituted not only sources of frustration and tension but also offered the potential for change. Academics had to take into account a confident set of actors who, despite a history of oppression and exclusion, are forging a new positioning in the public sphere that empowers them to voice concerns and be explicit about their suspicions. These actors are fully aware of what they know and academics learned from and with them. Discussions and informal interaction in the field helped to build trust, something that was mediated by other Brazilian partners. UNESCO, in particular, managed communication and the development of a joint representation about the value of systematic research. Representations changed, fuelled by the evolving relationship between partners and by how activists from AfroReggae and CUFA assessed the research and its findings: they felt empowered by the process and by what the research revealed about their work.

In Cambodia, although the institutional setup favoured hierarchical representations, partnership working enabled a shift in local NGO staff's representations of military families. Spending considerable time at their homes in military camps, local NGO staff began to understand the hardship of military families, and that they too were *neak thormada* – 'regular' people. They came to recognise the limitations within dominant, problem-focused representations, acknowledging that 'tradition' was not only health-damaging but also valued, and that military communities' knowledge needed to be taken into account. Their representations of the international NGO were also ambivalent, encompassing both recognition and rejection of the superiority of their knowledge. However, back in NGO offices, positioned as partners with little to contribute, they were reluctant to share these adaptations with international NGO managers, curtailing opportunities for bringing this knowledge into the programme. Coupled with financial dependence and the funder's emphasis on inputs in defining 'success', hierarchical representations at this level of the partnership were most rigid.

Styles of communication

The two cases exemplify consensualisation and reification as styles of communication shaping the dynamics of partnership. The Cambodian context encouraged demonstration of respect and deference within sociocultural and professional hierarchies, reinforced by the local NGOs' financial dependence on the international NGO. This helped establish reification as a dominant style of communication. Expectations derived from the Cambodian education system exerted pressure on local NGO staff and peer educators to demonstrate to participants that they possessed superior knowledge in order to establish credibility with their audience. Thus, even

though sessions were designed to be interactive, the style of communication remained prescriptive. Target-related pressures for high attendance arguably discouraged local partners from taking risks and moving away from the expected, didactic communicative practices that could ensure credibility.

In less public arenas, however, local partners were able to generate more critical discussion. As the programme continued, local NGO staff and peer educators created opportunities for discussion with military families in private, informal spaces where discussion, challenge and elaboration of programme messages were more likely; programme knowledge was anchored in existing community knowledge and transformed in pragmatic ways that made 'local sense' (Aveling, 2012). For example, women were encouraged to refuse sex by satisfying their husband in other ways, rather than on the basis of 'equal rights' that contradicted their traditions.

In Brazil, due to the sociopolitical context, institutional setup and distributed contribution of skills and resources, hierarchy in representation could not be easily sustained, and consensualisation was the dominant communicative style. There was no single hierarchical system implementing a project, but an arrangement between multiple stakeholders with different skills and powers. This relative symmetry, obtained through the simple fact that without each one of the partners the project would be unrealisable, was institutionalised in regular Dialogue Seminars that became main centres for decision-making. In contrast to Cambodian sociopolitical pressures for deference, none of the partners was prepared to be silenced, and any such attempt could jeopardise the partnership. For example, tensions were expressed at various moments of the partnership, producing challenging meetings where mistrust and anger dominated procedures and yet where semantic barriers could not be sustained. As the meetings evolved and the partnership was able to 'survive' (Benjamin, 1993) negative feelings, there was a gradual process of accommodating the

different experiences and knowledges around the table and accepting what different partners were able to bring to the project.

Representational projects

Both partnerships show how representational projects affect efforts to engage with, include or exclude different knowledge systems in partnership practices. In Cambodia, NGOs' dominant representations of their partners reveal an orientation to donor interests and priorities – both those of the Global Fund and donors more broadly. The international NGO's representation of local NGOs as lacking capacity serves the project of enrolling the donor and accessing funds: representing local NGOs as 'in need' of technical support and programmatic expertise supports the conceptual work of sustaining its legitimacy in an aid environment dominated by the rhetoric of partnership working and the importance of 'sustainability'. It is also central to the tendency towards monologising practices of tutelage and control. Similarly, the problem-focused representation of military families was invoked as part of a causal model justifying the deployment of resources. The portrayal of military partners as 'in need' and a legitimate 'target' for external intervention/support is central to the persuasive power of this representation. The power of these projects was reinforced by an institutional context characterised by unidirectional flow of resources and a political context in which international NGOs have greater power than local NGOs to negotiate military access (Aveling, 2010).

In Brazil, while each institution brought to the partnership its own set of projects, it was not possible for one single project to dominate the partnership. Representational projects were made explicit at the outset, something that was institutionally built into the formal agreement signed by all partners. While tensions between projects abounded, asymmetries were controlled by the distributed nature of representations and the lack of one clearly dominant partner. One specific point of tension was in

relation to the research outputs, with academics worried about content, rigour and the demands of their own institutions, while designers were worried about readability and presentation. This was eventually resolved by going back to institutionally established agreements and decisions made during the Dialogue Seminars, which helped everyone to understand the perspective of others and find a compromise.

In both the Brazilian and Cambodian examples, we see how the institutional context shaped not only representations of particular partners but also the future-building projects entailed within those representations – the need to sustain legitimacy and ensure funding (by justifying the deployment of resources to a legitimate 'target') or future contracts and careers (producing the 'right' kind of outputs). We also see how institutional contexts allowed more or less space to make projects explicit and to formulate more realistic assessments of who gives and who takes while producing a shared representational project that validates the knowledge and contribution of all partners involved.

Table 1 summarises the overall model we presented in the pages above.

Considering the processes discussed above as diagnostic tools, partnerships can be seen as transformative or monological depending on the contingencies of material and psychosocial conditions. Monological practices involve hierarchical representations of self and other and reified styles of communication where the knowledge of certain groups dominates the formation of practices, outcomes and definitions of what constitutes 'success'. In contrast, transformative partnerships work towards distributed representations, consensualisation and acknowledgement of all stakeholders' projects and contributions. Transformative partnerships enable meetings between the resources of different systems of knowing and, importantly, are effective in addressing problems that require combination of different know-hows and types of expertise.

Whether partnerships are more or less transformative or monological is an empirical question, and, as with all typologies, these categories are best seen as a continuum within a spectrum of practices rather than categories frozen in theory.

Discussion and conclusions

Conceptualising partnership as a situated encounter between the knowledge systems of different partners foregrounds the relevance of relationships and dialogue in partnership processes, and the co-constitutive relation between knowledge, projects and socio-economic and institutional contexts. Our case studies illustrate the role of communication, representations and the contextually bound projects they carry in shaping the nature of knowledge encounters and the extent to which partnerships achieve more or less transformative or monological practices. They illustrate the dynamic, evolving nature of these processes and practices, and the potential for transformation over time: in both cases, as informal spaces of dialogue and relationships of mutual understanding and empathy began to develop between partners, some creative, hybridised interpretations of programme messages and goals emerged. Our case studies also make clear the constraining effects of hierarchical representations which hold functional value (as in the Cambodian aid context) and institutional processes (such as accountability structures) that limit or enable opportunities to acknowledge competing projects and develop consensual communication.

Our model suggests that partnerships are not simply a tool for implementing programmes and transferring information and resources. Rather, partnerships are evolving and situated social systems where competing interests and asymmetries in power and positioning are the norm rather than the exception. Achieving transformative partnerships is a process which requires time, commitment and recognition within the framework of what constitutes 'success' in health and community development activities. As such, partnership needs to be understood not just as a means but part of the intervention process itself, an ongoing *practice*

Table 1. Partnership working as knowledge encounters: Theory, evidence and implications for practice.

Psychosocial processes	Empirical cases		Practice implications
Knowledge encounters	Brazil ⟷	Cambodia	Enabling transformative partnerships
Self–other representations	Distributed	Hierarchical	• Make the input of all partners explicit • Reflect on the lifeworld of the other • Question distribution of power • Engage in informal communication
Styles of communication	Consensualisation (dominant) semantic flow	Reification (dominant) semantic barriers	• Encourage voice and expression of divergence • Recognise different languages and practices • Avoid prescription; institutionalise collaborative decision-making • Develop spaces for the expression of tension and differences; institutionalise debate and conversation
Representational projects	Explicit	Implicit	• Identify and discuss goals and projects • Acknowledge that all partners have needs and representational projects

The empirical cases are located in the table as ideal cases for the purposes of illustration; there is flow and movement between the modalities in the typology, which are in a continuous spectrum of practices.

that requires explicit focus, critical reflection and an enabling institutional context.

The Brazilian and Cambodian cases show that creating transformative partnerships entails challenges to established or desired identities and projects. A commitment to partnership therefore requires critical reflection on the representations and projects that all partners bring to the encounter. This must be a reciprocal process: it is not only a question of critically reflecting on how one evaluates others' knowledge, but how one evaluates one's own. For some, this may no doubt be a painful process which entails significant challenges to firmly held understandings of one's professional role and competence. While personalities and individual willingness to engage in a potentially challenging process are clearly relevant, it is

also essential that partners are supported in this process and that this support be seen as within the remit of programmes. It is not only local communities who may need to be 'empowered to participate' (Cornish, 2006) but also practitioners and 'experts' wrangling with their own sense of expectations and identity claims.

The 'needs' of development organisations (e.g. to sustain funding, to meet specific donor demands or to maintain their legitimacy) must be recognised as influencing the way partners engage with each other, *in addition* to the 'needs' of local communities. Acknowledging from the start that it is not only 'communities' who have needs to be met by the intervention may help avoid the perpetuation of hierarchical representations that freeze identities in positions of providers and recipients and ultimately

undermine the very nature of development as a process of human emancipation and freedom. Our model, which takes account of the influence of *all* partners' representations and projects, thus speaks to the call to move away from simply focusing on the 'needs' of disadvantaged groups and how they might be 'empowered', to include understanding of how the 'needs' of privileged groups may distort a stated commitment to transformative partnership.

Reflecting the dynamic, temporal nature of knowledge encounters, the cases studied also illustrate how, even within powerfully constrained contexts, more transformative encounters can be sustained. These examples point to the importance of developing rich, concrete understandings of others' lifeworlds and to the capacity to take the perspective of the other and grant it legitimacy (Cornish et al., 2012). The more transformative elements evidenced within the partnership also underscore the point that transformative encounters are not about neutralising difference, but about establishing productive tensions between different perspectives and knowledges in order to generate novel, shared ideas and strategies.

The practice of partnership therefore also requires proactively and consciously developing spaces for consensualisation and embracing conflict as necessary and integral to dialogue, rather than allowing inevitable communicative and semantic barriers to be obscured by a focus on programme inputs and deliverables. For instance, brokers, such as local NGOs in Brazil and Cambodia, who move and mediate between contexts have a potentially crucial role to play in facilitating understanding across difference and the generation of novel solutions (Aveling, 2011; Mosse, 2005). Yet, many sociocultural and institutional pressures discouraged their creative, brokering efforts. While some aspects of the intervention context may be difficult for development organisations to alter (e.g. local sociocultural demands and individual personalities), in the longer term, it is arguably within the scope of development organisations to reflect on how the institutional conditions they

sustain support or undermine the renegotiation/re-elaboration of particular representations. The Brazilian experience shows that inbuilt decision-making procedures (such as Dialogue Seminars) and formal, explicit recognition of *all* the projects at stake in the partnership can be a step in this direction. Our comparison also highlights, however, the deeply constraining influence of unidirectional structures of material accountability on the communicative interactions between partners.

The irony illustrated within the Cambodian case study and demonstrated by the agency of favela NGOs AfroReggae and CUFA in Rio de Janeiro – but which applies to much of the current aid system and community interventions – is that there is a fundamental contradiction between the requirement to demonstrate that people are in need of assistance and the goal of maximising recognition for those same people as capable participants in their own development. The function that problem-focused, disempowering representations serve in justifying the release of resources is thus a key obstacle to establishing transformative partnerships. Overcoming this obstacle requires instituting criteria for allocating funds wherein representations of community partners which emphasise their strengths and knowledge also hold functional value. Equally, aid agencies and health development institutions must consider how the accountability structures and definitions of 'success' they impose contribute to sustaining future-oriented representations and projects that undermine the potential for transformative partnerships. Given the competing demands that all partners must continuously juggle, partnership needs to be considered not only part of the intervention process but part of the definition of success.

The question we are left with, then, is to what extent development practitioners and institutions are willing to adapt institutional conditions to support transformative encounters. Are they – or we – willing to challenge structures and professional/social identities in order to live up to the ideals of policy

discourses, community health psychology and transformative encounters?

Note

1. The research projects from which these case studies are drawn received all necessary ethical approvals from the relevant institutions (University of Cambridge Psychology Research Ethics Committee, the Cambodian National Ethics Committee for Health Research and the London School of Economics Research Ethics Committee).

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