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Strengthening senses of community through collaboration

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Introduction

A sense of community can be interpreted in diverse ways, dependent on various individual, group and organisational forces working for and/or against feelings of being part of a community. This chapter examines how senses of community were developed through an AHRC Collaborative Doctoral Award (CDA) between the University of Northampton (UoN) and Northamptonshire Black History Association (NBHA) from 2008 to 2012. This chapter will give some examples of how collaborative research between a university and community-based non-academics can be fruitful for both parties, individuals unaffiliated to either group; as well as the larger regional community as a whole. Furthermore, this article discusses the added value of collaborative doctoral research to develop an understanding of how the triplicate of academia, community-based organisations and individuals unaffiliated with either partnership group, can simultaneously benefit from research collaboration both during and after the direct timeframe of the research. We begin with an introduction to the project and research partners.

Prior to any discussions around the possibility of an AHRC CDA application, the Management Committee of NBHA (the Committee) and Dr. Julia Bush from UoN worked in partnership in order to develop undergraduate modules in Black British History, as well as UoN providing financial and in-kind support to produce its publications; specifically *Sharing the Past*, a documentation of 800 years of Black history in Northamptonshire, and *Black British History: Selected Studies*. The essays forming *Selected Studies* were written by undergraduate and non-undergraduate associate students attending Black British History modules between 2006-2009 led by Dr Bush. This reciprocal relationship between the university and this community organisation was integral to the decision to work in partnership and apply to the AHRC for a CDA.

The Committee were keen to have a researcher dedicated to recording more oral histories of local Caribbean people, as well as having the prestige of linking more formally with UoN. In addition to the aforementioned collaboration, the CDA was regarded as an extension of the Northamptonshire Black History Project (NBHP) funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund and Northamptonshire County Council in 2002. This funding enabled the collection of a wealth of local history which eventually led to an application for a CILIP Libraries Changes Lives award to produce *Sharing the Past* in 2008. *Sharing the Past* documents over 800 years of Black British history in Northamptonshire. During the production of this book, it was recognised by those participating in the Project that there should be a consistent effort towards helping people learn more about local Black and Black British history. NBHA was launched in October 2005, dedicated, '... to promote education in relation to Black History'.¹ Also part of the Association's ethos was to, '... empower Black communities and the wider community and challenge racist attitudes by demonstrating the contributions and achievements of Black individuals and communities throughout British history'.² Furthermore, UoN formally agreed to work with NBHA in this same month, beginning a fruitful connection between community and academia. Whilst proud of these accomplishments, NBHA also wanted to develop another area of local Black British history, forming the basis of the AHRC CDA discussed in this chapter. NBHA wanted to capture the imagination of more local people regarding Black British history, as well as nationally and internationally whenever possible.

The appointed CDA student, George Watley, was a member of the Caribbean community by parental origin. However, being American meant that he was also not entirely part of the local community he was researching. Watley's heritage combined insiderness and outsidership which provided research benefits in terms of being a

¹ Northamptonshire Black History Association Web site last accessed 1 March 2013, http://www.northants-black-history.org.uk/aboutUs.aspx?itemTag=Our_history_so_far

² Ibid

relative insider without,' ... *the restricting expectations of others (and/or) over identification ...*³ Also, despite living in Northampton for five years before commencing research, Watley knew nothing about NBHA before reading the advertisement about the AHRC-funded CDA in April 2008 in front of his regularly-frequented barbershop. The CDA's remit was originally to research the consumer behaviour of Caribbean migrants to Northamptonshire c.1955-1975 as stated in the advertisement. However, as the research progressed, the shifting identities of interviewees, those researched by Watley, as well as within himself, became transparent. This recognition made Watley slightly change the focus of the research towards including analysing how identity influenced the consumption practices of local Caribbeans that became central to the thesis. Not only were multiple concepts of identity as Black, Caribbean and British people important in analysing Caribbeans' consumption practices c.1955-1989, concepts of identity and simultaneous shifting of these three cultural categories influenced Watley throughout the research for reasons which will be mentioned later in this chapter.

In the remainder of this chapter, we will address and discuss three important categories from the perspective of the UoN-NBHA CDA partnership: first, the collaboration as it supported research, as well as broader objectives directly and indirectly related to it; second, the collaboration as it supported research dissemination, as well as how such dissemination influenced research findings; and third, during and post-research benefits of CDA collaboration.

Collaboration supporting research

When the CDA research commenced, NBHA possessed a range of beneficial resources. The Association had approximately 100 recorded and fully-transcribed interviews conducted in 2002-2005 as part of the HLF-funded NBHP. Half of these interviews were of local Caribbean people. The interviews were conducted through an academic-community partnership that was envisioned to lead towards future development of local Black history. In terms of CDA research, extant interviews from these 2002-2005 interviews were extremely useful in terms of Watley being able to read the transcripts and use the plethora of information obtained about potential and actual interviewees in preparation for interviews. The extant interviews from 2002-2005 supported the 2008-2012 research, which related to the theme of 'Identity and consumption practices of Northamptonshire Caribbeans c.1955-1989' that later formed Watley's thesis. Watley used these extant interviews to become more knowledgeable about his interviewees and the Northamptonshire Caribbean community more generally, as well as to analyse the broad range of narratives collected in order to develop meta-narratives about the history of local post-War Caribbean people. Supporting using multiple layers of interviews over an extended time like NBHP/NBHA and the CDA did, is Shopes' assertion that extant interviews are beneficial when:

*... conducted under the auspices of ongoing history research programs as archival projects for the use of future researchers or by professionally run historical organizations as documentation projects. While it is important to assess such interviews in light of their provenance, their strengths are often considerable: typically they are framed around questions drawn from contemporary historiography and include multiple narrators, variously positioned within the community; they tend to range widely over individual narrators' life experiences so as to be of value to users with varying interests (and) they are generally the work of skilled interviewers who are knowledgeable about the subject at hand.*⁴

The 2002-2005 were of the general history of Black people in Northamptonshire and their lives before arriving to the county, whilst the 2008-2012 interviews were specifically related to the CDA research. The extant interviews in 2002-2005 supported the 2008-2012 research because of the recording of various interviewees across the Northamptonshire Caribbean community that, in combination, were knowledgeable about the local

³ D. Wolf, *Situating feminist dilemmas in fieldwork, Feminist Dilemmas in Fieldwork*, ed. by Diane Wolf (Boulder, Colorado, USA: Westview Press, 1996), 15

⁴ L. Shopes, *Oral History and the Study of Communities, The Oral History Reader*, ed. by Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson (London: Routledge, 2010), 264

community and of Caribbean people in the county more specifically. Interviewees ranging from professional educators, influential community members, as well as those outside of these status categories were interviewed; recording the life stories of a wide range of Northamptonshire Caribbean people variously positioned in the local community. Also, collecting and disseminating these narratives to a wide variety of audiences, as well as being able to use all of these mentioned connections and attributes to obtain support, assisted in turning a Project into an Association, in addition to acquiring and fostering support to conduct future research on a more specific aspect of Northamptonshire Black British history. Furthermore, for those 2002-2005 interviewees that could not be interviewed in 2008-2012 for various reasons, such extant interviews were a welcome addition to CDA interviews.

In addition to the NBHA-based resources supporting this collaboration, UoN added to this alliance through Bush's role as Secretary of NBHA and supervisor of Watley during his CDA. Also, various UoN faculty members assisted in producing *Sharing the Past*. The combination of this prior UoN support of NBHA, in addition to the CDA researcher being able to use university resources to place the full range of interview archives under the NBHA umbrella, has given and will give local, national and international audiences an understanding of how Northamptonshire Caribbean people have distinctively added to historical narratives of Black people in Britain. Currently, all NBHP and NBHA recorded interviews and transcripts are in the Northamptonshire Records Office and future plans include placing transcripts and selected audio clips on the NBHA Web site. Collaboration supporting research in these contexts led to this partnership supporting dissemination of CDA and pre-CDA NBHA research in contexts to be delineated in the next section.

Collaboration supporting research dissemination: teaching

Before Watley commenced the research, Bush taught modules in Black British history at UoN, one of only three universities offering such modules in Britain at the time CDA research commenced.⁵ During these modules, there was a dedicated session on oral history when a guest speaker from NBHA prepared a lecture about the purpose and rationale for oral history, as well as sharing aspects of oral history obtained from the 2002-2005 interviews with students taking this module. Within one month of starting, Watley was informed by Bush that she would be retiring at the end of the academic year and asked Watley if he would be willing to teach the Black British History modules starting in Autumn term 2009. This opportunity was taken by Watley, enabling the continuation of Black British History teaching at UoN that was feared by NBHA members to be eliminated after Bush informed the Association of her impending retirement in 2008. The collaboration was proving fruitful within weeks due to the CDA leading to a seamless transition between locally-based lecturers both having developing connections with NBHA.

Post-2009, Watley shared excerpts of interviews he conducted with students. Some students chose to use these and earlier NBHA interviews when writing their essays for both modules. Furthermore, most students better understood the connections between the books, articles and other references they were reading, and the effects of historical events had on individuals. The combination of sharing current research alongside having NBHA members participating in lectures dedicated to helping students understand oral history as a functional methodology, developed links between undergraduates and the Northamptonshire community, as well as giving students a micro-understanding of Black British History that worked alongside the national perspectives they were learning about. Undergraduate-NBHA connections were also developed in 2011 through a project that linked these two groups.

Collaboration supporting research dissemination: Oral History Roadshow

In addition to using current oral history research in teaching the Black British History modules from 2009 afterwards, NBHA through Watley's idea and Bush's connections with UoN, was able to obtain funding from

⁵ G. Watley, Students' use of Northamptonshire Black History Association archives as an inspiration to recognise, include and develop oral history, *History of Education Society UK* (unpublished paper), Sheffield, England, 6 December 2009

UoN in 2010 for a travelling Oral History Roadshow that disseminated NBHA-collected oral histories to a variety of audiences in March-June 2011. Watley conducted this Roadshow with the support of approximately 20 people ranging from NBHA members, UoN students and some non-NBHA affiliated individuals. This Roadshow used a combination of portable banners and hand-held audioguides to share both sets of NBHA-conducted interviews with various audiences in Northamptonshire; including UoN, schools, libraries and other venues. All volunteers were inspired to share this history although the preparation and exhibition of the Oral History Roadshow presented challenges and opportunities in unexpected ways.

During the interviewing stage of researching, Watley recognised that the town of Wellingborough was underrepresented in the number of interviews he conducted. Wellingborough is the second largest town in Northamptonshire overall, as well as in the number of Caribbean people in the county. Out of 18 interviews conducted before the Roadshow commenced, only 2 of these were of Wellingborough-based Caribbeans. According to Watley and NBHA, this number was proportionally very low. However, despite placing advertisements in Wellingborough, as well as asking various Caribbean and other Black people in the town to seek out potential interviewees, this relative failure to obtain more interviewees was evident.

During the preview of the Roadshow, exactly one week before it launched, many people attending stated that Wellingborough was underrepresented. This included someone who was part of its planning committee. Also, another Wellingborough Caribbean man told his story of living in the town since the mid-1950s, unknown to Watley beforehand. This was also surprising because he was the uncle of NBHA's Association Manager. Also, the other Wellingborough interviewee interviewed as a result of feedback regarding the Roadshow participated in its planning committee, making it even more perplexing that she had not been interviewed beforehand. The failure of these two people to be interviewed before the Roadshow illustrates challenges and opportunities involving collaborative research. Challenges are to not only be inclusive in conducting collaborative research, but also to present opportunities to disseminate preliminary research findings to the general public when they are stakeholders in such research. Presenting this type of opportunity can work towards eliminating any gaps in research that could be publicly, or otherwise, objectionable. However, despite being unable to revise the Roadshow to include the input of more Wellingborough voices within it, these two people were interviewed within a month of the Roadshow preview, adding to the research in ways that most likely would not have occurred without the Roadshow.

In terms of the actual Oral History Roadshow, NBHA members, students, as well as a local playwright and producer, all volunteered their time under Watley's direction and its eventual success. Even Bush volunteered, notable because of supervising Watley. Also supporting this project was a local videographer that produced a 30 minute documentary about the Roadshow. He cannot be classed as a volunteer however because he was paid for his efforts. Despite volunteering or being paid, this Roadshow exemplified the collaborative nature of NBHA and UoN working together alongside university students and non-group affiliated individuals working for a common aim of sharing oral history with the general public. Although not strictly research and/or dissemination for the purposes of the CDA, the ability of the collaboration to parlay previous and current collaboration into future partnerships involving the partnership and others significantly added to the residual value of the CDA, helping to foster connections across sub-sectors of the community that probably would not have been as well linked otherwise.

Another benefit of this collaborative dissemination was that interviews were conducted and recorded of the Roadshow audience. An overwhelming majority of these interviews were conducted by volunteers. Volunteers were trained in oral history/interviewing techniques, with over 30 interviews having been collected. Some of these interviews were useful for Watley's thesis, as well as potentially for future publications. In addition, one of the NBHA member-volunteers not only conducted a majority of the interviews, he also became a Trustee of the Association largely as a result of working more closely with NBHA as a result of the Roadshow. The dissemination of research through our collaboration led to skills transfer, greater connections between formerly unconnected groups, as well community discoveries about Black British history unlearned otherwise. This latter point was illustrated through a Roadshow audience interviewee stating, ' *It sounds preposterous, but through this*

*Roadshow I learned that (Black British history) exists.*⁶ Through this and many other discoveries, our collaboration linked individuals and groups that probably would have been unconnected beforehand whilst helping people discover information useful as individuals, groups, and for Watley, material important for his thesis. This worked alongside ameliorating a significant mutually perceived gap in the research, integrating Northamptonshire's second town, Wellingborough, more closely within research findings vis-à-vis Northampton. This was appreciated by all parties and would not have occurred if it were not for the Roadshow.

Collaboration supporting research dissemination: digitization benefits

From NBHA's perspective, the interviews conducted and recorded by Watley would not have occurred without the CDA, all 22 interviews and 36 hours' worth. In addition, Watley transferred all the approximately 100 interviews conducted in 2002-2005 from mini-disk on to computer files for easy access and portability. These 7 boxes and approximately 250-300 CDs took many hours to transfer to computer files and probably would not have occurred if it were not for the CDA. This benefits not only NBHA, but local history more broadly, as copies of all interview recordings were given to Northamptonshire Records Office (NRO) alongside the transcripts of the 2002-2005 NRO already held. Watley also gave NRO interview recordings and transcripts of the interviews he conducted in 2009-2011. All of this history would not be publicly accessible if it were not for the CDA. In addition, Watley's presentation of his thesis to NBHA culminated the success of this collaboration, with both he and the Association proud to share this history.

Conclusion

Collaborative doctoral research can work successfully to develop senses of community across seemingly unconnected groups and/or individuals, as well as cementing bonds already create beforehand. The NBHA-UoN partnership through the CDA worked because both organisations had several dovetailing aims. Some individuals were interconnected within both organisations, with NBHA and UoN both desiring to work with others outside their respective groups, particularly involving utilising volunteers and promoting their respective organisations across Northamptonshire at the very least. A university/non-academic partnership also can work for the doctoral researcher in terms of connecting the researcher with various senses of community within a community, providing benefits to the individual and organisations in the partnership after the collaborative research has concluded. In addition, the larger community can benefit from collaborative research in terms of having a skilled researcher within it that has expertise to work with individuals and groups in the community for their mutual benefit. The positive attributes and benefits of the UoN-NBHA CDA collaboration provides examples of how other academic-community collaborations could create and develop connections and opportunities benefitting academia, community groups and individuals in given communities, as well as for the CDA researcher. Furthermore, such partnerships can support the creation and development of inclusive senses of community, potentially including those formerly excluded from prior senses of community in the process.

Supporting the concept of inclusion of the formerly excluded is the CDA researcher's experience. On a personal note, Watley was relatively unconnected with people in Northamptonshire before commencing CDA research, but is now well-integrated into Northamptonshire community connections, as well as NBHA. He is a Trustee and Vice-Chair of the Association, supporting the organisation during a critical phase of its progression. Furthermore, the videographer and playwright mentioned earlier both are keen to work with Watley on future projects. Also, the playwright has already consulted with Watley for his plays, utilising his historical expertise to develop more authentic productions from historical perspectives. Another aspect of the collaboration supporting both partners is that the Black British History modules probably would not have continued if it were not for the CDA, with UoN and NBHA both suffering if this had occurred. Four years and counting of Watley's teaching Black British History modules would never have occurred without the CDA.

⁶ Unpublished and non-transcribed interview, 17 March 2011