Can Phenomenological Understanding of Collaboration lead to Participatory Action for Building Partnerships?

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Can Gaining a Phenomenological Understanding of Collaboration aid Participatory Action for Building Partnerships?

I came across a wonderful metaphor that is relevant for this discussion. Creswell (2007) describes qualitative research as being an “intricate fabric composed of minute threads, many colors, different textures, and various blends of material” (p. 35). The use of such words as “many”, “different” and “various”, implies a certain permissibility for qualitative researchers to be creative in their approach and thus, in creating the “fabric” of their research. I can acknowledge with appreciation that one’s artistry is both welcomed and encouraged; albeit with the understanding that ultimately, the product I produce will be exposed to scrutiny and I must be prepared to justify it in the eyes of the observer (Crotty, 1998).

In an attempt to weave my own “fabric” for my upcoming doctoral research, I am faced with an array of both complexities and possibilities associated with the topic of my interest. I intend to explore of the meaning of collaboration from participants who wish to engage in interorganizational partnerships. The participants consist of certain scientists and leaders across Canada from academia and government; each with expertise in the medically-oriented functional food and natural health products research community. Recent funding has been awarded to construct a network comprised of partnerships that will be achieved in the spirit of collaboration. I am fortunate to have been given the opportunity to focus my studies on this initiative.

I believe that qualitative research would compliment the nature of my pursuit; the dilemma that confronts me as I examine the various worldviews, paradigms, and theoretical assumptions associated with qualitative research, is making the most appropriate selection among them.
According to Gilgun (2006), “excellent qualitative research is based on careful consideration of how and whether various findings, theories, and methodologies are relevant” (p. 437). While I have acknowledged that the choice I make must compliment the aims of my research, I must also satisfy my personal aspirations and academic goals. My academic goals are not limited to participating in research that is a “prelude to real research” (Sandelowski, 1997). I wish to engage in research that incorporates both understanding and action. Although it has been argued that understanding alone is in itself action (Sandelowski, 2004) participants in this scenario will rely on their understanding of a phenomena to guide them into active participation. Thus, I must consider whether an intricate blend of worldviews may be warranted to explore whether a phenomenological understanding of collaboration can lead participants into participatory action for building partnerships.

The remainder of this article will address what I believe to be the real-life issues concerning the concept of collaboration. I will discuss the possibilities of using phenomenology as an approach to collaboration. I will examine the challenges of partnering and explore whether participatory action research can serve as an additional and complimentary approach for advancing the concept of collaboration and aid in building partnerships. Finally, as this is somewhat of a novel proposal I am undertaking, both the limitations and recommendations of my discussion will follow.

The Real-Life Issues Associated with the Concept of Collaboration

The tensions created when we use the term collaboration arise from the numerous associations of the concept with other concepts in our attempts to define it, as well as a lack of context in which meaning is ascribed when it is applied in reference to practice. One way to understand collaboration is to employ similar methods as D’Amour, Ferrada-Videla, Rodriguez, and Beaulieu (2005) and analyze
the concept through empirical findings that exist in the literature. These findings will likely suggest, however, that the meaning of collaboration can be widely interpreted. In addition, the association of other concepts represented as being synonymous with collaboration such as sharing, partnership, interdependency, and power (D’Amour et al., 2005) will demonstrate a dependency on assimilation rather than on a uniqueness of the phenomenon. And yet, in recent times, there has been more emphasis placed on furthering attempts to align the concept of collaboration among interprofessional, interdisciplinary, or transdisciplinary modes of knowledge generation. Here we see a movement away from the experiential and individualistic nature of collaboration to it being viewed as no more than cooperative processes. These modes according to van Manen (2001) are “reductionist and problematic from the perspective of the ethical value of human understanding” (p.850) and “appear surprisingly simplistic and technocratic from a human science and philosophic point of view” (p. 851).

Operational associations have also been tied to the concept of collaboration whereby collaboration is a function of exchanging information, altering activities, sharing resources, and developing the capacity of another organization or individuals for mutual benefit in order to achieve a common aim (Himmelman, 1996; Apostolakis, 2004; Bryne & Hansberry, 2007). These observations, while not intended to discount the work of others, demonstrate that collaboration can be viewed as a functional commodity that can be objectively viewed and therefore manipulated. The danger of reducing collaboration on such grounds is the likelihood that an inability to collaborate will be blamed if any one of these functions is not successfully achieved.

The most troubling of all tensions exist from our common reference to collaboration, and particularly, on our reliance on the need “to collaborate” without any contextual meaning ascribed to it. Often, collaboration is emphasized as the ideal approach for reaching some form of desired outcome
however, we fail to provide a source of reference from which collaboration can be derived. This is often observed in documents produced by the health care sector. For example, recommendations put forth from key stakeholder groups (i.e. academia, government, and both public and private sector health organizations) for advancing the vision of health care often emphasize the need for collaboration, and yet, we are left without any sense or direction for what that collaboration entails. If, as readers, our understanding is comprised, what can be expected from those who must collaborate? Surely this lack of understanding must impact greatly on the ability to implement the recommendations. And it does. Why is it that when such emphasis is placed on the need to collaborate, the meaning of collaboration as a point of reference is not defined? What progress can be gained and how will collaboration pave the way to fulfillment of our recommendations if we are not given the context in which collaboration is proposed?

The purpose of bringing these issues to the forefront is to not purposefully discount the merit of the work that has been achieved to date. It may well be that any one or more of the various concepts associated with collaboration as they have been articulated in the literature are congruent and agreeable to the reader. The point is that one cannot always be certain given the subjective nature of our interpretations. It is the variability of our particular interpretations drawn from our individual lived experiences and the multitude of situations where are called to collaborate that makes collaboration challenging. It is possible, however, to engage in the moment and search for the understandable meaning of our experiences (Linseth & Norberg, 2004). With a phenomenological approach, we refrain from judgment and facts in favor of telling from the lived experiences of those who are immersed in the phenomena (Linseth & Norberg, 2004). In the moment, we seek to understand the meaning of collaboration.
The Value of the Phenomenological Approach

Phenomenology has its roots in philosophy and has been applied though not extensively to the social sciences such as psychology, nursing and education (Willis, 1999). According to Greenfield (1974), who presented a compelling argument for phenomenology’s place and its usefulness in the study of organizations and administration, the philosophical basis of phenomenology “has its origin in the distinction Kant drew between the noumenal world (the world as it is) and the phenomenal world (the world as we see it). For Kant, a world of reality does indeed exist, but man can never perceive it directly; reality is always glossed over with human interpretation which themselves become the realities to which man responds” (p. 4).

One’s reality therefore, exists in one’s beliefs, ideas, and interpretation of the world that exists around us. Reality lies inside of oneself and specifically, in one’s mind; discovery of truth is simply more than what science provides; and what remains of value to one, is variable and dependent upon one’s beliefs and interpretations. Reality is that which is understood as true in the world by individuals; and while that “truth” is in part influenced by social reality (i.e. the context within which one exists) and does influence action, its complete definition lies within oneself and cannot be empirically tested. The role of social science then, is to understand social reality as different people see it and to demonstrate how their views shape the action which they take within that reality (Greenfield, 1974).

To put forth the value of phenomenology as a viable approach for exploring the concept of collaboration in the context of partnership development, is it necessary to place the individual within the context of organization. The act of collaborating is undertaken by the individual and not by the organization itself. Greenfield (1974) emphasizes the essentiality of “viewing organizations not as
structures who hold true universal laws but as cultural artifacts dependent upon the specific meaning and intention of people who operate within them” (p. 2). Contrary to the existing reliance on organizational structure and the fixed scientific theoretical underpinnings associated with it, phenomenology offers an approach of variability and allows us to focus on the “particulars” versus the “universal” for construing the social world around us. At the core of this view according to Greenfield “is not a single abstraction called organization, but rather the varied perceptions by individuals of what they can, should, or must do in dealing with others” (p. 3).

Although I have not yet made a final selection of the intricate threads that will comprise the “fabric” of my research, there are numerous aspects of the phenomenological approach to qualitative research that make it appealing. For instance, a phenomenological approach must include sensitive and interpretive skills and creativity on the part of the researcher (van Manen, 2006). As researchers, we are careful not to invoke judgment and conclusion to our findings, and thus “bracket” ourselves in order to “become open to our own experience and to the understandable meaning implicit in the experience” (Lindseth & Norberg, 2004, p. 148). Audio-taped narratives are best to capture the lived experiences of the participants and the exploration entails a telling of both objective reality and individual experiences of the participants (Linseth & Norberg, 2004). The “what” and the “how” of individual experiences as it relates to the specific phenomena under inquiry is revealed, allowing for a composite description of the essence of the experience for all individuals to unfold (Creswell, 2007; Moustakas, 1994). It is this “composite” of collaboration as it is derived among the participants that may well be integral to the development of the partnership.
Exploring the Need to Build Partnerships

Partnerships have been described as a cornerstone of policies to modernize health and social services (Glendinning, 2000; Robinson & Cottrel, 2005). There is no question that the need to build interorganizational relationships with other institutions and establish effective partnerships is of critical importance in the health sector (Yarbrough & Powers, 2006). This is particularly so for the specific domain of health research whereby several major funding agencies have recognized their role in supporting research partnerships and have targeted funds for such activities (Savitz, 2007). The demands of health care require capabilities and resources beyond those that any single researcher or organization can offer in entirety. As we consider the current environment and look toward the future, we see that organizations continue to downsize and concentrate on their core competencies, while the use of outside sources continues to increase. Our reliance on others through partnering has grown stronger than ever, and with that, there exists the need to pursue options that will lead to successful partnerships.

It has been suggested that developing interorganizational or multi-agency partnerships (which consists of two or more partners) require that partners work together towards a common set of goals (Apostolakis, 2004). However, there exists limited evidence of the effectiveness in which partnerships can achieve desired goals (El Ansari & Weiss, 2006; Cheadle, Senter, Solomon, Beery, & Schwartz, 2005; Weiss, Anderson, & Lasker 2002; Krueter, Lezin, & Young, 2000). Thus, more focus must be placed on the evolution, structure, and outcomes of partnerships (El Ansari & Weiss, 2006; El Ansari, Phillips, & Hammick, 2001; Roussos & Fawcett, 2000; Kruter, Lezin, & Young, 2000; Scott & Thurston, 1997).
The term “partnership” has been linked to other concepts such as networking, coordination and cooperation (Gannon-Leary, Baines, & Wilson, 2006). Activities such as networking, coordination and cooperation imply a greater reliance on the individual than on the organization itself. Setting goals, processes, and outcomes for partnerships and achieving success depends on the meaningful actions of the individual. While certain success can be viewed from the standpoint of a given organization, it is individual influence derived from one’s perception of social reality that drives the success of the organization. In support of this notion is Greenfield (1974) who asserts that “the notion of the organization as a necessary order-maintaining instrument falls and the notion of organization as the expression of particular human ideologies takes its place” (p. 9).

All participants who intend to engage in partnerships must be empowered to have a voice for a true partnership to exist. The differing perspectives and meanings that individuals bring to the administrative and organizational arenas are among the greatest gifts and the most significant challenges for understanding partnerships. Assigning certain significance to role of the individual within the organizational structure requires that we also consider the complexities that arise when individuals are given their rightful place at the forefront of organizational theory.

The full potential of qualitative research has yet to be realized in the health field, especially in partnership work, since it is challenging for studies to explore simultaneously and with precision a wide range of individual and contextual variables of a partnership (El Ansari & Weiss, 2005). Qualitative research, however, can assist researchers in understanding the meaning of an intervention, the participants’ beliefs about the expectations of the outcome, the impact of the context, and the process of the intervention (Verhoef, Casebeer, & Hilsden, 2002). Participatory
action in particular, may be appealing for the researcher who wants to advance the utility of research findings into practice (Sandelowski, 2004).

Participatory Action Research as an Approach for the Advancement of Partnerships

Given the recommendations from the literature, more concerted effort must be focused on improving our ability to effectively measure the quality of partnership processes and outcomes. While the phenomenological approach may be effective for exploring the meaning of collaboration among participants, it appears reasonable that the use of an additional approach, namely, participatory action research, may help address the current limitations that have been reflected in the literature. The basic tenet of participatory research according to Creswell (2007) is that “research should contain an action agenda for reform that may change the lives of participants, the institutions in which they live and work, or even the researcher’s lives” (p. 21). Reason (1988) defines participatory action research as an emerging paradigm in which research is conducted “with” and “for” people rather than “on” people (p. 1). This notion is appealing given the very nature of partnership development and the underlying need for reconciliation of the tensions between individual and the organization.

The current challenge of participatory action research is for one to know exactly what it entails as there is no a single way to implement it (White, Suchowierska, Campbell, 2004). There are, however, numerous proposals available for conducting participatory action research (White, Suchowierska, Campbell, 2004; Minkler & Wallerstein, 2003; Stringer, 1996; Danley & Ellison, 1999; Greenwood, Whyte, & Harkavy, 1993; Whyte, 1991; Whyte, Greenwood, & Lazes, 1991)
one concedes that participatory action research is indeed an approach to qualitative research, it would seem reasonable that this approach would compliment any one of the existing partnership paradigms and models that are currently available.

The appeal of participatory action research is the broad-based assumption of active participant engagement which is essential for building partnerships. With the aid of phenomenological enquiry, participants or in this scenario, potential partners are brought together and presented with their collective description of collaboration. They are then asked to engage in establishing a mutually agreeable vision for their partnership. The vision is not an abstract formula, rather, it involves active participation for setting clear goals for their partnership and is achieved through agreement and commitment. What follows is the incorporation of a chosen partnership framework that takes into account the key processes associated with the particulars of the partnership.

Limitations and Recommendations

A daunting task one might suggest, when coming to terms with the idea of implementing a combined qualitative approach to a topic of inquiry. However, as illustrated, a single approach may not warrant the outcomes one wishes to achieve for one’s research; nor may a single approach be compatible with one’s fulfillment of the academic requirements and achievement of personal goals. In the current academic environment, there are many doctoral students (myself included) and researchers alike who do not undertake research for exploration and discovery alone. Rather, there exists a desire to reach out to meaning and move it closer within the realm of practice.

If one accepts that we are confronted with issues concerning the concept collaboration, it is necessary that we revisit our understanding of it, as well as the methods that have been employed.
One may ask why this is so important. Others may object that essential meaning of collaboration is not necessary as long as there is enough agreement to proceed with the initiative at hand. Where action is needed, too much reflection may be inappropriate (Lindseth, Norberg). However it is the very nature of our awareness of our reflection that we reveal our biases. Perhaps too, our awareness may motivate us move toward improvement. For partnerships to be successful, it is necessary that partners work toward achieving a common vision of the partnership and this cannot be easily attained if we do not first engage in reflection.

Phenomenology as a qualitative approach is challenging because it can be argued that the method of inquiry constantly has to be invented anew and cannot be reduced to a general set of strategies or research techniques (van Manen, 2006). Phenomenology leaves one without a “tried and true” methodology since it is dependent on the beliefs, values, experiences, and ideas ascribed from the “particular” rather than of the universal. However, it is knowledge of the “particular” that sheds light on individual understanding of a phenomenon and often, it is precisely this knowledge that helps us to address the inconsistencies that prevent us from moving toward collective understanding.

Similarly, the use of participatory action research, particularly for doctoral research is still a fairly rare phenomenon (Gibbon, 2002). Participatory action research has been challenged for lacking in methodological rigor; defined terms; and the tensions created from the ideological presumptions of shared responsibility and governance; and cultural disparities among participants which impedes practical advancement of the research itself (Green, 2004). Such misgivings, however, are highly relevant to nature of the topic under study, the type of participant groups brought together, and whether there is a certain reliance on choosing participatory action research as a single approach to
research inquiry. It is imperative that such challenges be brought to the forefront for our consideration so we may carefully attend to them. They may be of particular importance when we delve deeper into the intricacies of selecting the methodological processes we wish to incorporate.

Conclusion

Ultimately, it is the focus of our research that leads us to devise our own ways of proceeding and that allows us to achieve our purpose (Creswell, 2007). It is from acknowledging the complexities and possibilities of my chosen topic that I have created the “fabric” of my research. Through exploration of the real-life issues concerning the concept of collaboration, it is feasible to suggest that gaining a phenomenological understanding of collaboration from the perspectives of the participants is as significant as approaching partnership development with the use of participatory action. Hence, it may well be that combining worldviews is a viable option when wanting to transition from relevance to action. Attention to the means by which one may achieve collaboration and partnerships and not merely stating that they are necessary, contribute to success. It has been my aim to have adequately addressed some of those considerations.
References


