Partnership Dynamics in University-Community Engagement: A Case Study of the TibaSA Multi-Disciplinary Research Team in uMkhanyakude District, KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa

Innocent T. Mutero and Moses J. Chimbari

Abstract

Cooperation and reciprocity between university actors and community research assistants through university-community engagement has the potential to lead to knowledge creation and improved research uptake. However, there is a paucity of research on the relational dynamics and operating processes in successful partnerships between multi-disciplinary university scientists and community research assistants. This study investigated the case of the Tackling Infections to Benefit Africa (Tiba) research team based at the University of KwaZulu-Natal to identify the attributes associated with constructing and sustaining transformative university-community engagement through multi-disciplinary research teams. Data was collected by means of participant observation, ethnographic conversation interviews, and in-depth interviews with key participants including community research assistants and university-based researchers. The results show that organisational structure and qualities, academic principles and social qualities underpin the success of multi-disciplinary research teams. Based on the findings, we assert that dialogic interaction, respect, 'demystification of science' and knowledge plurality facilitate relationships between researchers and community research assistants that can aid in framing sustainable university-community engagement as a way to work *with* the community rather than ways to work *for* it.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS: INNOCENT T. MUTERO AND MOSES J. CHIMBARI, University of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. Email: muteroinnocent@gmail.com

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La coopération et la réciprocité entre les acteurs universitaires et les assistants de recherche communautaire à travers l'engagement communautaire des universités peuvent mener à la création de connaissances et à une meilleure diffusion et utilisation des travaux de recherche. Toutefois, il y a peu de recherches sur la dynamique relationnelle et les processus opérationnels dans le cadre de partenariats fructueux entre les scientifiques universitaires multidisciplinaires et les assistants de recherches communautaires. Cette enquête a étudié le cas de l'équipe de recherche Tackling Infections to Benefit Africa (TIBA) (S'attaquer aux infections au profit de l'Afrique) basée à l'Université du KwaZulu-Natal dans le but d'identifier les attributs associés à la construction et au maintien d'un engagement communautaire universitaire transformateur grâce à des équipes de recherche multidisciplinaires. Les données ont été recueillies au moyen d'observations des participants, d'entrevues de conversations ethnographiques et d'entrevues approfondies avec des participants clés, y compris des assistants de recherche communautaires et des chercheurs universitaires. Les résultats démontrent que la structure et les qualités organisationnelles, les principes académiques et les qualités sociales sous-tendent le succès des équipes de recherche pluridisciplinaires. Sur la base des observations, nous affirmons que les interaction dialogiques, le respect, la « démystification de la science » et la pluralité des connaissances facilitent mieux les relations entre les chercheurs et les assistants de recherche communautaires aidant à formuler un engagement communautaire universitaire durable comme procédés de travailler avec la communauté plutôt que celles de travailler pour elle.

Mots clés: engagement entre l'université et la communauté, attributs sociaux, dynamique de partenariat, recherche multidisciplinaire, assistants de recherche communautaires

Introduction

In an era of growing social exclusion, disconnection, increased inequalities and failing health systems, there is a worldwide call for academics to investigate and invest in engaged scholarship, also referred to as university-community engagement (Boshoff, 2017). South Africa currently faces a multitude of challenges which have led to growing calls for such engagement. Universities and different community stakeholders are expected to coalesce in finding solutions to some of the community's intractable problems through innovative research. University-community engagement is said to be one of the core pillars that can be used to improve public health

delivery (Musesengwa and Chimbari, 2017), democracy (Cook and Nation, 2016), sustainable development (Mbah, 2019), placemaking (Thakrar, 2018) and social justice (Machimana, Sefotho, and Ebersöhn, 2018, p. 177) especially in marginalised communities.

The buzz around university-community engagement in South Africa has seen universities realigning their disciplinary expertise and resources to connect with broader societal issues (Bhagwan, 2018). There is increasing interest in the possibility of community knowledge and academic knowledge making innovative contributions to changing the structural conditions of poverty and inequality (Moore, 2014). University-community engagement facilitates bidirectional communication, breaking boundaries between the academy and external stakeholders. However, it is fraught with partnership or relational challenges. Esau (2015, p. 1) posits that, "in the South African context, academics and researchers are not usually trained to work with communities as partners".

Although much is known about why partnerships are formed, comparatively little is known about how collaboration works - about how collaborating partners navigate and negotiate complex partnership challenges to achieve more as a cohesive team. Our study aimed to fill this gap by identifying key elements and attributes that could both improve team chemistry and leave a legacy in the community. We investigated the experiences of multidisciplinary researchers including university-trained researchers and community research assistants in a University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN)-based research team working on a project called Tackling Infections to Benefit Africa, South Africa (TibaSA). In this context, community research assistants are defined as community representatives jointly recruited by research leadership and community structures to be part of the research team. They were trained on key research procedures including research ethics, data collection and other tasks.

While collaboration is extremely valuable, many partnerships encounter challenges that inhibit success. Where inadequate attention is paid to engagement processes, power and status may stand in the way of successful university-community engagement (Strier, 2014; Weiss, Anderson, and Lasker, 2002). Academics, and by extension their students, do not always accord community members the respect they deserve as co-researchers (Musesengwa and Chimbari, 2017). Prejudicial and stereotypical classifications have been observed amongst the university internal public where "there is a lack of recognition of students from rural areas and their potential" (Timis et al., 2019, p. 77). Members of multidisciplinary teams might face similar challenges. Research has shown that such prejudice can be based on ethnicity, nationality, formal education and skills and many other individually and socially created classes (Baker and Collier, 2003; Mutero and Govender, 2020, 2019). Previous studies

on service learning, a key component of university-community engagement, have also focused on partnership development processes (Rautenbach and Mitchell, 2005), power and participation dynamics in collaborations (O'Brien, 2009) and how to evaluate relations through participatory research (Mitchell and Humphries, 2007). Our study aimed to establish how students, senior and early career researchers (hereinafter referred to as researchers), relate to the lay community (community research assistants) in collaborations that seek to improve people's lives through research.

Unpacking University-Community Engagement

While broadly and variously defined, university-community engagement essentially refers to breaking the boundary between the university and the external community, creating reciprocal opportunities and address-ing the community's challenges, while also enriching the university's traditional mandate (Hall, 2010; Mtawa, Fongwa, and Wangenge-Ouma, 2016; Preece, 2013). Conversely, the Centres for Disease Control and Pre-vention (CDC) defines community engagement as "the process of working collaboratively with and through groups of people affiliated by geographic proximity, special interest, or similar situations to address issues affect-ing the well-being of those people" (NIH, 2011, p. 7). The common thread running through university-community engagement and community engagement as defined within the broad academic context and specific to health researchers is that the stakeholders work collaboratively, shifting dis-cipline-based boundaries and expert/non-expert binaries to achieve shared goals, usually for the greater good. Bhagwan (2018, p. 32) observes that universities are embracing multi-disciplinarity and engaging communities with a view to effectively dealing with broader societal issues.

The long-term benefits of university-community engagement have not only been linked to knowledge creation (Jacobs, Habiyaremye, Fakudze, Ramoroka, and Jonas, 2019), community-focused policies (Mosavel, Winship, and Ahmed, 2018), improved community health practices (Gopper et al., 2019), and ending violence (Nation, Bess, Voight, Perkins, and Juarez, 2011) but also to increased cognitive and social justice and rec-ognition of the plurality of knowledge as well as upholding the right of different forms of knowledge to co-exist (Leibowitz, 2017). University-com-munity engagement also promotes social and civic responsibility among students (Maistry and Thakrar, 2012) and increases their sense of commu-nity belonging. Meaningful engagement of communities is also necessary for the success of research uptake as it promotes multi-level cooperation and the sustainability of projects through the pursuit of shared and overlap-ping objectives (Mindu, Chimbari, and Gunda, 2018; Mosavel et al., 2018).

Context of the Study

The study was conducted in the uMkhanyakude District of KwaZulu-Natal where TibaSA is conducting research. While TibaSA has had a presence in uMkhanyakude since 2014, the research team's previous work was conducted under the MABISA (Malaria and Bilharzia in Southern Africa) project (Musesengwa and Chimbari, 2017). The research team has produced in excess of 50 refereed journal articles, and ten PhD and three Master's graduates. The TibaSA research team follows an ecosystem approach to health (ecohealth) which leverages multidisciplinary research. Commonly referred to as the ecohealth approach, this concept seeks to address health issues in the context of the social-cultural and biophysical environments. It is used to understand how human-related factors interact with the environ-ment and consequently influence human health (Chimbari, 2017).

The research team comprises of researchers and non-researchers with complementary skills in a range of areas including using arts for social change, community engagement, participatory visual and digital media, and biomedical, social, and public health. The researchers have estab-lished project implementation structures that, as described elsewhere, are working well (Musesengwa and Chimbari, 2017; Musesengwa, Chimbari, and Mukaratirwa, 2017). The stakeholders engaged by TibaSA and its pre-decessor MABISA include community health workers, school principals, village headmen, community members and local health services profes-sionals. Our investigation was limited to community research assistants, the Community Advisory Board (CAB) and the university researchers who form the core of the investigating team. The nature of relationships between university-community engagement stakeholders is key to success-fully achieve research goals (Bhagwan, 2018; Mutero and Govender, 2019; O'Brien, 2009; Strier, 2014, 2011). The relational dynamics and operating processes undergirding partnerships between multi-disciplinary university scientists and community research assistants are understudied.

Universities' interaction and partnerships with communities for the public good have existed in South Africa for a long period of time. However, no policy mandated community engagement in the South African higher education sector prior to the White Paper on Public Service Training and Education (1997) (CHE, 2004, p. 132). In response to the call of the White Paper on the Transformation of Higher Education (Department of Edu-cation, 1997) the Joint Education Trust (JET) launched the Community Higher Education Service Partnerships (CHESP) in 1999. The aim was to assist higher education institutions to conceptualise and implement com-munity engagement as a core function of the academy (Lazarus, Erasmus, Hendricks, Nduna, and Slamat, 2008).

Methods

The study's research questions focused on how researchers and community research assistants negotiate and sustain team relationships and how these relationships influence community engagement. Since the project members consisted of multi-disciplinary researchers, we also investigated how different science traditions that shape the researchers' and community research assistants' approaches to learning pose challenges, and contribute to improved university-community engagement. Essentially, the study examined how relationships between researchers and community research assistants can assist in framing university-community engagement as a way to work *with* the community rather than ways to work *for* it.

The study population was made up a team of researchers working on a project to tackle infectious diseases in Ingwavuma Community, uMkhanyakude District. For the purposes of this article, we divide this team into two groups, namely community researchers (community research assistants and the CAB), and researchers. The group names that we use here are also used by this team; therefore, we do not run the risk of labelling or mislabelling. The community researchers' group is made up of men and women living in the Ingwavuma community, trained by university professors to assist in carrying out different tasks, some of which require specialised skills. On the other hand, the research group consists of women and men currently based at UKZN as professors, postdoctoral fellows, or doctoral and Master's candidates.

All the members of the team were included in the study; hence, we did not sample. The team consisted of 26 people, with nine community research assistants, five members of the CAB, ten researchers, and two administrative staff. The team had 14 women and ten men. The size of the team meant that all the members could be interviewed and observed as they carried out their duties. However, only 17 members participated in the interviews, with the remainder either unavailable or opting to exercise their right not to participate in in-depth interviews. The views of those who declined to take part in in-depth interviews were captured using ethnographic conversational interviews ("Key Concepts in Ethnography", 2009).

The data was collected by means of in-depth interviews, ethnographic conversational interviews, participant observation and still photographs. The problem of participant reactivity was reduced through participant observation by the first author (fieldworker and mentee of the principal investigator) who fitted into the scene well enough not to arouse reactivity from both university researchers and community research assistants (Guest, Namey, and Mitchell, 2013). Subjective data was collected using ethnographic conversational interviews on campus and field trips where the team interacted and had casual conversations (Rautenbach and Mitchell, 2005).

The interviews were conducted at Forest View Lodge which provided a conducive environment for the interviewees to share their thoughts without inconveniencing their families. The venue also increased confidentiality as it allowed for privacy. Participant observation was particularly useful in order to report on the team's relations over a prolonged period rather than just using interviews which are susceptible to self-serving censorship (Rautenbach and Mitchell, 2005) . Juxtaposing data from interviews and observation enables the researcher to describe existing situations using the five senses, providing a 'written photograph' of the situation under study (Kawulich, 2005). The highly blurred researcher/researched boundaries and power play between university-community engagement stakeholders requires a juxtaposition of data collection methods in order to provide evidence on the 'human' side of an issue, that is, the often-contradictory behaviours, beliefs, opinions, emotions and relationships of individuals (Yin, 2003). The data was analysed using inductive analysis, with emerging patterns and themes then synthesised (Coffey and Atkinson, 1996).

Ethical approval was obtained in the context of the larger study from UKZN. Participation in the study was voluntary and participants were informed beforehand that this was the case and that they could withdraw from the research at any stage. The participants were also assured of anonymity.

Results and Discussion

Organisational Structure and Qualities

The TibaSA team consists of multi-disciplinary researchers and community research assistants working to achieve a common goal from different scientific perspectives. Data analysis classified the data into three broad categories: 1) TibaSA's organisational qualities, 2) the academic principles followed by the team, and 3) the social qualities that underpin team members' interaction.

This sub-section sets out the organisational hierarchy as it was intended on establishment. We also provide a brief explanation in order to understand how it plays out in the team's operations. However, to understand its efficacy or inefficaciousness, the researchers asked participants for a team assessment. Therefore, the results and discussion presented here are not on the team as it was intended to operate, but rather on the participants' lived experiences of project operations. For purposes of completeness, we first present a diagrammatic presentation of the organisational hierarchy which guides our discussion.

Figure 1. Collaborative Leadership Hierachy
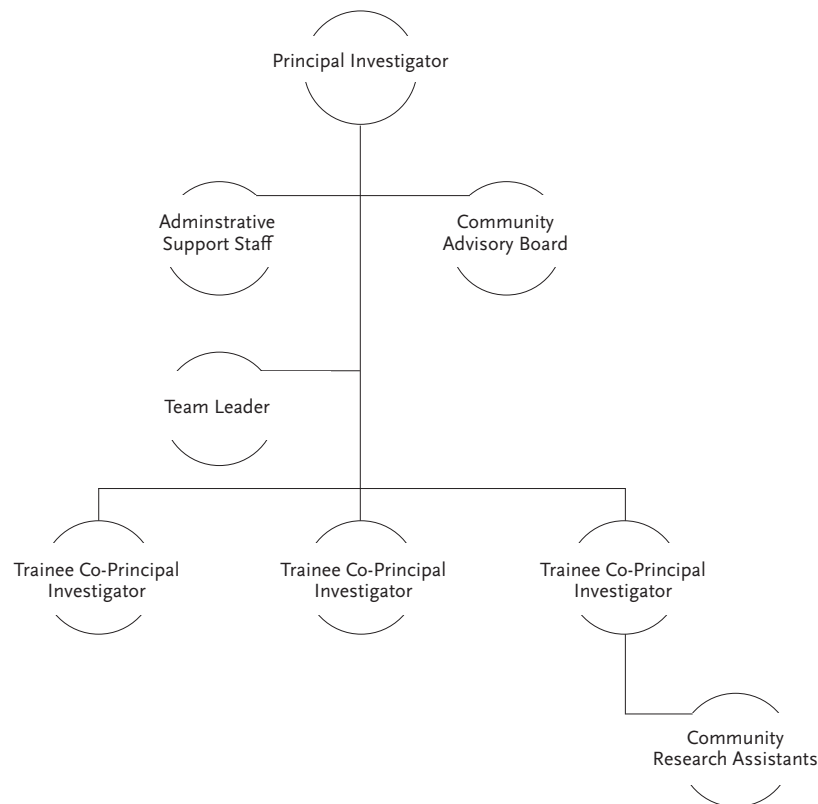
a) Principal Investigator's commitment to collaborative leadership

The team's different scientific backgrounds and other divides are potential sources of retrogressive conflict. However, its observance of collaborative leadership creates good relationships between members of research team, thus, facilitating the smooth flow of activities. The team is led by an experienced Principal Investigator (PI) who oversees all operational and research activities. The PI affords autonomy to all members of the research team regardless of their level of study or experience. This gives the student and mentee researchers (referred as Co-PIs in the diagram above) an opportunity to learn from each other. The experienced PI often provides leadership in the face of uncertainty amongst Co-PIs. As a result, the junior researchers develop a critical appreciation, first of one another as equal team players and secondly of multi-disciplinary research.

TibaSA has created an environment where there is open communication and community research assistants, postdoctoral research fellows, and PhD and Master's students are given an opportunity to exercise leadership in their individual capacities. The importance of effective communication and of all members was corroborated by participants:

Each member in the system has a critical role to play. Any role that get compromised affect the whole system negatively. Clear and timely communication needs to be ensured at all times (even when it's uncomfortable). A background to this recommendation is a recent extended field trip. There was a time when the group felt abundened [sic] *because there was no effective/clear communication from the team leader and administrative support staff.* (Interviewee H)

The level of involvement varies per field trip but you always submit a plan for your data collection. Logistical compromises are then made by with admin staff. In the upcoming field trip, I will say I have been more involved and I think it is majorly becos [sic] *it is about my work alone.* (Interviewee B)

The coordinated deep democracy which the team follows for both the organisational processes and structure facilitates efficiency. Deep democracy is defined as a practical and powerful decision-making method for inclusive decision-making, where every opinion is heard and acknowledged, and counts (Green, 1999). It is used here to refer to an organisational structure which has a PI and a delegated team leader who work to coordinate overall team projects but also allow Co-PIs the leeway to lead their own studies. The organisational hierarchy is thus premised on independence and open communication.

b) Administrative and Stakeholder Management

The PI is closely assisted by Administrative Support Staff (ASS) and the CAB whose duties we are briefly described below. The ASS has two offices which handle the communications and finance aspects of the project. The CAB comprises of community members who act as a boundary partner between the research team and the community (Sarah, 2007). The ASS and CAB's position in the hierarchy can easily stall the project's operational and academic processes or vice-versa. For instance, they can miscommunicate or delay communication. To this end, we sought the participants' views on the offices rather than the officers. The following responses were obtained during interviews:

My view of the administrative support staff is a positive one. I will just state few instances that come to my mind as to how their presence has contributed to the success recorded by the team. Firstly, their presence is hugely felt in the research team as they help in reducing the task to be done by Prof.

Hence, Prof. can deal with academic issues while they sort out administrative issues. (Interviewee A)

[Admin A's] *presence improves our progress because she helps a lot in putting everything we need together, ordering stock, getting us petty cash, paying our field allowance, renting cars for us, bringing specialists to assist us. Without her it is difficult to go around the university getting these things put together.* [Admin B] *is also important in moving the project forward, she does the calls with all the important people in the community and the corporate world to get our work set up. She will arrange meetings with stakeholders, organise events for the project, and arrange activities that we have to do in the community. She is basically the 'go to person' for anything relating to the project events and plans. She prepares the calendar for the professor and has a calendar for project events.* (Interviewee B)

While it is difficult to separate the office from the officer, these responses show that effective operations call for staff that is dedicated to communicating the research team's position to both the internal and external public.

However important the offices are, there is a need for administrative staff to exercise due diligence and caution in carrying out their duties. Participants pointed out that ASS has the potential to stall progress if they dwell on personal conflict or if they overstep the mark to make decisions that should be taken by the PI based on technical knowledge rather than budgetary demands. Commenting on hearsay, one of the respondents said:

From what I have heard, if you are not in good books with the administrative support staff, they have the power to make one's life miserable. (Interviewee J)

To curb the likelihood of failure due to personality issues and administrative bungles the respondents recommended professional training and refresher courses for the ASS. This view is aptly summarised in the following excerpt:

Administrators succeed at this if they make an effort to engage team members and treat everyone fairly...The roles of every office must be clearly defined and their capacity (skills and resources) developed to enable efficient execution of responsibilities. (Interviewee E)

Essentially, the responses reflect the need for a professional administrative staff complement which has the capacity to separate personal issues from work. Dealing with personalities is particularly important in a large research team comprised of people from diverse backgrounds.

The responses show that CAB members are an extension of the communication arm of the research team. The communication duties of CAB members primarily serve two purposes. The first is facilitating relationships between the researchers and the community:

The community advisory board is good for the progress of the research being done by the project. They help us to get in touch with the community members. They are our first point of access into the community. When we need to organise meetings with the community, they are the ones that invite the community members and bring us to them. (Interviewee D)

The Community Advisory Board is a catalyst in our research endeavours. Without them the communities in which we conduct research would shut us out anytime they feel like. Their presence bring us favour and good relations with the community. (Interviewee C)

The second function is representative participation, which implies that at times the CAB speaks on behalf of the community, suggesting questions or issues they want addressed through research.

For most of the work we do in the community we consult the CAB members before we can work in their areas. They call meetings with the community and they give us guidance on how to approach the community. (Interviewee H)

Most university-community engagement projects are initiated by university actors rather than community stakeholders due to resource discrepancies that favour higher education institutions (Hagenmeier, 2015) and policy prescriptions (CHE, 2004). Public health researchers have observed and are against poorly conceptualised and incorrectly implemented community engagement which often sees one group being invited to be foot soldiers, collecting data, and championing and validating externally-driven research processes (Baker and Collier, 2003). As observed by one of the participants, TibaSA laid a good foundation that avoids unhealthy transactional partnerships:

Given that I joined the team less than a year ago, I do not have much to say about the Community Advisory Board. I met them for the first time at the community feedback programme that was held in February. Based on the level of organisation and co-ordination I saw at the feedback meeting I will say their presence is beneficial. The CAB members is the link between the research team and the community. And if we are considering community empowerment ... we need them because they are the people that will ensure continuity when the project is over. (Interviewee I)

This observation is in line with Kline et al.'s (2018, p. 91) view that university-community engagement should not represent the universities' charity to poor communities but should also focus on the expertise and contribution that the community can offer.

c) Empowered middle management
The team leader who coordinates the team's field activities is also critical

to its functionality. The team leader often prevails over all administrative roles while in the field. Such coordination enables the team to work together to achieve a common purpose. The team leader also facilitates conflict management, conflict resolution and conflict transformation. This implies that in times of conflict, operational processes are not halted by the absence of the PI as the team leader is empowered to lead team activities in ways that encourage collaborative and respectful partnerships between the university-trained researchers and community research assistants. All the participants agreed that the position of team leader is a difficult, but very important one, as indicated in the following responses:

It is not easy to be a leader and one cannot get to please everyone. That being said, the team leader is trying and the progress his presence brings to the team cannot be over emphasised. We need him to co-ordinate the various activities in the research team from journal meetings to trainings, to field trips and so on. (Interviewee D)

The team leader is the face and spokesperson of the team with stakeholders and is the bridge between the team and the PI. The team leader gives the team direction as they work towards achieving goals by developing and implementing (including through delegation) strategies/tasks. The leader also encourages learning and facilitates a good working relationship between team members, being open to and asking for ... feedback, encouraging critical thinking and discussions. (Interviewee E)

The team leader helps in mediating when we have conflict with researchers... S/he also communicates with Prof. on our behalf if there is anything that we want addressed. (Interviewee F)

In cases where the source of conflict involves the team leader, other team members perceived to be either neutral or senior mediate without unnecessarily involving the PI. This route to conflict mediation was collectively chosen by team members during staff retreats which we discuss later in this article.

2. Academic Principles

a. TibaSA's Innovative Research Agenda

TibaSA follows an ecohealth research approach which by its very nature of multi-disciplinarity and encouragement of novelty and innovation causes academic tensions, especially among conservative scholars who thrive on methodological fundamentalism. While these tensions exist outside the team, for the inexperienced team of Co-PIs within the team, conflict often revolves around balancing the research end and the means. Often, though not always, the qualitative researchers and community research assistants

have an affinity for the research process, whereas the quantitative researchers are interested in tangible end results.

At times they (quantitative aligned researchers) capitalise by knowing nos.... basically its more on how many are affected than understanding of their problem... I hope I am clear. Yet rich information is in qualitative... They know the numbers of the people who are affected or not affected by the problem being investigated... not the factors involved. (Interviewee J)

It is not always easy to understand how our different studies link. Most of the time ... we have report back meetings every day after fieldwork, but we do not do in a way that shows links. At the end of the day it might seem like other studies are more important. (Interviewee A)

These differences in orientation present a complex and sometimes chaotic environment, eliciting tensions that must be continually resolved. As a result, TibaSA constantly reviews relationships and situations, leading to replenishment of creative and dynamic energy in the team. This dynamism catalyses innovative problem solving and enables resilience and sustainability. The innovation lies in the fact that valorization of research is encouraged in all studies (Ngwenya and Boshoff, 2018). As a result, team members view and make an effort to plan and implement their studies as vehicles to contribute to solving existing problems and preventing future challenges.

Given that the team suffers from a work overload and has insufficient experience to model innovations, the PI convenes research seminars where the team present their research plans which are rigorously critiqued by their peers. The team leader also arranges daily feedback meetings during field trips. All team members report on the day's field activities and how they feed into their research. These sessions are an opportunity to critique the research processes and how they affect both the relationships and objectivity of research results. The process builds innovation and transformative leadership amongst all team members as they are encouraged to make contributions that critique as opposed to criticize their colleagues. These critical engagements offset challenges and enable members to achieve purpose in the face of uncertainty as espoused by Ganz (2009).

b. De-mystification of Science and Knowledge Plurality

The team's model for knowledge creation and sharing starts with the existing knowledge and experience of both the research assistants and university researchers and the connections between them. We observed that the CAB and community research assistants orient researchers on the community's lived experiences, thus providing a good historical base for the research as well as current knowledge of the community's needs and aspirations. We also observed co-knowledge creation at community feedback meetings

where TibaSA engages with the community for the purposes of reporting on research findings and processes as well as seeking the community's advice and assessing its knowledge of diseases. Community research assistants and the CAB represent the community in determining the research agenda. Our observations on how knowledge and experience sharing lead to co-setting of the research agenda are supported by participants' views:

> [The CAB members] *are the first point of call for both the researchers and the community for clear communication between both parties. That is, they help explain (bring understanding) to the community about the nature of the research work carried out and to the researchers, the community's expectations (e.g., relating to conduct...)*. (Interviewee B)

As a result, there is limited dismissal of different schools of thought. All team members are encouraged to understand the studies and duties of each member with a view to appreciating one another's efforts and to correct any ingrained prejudices (Leibowitz and Bozalek, 2016).

Over the years the research team has invested in equipping lay community members with both knowledge and skills to conduct research (Musesengwa and Chimbari, 2017). The majority of the research assistants who were interviewed and observed during the course of the study had been part of the team from the time of the MABISA project which started in 2014.

> *I joined the team during the time of MABISA; the researchers I worked with under MABISA have graduated and new members came in. We continue to work together, with mostly new members under Tiba*. (Interviewee G)

These community research assistants are now experienced in collecting both qualitative and quantitative data through conducting interviews, administering questionnaires, and using KoBo collect, a free open-source tool used to collect data in the field using mobile devices (Deniau et al., 2017). Community research assistants also assist in conducting focus group discussions in the local language. They are conversant with parasitology as they are actively involved in specimen collection and screening.

University-community engagement projects are likely to achieve their set goals when participating individuals realise their individual potential while at the same time recognising the agency of the collaborating partner (Mutero and Govender, 2019).

The team attends regular refresher courses, often conducted in conversational format to avoid the intimidation associated with science and the boundary that exists between community research assistants and university researchers. One of the Co-PIs had the following to say regarding the exchange of scientific knowledge with community research assistants:

> *We take time to speak to the community research assistants on social issues, career paths and our studies. However, you don't do it lecture style. You do it as a conversation. At the end of the day they build muscle memory from repeat*[ing] *the same thing with accuracy*. (Interviewee I)

These processes demystify science as the preserve of the academy. Democratic and open processes in learning empower both the university researchers and community research assistants. This also has the effect of dissolving the divides between team members. The community research assistants, in their other identity as the researched community, get to understand, critique, and question the research process. By extension, their knowledge of, and intimate association with the research paves the way for wider community research uptake as community members are comfortable engaging with people they are acquainted with. Balls-Berry et al. (2018) are of the view that inviting community members to engage with people (community research assistants) they are acquainted with improves local buy-in. The importance of having community insiders is aptly captured in the following response:

> *They belong to the community, therefore offer us help getting into the community and doing FGDs and interviews. They introduce us to the community members we need to interview and they arrange participants for FGDs. They also call meetings with the community and they give us guidance on how to approach the community. Their presence helps us to have access to the community and in order for us to get the trust of the community*. (Interviewee D)

The community research assistants also acknowledged their role in the community and on the research team:

> *We represent the researchers when they are gone* (sic) *to Durban. Some community members ask us about what we will be doing next and we respond accordingly. Our job also includes guiding the researchers on how to relate with the community. Besides living in the community some of us have been with the team since the days of MABISA...* (Interviewee G)

The presence of the community research assistants therefore gives the team an insider's perspective, improving how they relate to the wider community and its mores and values. Community research assistants bring viable content to the team and an understanding of the community's cultural experiences, memories and worldview which are all important in initiating and improving research uptake.

3. Social Qualities
a. Building Empathetic Relationships Through Regular Contact
We established that there is widespread trust among team members, which had a direct impact on practice. This is reproduced by discourses of tolerance and open-mindedness combined with regular contact among team members. The Durban-based team of researchers visits Ingwavuma for

a fortnight almost every month. Regular physical proximity among team members has created relationships of respect and reciprocity as well as an urge for excellence.

The community research assistants and university researchers meet in shared social spaces of habitual contact which facilitate relationships that transcend research activities. As a result of the regular field visits and respectful interactions, there is evidence of empathy, particularly among the university-trained team members who often come from more privileged backgrounds than the community research assistants. One university-trained researcher commented:

> It is very important that we find ways to empower CRAs [community research assistants] in ways that are beneficial to their everyday lives; that way we will ensure that when we leave, we have empowered the CRAs. For example, we can set objectives that have nothing to do with gathering data on schistosomiasis. For example, one of the CRAs can be given the duties to do financial accounts, as a form of personal development. (Interviewee H)

While the sentiments captured above present what appears to be a future plan, it is important to highlight that deliberate efforts are already made to empower the community research assistants. For example, the team engages in casual conversations that tackle important issues such as career and study options. Currently, two community research assistants have been assisted to apply to university. While only one was accepted, both attributed their decision to enrol in higher education to taking part in the research as well as the guidance they received to make online applications. Maistry and Thakrar (2012, p. 52) argue that individual development of self within university-community engagement settings is related to others as opposed to being a purely individualistic pursuit. Therefore, university-community engagement recognises that "no individuation is possible without sociation, and no sociation is possible without individuation" (Habermas, 1992, p. 150). Recognition of individual partner's capacity and understanding each person's niche in the broader scope of a large university-community engagement project is particularly encouraged in ecohealth as it facilitates team cohesion (Chimbari, 2017, p. 13). Cordial team relations in university-community engagement have positive externalities as evidenced by the community research assistants' social mobility.

b. Dialogic Interaction

The ecohealth approach that the team follows explicitly addresses issues of power and builds on the strength of multi-disciplinary partnerships. On joining the team and during meetings, members are oriented on the ecohealth approach which acknowledges multiple realities and has as its objectives the emancipation of the community and a drive towards holistic

sustainability. Its quest for holistic and sustainable research which centres on the research community and their environment has links with Paulo Freire's (1970) dialogical conscientisation.

We observed that the working environment created by pursuing an ecohealth approach provides a dialogical space for action, reflection and becoming. A member's educational, social or economic background does not qualify them to speak over others or disqualify them from sharing their views. The research environment disentangles the uneven power matrix whereby "...very often, two-way partnerships with communities are thwarted because university research activities are narrowly designed with community partners who are viewed as passive participants, not partners in discovery" (Bhagwan, 2017, p. 179). Our observation is that the research environment allows all members to observe, imagine, shape and contribute to the research process. Differently, put there is shared ownership of all efforts which puts members in a position to speak about the studies in ways that encourage research uptake among community members.

c. Humble Posture of Learning

The nature and size of the TibaSA team makes it inevitable that its members will have different personalities, strengths and weaknesses. With guidance from the PI, the team has conducted personality traits tests for members to better understand themselves and their colleagues. An understanding of the self prepares one to improve how they interact with others. The personality tests and subsequent team conversations are the cornerstone of instilling a humble posture of learning among team members. Commenting on the efficacy of personality traits tests, a team member said:

> Interacting with colleagues who might have either an inferiority complex or bullyish attitude demands the team to exercise restraint and humility. (Interviewee H)

Another commented:

> Treating and interacting with a humble posture of learning builds a colleague's self-esteem and self-respect. Staying humble also makes it possible to share knowledge and experience we have gained with team members. (Interviewee F)

It appears that a humble posture of learning is a pivotal principle in how the team relates both socially and academically (Mutero and Govender, 2020). Humility means that no one individual can be a centre of knowledge and that one can always learn from other people's views (Arthur, 2005). It helps to avoid the pitfalls that come with a superiority complex, unwillingness to learn and individualism. Interacting and learning with humility builds unity among partners who come from different scientific, economic and cultural backgrounds (Marlier et al., 2015). Working together

to achieve each team member's research objects and the overall research goal becomes a priority for all players when there is respect, interdependence, synergy and unity.

Conclusion

This study shows that engaged scholarship contributes to fostering citizenship capacities and developing civic-minded public health practitioners. The results support previous studies that concluded that the success of any community collaboration ultimately depends on the way it is run and the relationships that subsist among and between university actors and community stakeholders (Musesengwa and Chimbari, 2017) . The currency of partnerships in community engagement initiatives is related to the sufficiency of the partnership's nonfinancial resources such as knowledge, skills, connections to people, legitimacy and credibility; convening power (Weiss et al., 2002). Relations and leadership within a community engagement project facilitate "individual empowerment, bridging social ties, and synergy and thus strengthen community problem solving and community health" (Lasker and Weiss, 2003, p. 30). A micro-level study like that on which this article is based, which focuses on the natural building of relationships and strengthening of social capital among people often divided by social classifications and rigid academic disciplines has important implications for university-community engagement in general and the training of public health professionals. The study also contributes to the debate on, and partially provides answers to how research uptake can be improved through transforming bonding social capital among researchers to bridging social capital, benefiting the whole society.

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