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Non-Governmental Public Action Programme

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A relationship gone wrong? Research ethics, participation, and fieldwork realities

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Acknowledgements

Introduction

In March 2007, after an absence of a year, I returned to a Tanzanian roadside town to follow up on a study exploring the possibilities and constraints of HIV/AIDS interventions at the grassroots. In 2005-06 I had spent several intermittent fieldwork periods in this town, working with an inspiring group of enthusiastic but impoverished HIV-positive men and women who, against the odds, had organised community groups to support each other and others affected by AIDS. Returning to the same community with a new research project that explicitly sought longer term and meaningful participation in 'their' projects generated a great degree of trust and enthusiasm among the community-based organisations (CBOs). The leaders of the groups, Mr M and Mr K, welcomed me in and introduced me to new members, organised meetings and gave me access to any information I conceivably could be interested in. People knocked on my door morning and night to invite me to meetings or offer interviews or otherwise relevant information. Community leaders such as doctors, nurses, religious leaders, teachers, and elders were keen to give their opinion, and most days my research assistants had a good story to tell that they had picked up 'on the streets', reflecting the town's worries about HIV/AIDS. Despite this initial outlook and abundance of information and participation, a series of events led to my hasty departure from the town five months after having initiated the second research project, leaving behind a fractured and tense situation to which I was convinced I could not contribute anything more than further conflict. I felt that neither I, nor the community, would benefit from further scrutiny of the studied community groups, and decided that the best thing to do was to leave them to it. This is not an action that I admit to without a feeling of unease, and I am not proud of it. However, I feel that it is time to unpack the reasons for these tensions and the role that I, or the research, might have played in creating them. The need to reflect on the nature of this 'relationship gone wrong' and the consequence for the validity of my research results is one objective of this paper; the second objective is of a methodological nature. In particular, by unpacking the ambiguities that might be inherent in participatory research, I hope to further our understanding of the principles underlying participatory research in general, and in impoverished and unequal settings in particular.

The research

The research project we embarked on in late 2006 looked at grassroots activism in the area of HIV/AIDS in a roadside town in Kilimanjaro, Tanzania. In particular, we were interested in working with organised people living with HIV/AIDS and studying their 'experiences of participation in AIDS activism in Tanzania', as well as the organisational experience at local, national and global levels (Boesten, Bujra, and Pearce. 2006). This focus had grown out of a previous research project in the same town, which looked at community-based interventions against HIV/AIDS (Cleaver, Toner and Boesten 2004/06). The conclusion of that research was that groups of people living with HIV/AIDS were more motivated and therefore more dedicated to community work than other CBOs because of their empathy with the beneficiaries and their individual and collective pursuit of a positive future in adverse circumstances (Boesten 2006, 2007). Following from that observation, and supported by experiences in, for example, South Africa **(**Manchester 2004, Robins 2005), the idea grew that participating in community-based work and the concomitant necessity to be open about one's HIV status, could help fight stigma, on the one hand, and have an empowering effect on communities of HIV-positive people, on the other hand. As this research looked at the underpinnings and effects of participation in community work in such a delicate and often controversial area as HIV/AIDS, a genuine participatory approach to the research itself seemed appropriate.

Approaches to participatory research

The project's methodology relied heavily on ethnographic methods such as interviewing, group discussions, participant observation, and some participatory exercises. My idea of what *participatory* research could be, and hence the reflections in this paper, is grounded in three different though related discussions about such methodologies: first, I am heavily indebted to the debates in feminist social research developed since the 1960s, and critically discussed in the now classic volume *Women's Words*, edited in 1991 by Sherna Gluck and Daphne Patai. Feminist researchers have long been engaged in debates about power relations between researcher and participants, especially because a strong feminist engagement with the studied lives sometimes suggested the existence of political community among women; an assumption that builds on the idea that feminine capacities for 'feeling, belief, and experientially-based knowledge' as well as 'empathy, concern, and connection' would undermine the hierarchical research relationship and favour non-extractive and empowering alliances between women (Du Bois and others cited in Stacey 1991: 111). However, as Stacey formulates in her contribution to *Women's Words*, such assumptions about 'sisterhood' and sincere engagement with research participants often led to 'delusions of alliance'. As Stacey explains, the pursuit of greater intimacy that should lead to greater mutuality in research relationships may well expose research participants to greater dangers of exploitation as personal intimacy is difficult to match with critical social analysis of the data that result from that intimacy. Much like Stacey's disconcerting reflections on the idea that feminist social research is more engaged, more truthful, and less exploitative, feminist scholars and activists have long questioned the possibility of identification and representation across race, class, and ethnicity (Bell Hooks 1981, Mohanty 1988). Nevertheless, feminist research often aims for fieldwork experiences that dismantle unequal power relations between researcher and researched, while acknowledging this is more an unattainable ideal than a reality. Thus, while the idea of mutuality in feminist research is an ambition that I grew up with academically, the ambiguities of such endeavours were and are a continuous subject of reflection.

Strongly related to, and indeed largely the fruit of, this feminist concern with unequal power relations in the social world we study and the consequent unequal relationship between researcher and researched are the contemporary discussions in critical anthropology about doing non-extractive research by actively engaging with the

'researched', their lives and their well-being (e.g. Sanford and Angel-Ajani 2006, Madison 2005, Bourgois 1990). Lately referred to as a school of 'engaged anthropology', these scholars assume a political solidarity with the weak and vulnerable they study and an almost activist commitment to supporting them in their real-life struggles against institutions and structures that undermine their wellbeing and freedom. This type of approach to ethnographic research goes beyond observation and participation and has defied professional ethics that demanded certain neutrality (Bourgois 1990). An activist engagement towards social justice is often directed at the idea of the researcher 'giving something back' to the participants or their community. This might be done through sharing and discussing research results and/or through actively representing the interests of the researched in and through lobby groups and other potentially powerful channels. In similar fashion, as feminist researchers have often assumed, such engaged methodologies also assume that working together in research is empowering for those involved. Of course, a link to Freirian commitments to social change through dialogue and consciousness-raising is evident in both positions (Freire 1970).

Researching issues related to development discourse and practice in impoverished settings inevitably leads me to the third and last body of literature that informs my practice and theory about participatory methodologies, which is the literature associated with participation in development. One of the most important campaigners for participation in development, and himself partly drawing on Freire, is Robert Chambers and his advocacy for 'putting the last first' by using a set of participatory techniques in development research and practice (1995). Chambers' approach resembles the approach of the engaged anthropologists and feminist social researchers not so much in methods, but rather in his approach's methodological underpinnings, which are based on notions of social justice, mutuality, and an active challenge to unequal power relations both in the world that is being studied as well as between researcher and researched. Thus, Chambers, his predecessors, followers and even his critics (Cooke and Kothary 2001, Hickey and Mohan 2004) emphasise the importance of attitude: to be able to do good, respectful, and participatory research for development one needs to 'decolonise [the] mind' (Chambers, 2005 in Kothari, p 76). Like the above two methodological approaches, Chambers' call for more participatory approaches to development involves sincere engagement with those who are the subject of research. Using an innovative set of participatory techniques, Chambers suggests, people who are marginalised in existing social structures would be supported and guided to become critical agents of social

change. The emphasis on the technical aspects of the methodological innovation that resulted from Chambers' call was criticised and debated in two edited volumes *Participation: The New Tyranny?* (2001) and *From Tyranny to Transformation* (2004). This debate is, I believe, valuable for thinking about participation in development, as well as for participatory research in developing countries. While the technical aspects of Chambers' model (i.e. Participatory Rural Appraisal methods) never played a large (or controversial) role in my own practice, the debate about what participation in development means and how inequalities might be grounded in persistent colonial (or racist, see Kothari 2006) preconceptions does inform my thinking about doing research in postcolonial settings.

Ethical considerations & participation in practice

As we will see, these three interlinked approaches to doing participatory, non-extractive social research (feminist social research, engaged anthropology, participation in development) were all relevant to my fieldwork experience in Tanzania. I worked with several (three, but this became more) fragmented groups of people living with HIV/AIDS in a poor, semi-rural town in Tanzania, a former German and then British colony that has become a favoured research and intervention site among development practitioners. Tanzania, one of the poorest and most peaceful and stable country in the midst of unstable and warring countries, is a safe haven and hub of international development efforts in East Africa (and indeed efforts at internationally mandated justice with the International Criminal tribunal for Rwanda based in Arusha). In this setting being Western and white is often associated with the experience of both colonialism and development; vividly expressed in the Swahili word *mzungu* –white person.

As a *mzungu* in a Tanzanian roadside town, I could not circumvent some locals' interpretation of our relationship as inherently unequal, perhaps paternalist and certainly clientelist. Although clientelism is hardly a particular characteristic of Tanzania, in this particular context it was reinforced most clearly by the expectations of material returns for participation in the research, an expectation fed by a common practice in national development projects to pay sitting fees for people's participation in educational seminars and projects (Boesten, Cleaver, and Toner, 2008). The fact that I was not there to develop a 'project' (i.e. a development intervention paid for with international funding for the benefit of local communities) did not alter those expectations. Rather, for many local Tanzanians it meant that there was scope for me to *set up* projects and pressure was exerted to help develop such projects and seek funding. Considering the poverty and need of the people involved, their willingness to work for the community if provided with the means to do so, and the idea of 'giving something back' as part of an engaged participation in their activities, I became involved in developing ideas and proposals for fundraising. This was facilitated by my participation in a small British NGO with a local office in the region, called Village-to-Village (V2V), and headed by a colleague at the University of Bradford, Anna Toner. I drew on the experience and local expertise of V2V, and helped establish direct links between the CBOs with which I worked, and V2V. Although this affiliation with V2V made my commitments easier for me –I was backed up in my promises of support and this in turn facilitated access to the CBOs- and more

credible and concrete for the participants, it also gave me two roles that were not always easy to keep apart. I was now not only a researcher in the community, but someone with access to projects and resources –a development worker.

In 2005, during the first research project, staff from V2V had helped me to find active CBOs against HIV/AIDS working at village and town level in Kilimanjaro region. Since that time I had met a variety of community workers and groups working against AIDS and become strongly affiliated with one particular group of people living with HIV/AIDS who worked at town level but had many connections both at smaller and at broader geographical and political levels. This group, Migule, was particularly interesting because of their strong engagement to the cause of prevention and care, their enormous energy in mobilisation, and their expanding networks both at village, town, district and regional levels. They seemed to be a force with a clear goal. The two main leaders of the organisation, Mr M and Mr K, were charismatic, smart, driven, and with a keen interest in reaching the most vulnerable and in involving the less visible. Charismatic and consistent leadership is important in any organisation, but it may be even more important in an environment that lacks institutionalisation, access to education, and access to basic resources. These two young(ish) men could not rely on the more common markers of authority such as age, wealth and education, but in turn seemed to rely on commitment, charisma (and gender), and a necessity to survive individually as well as collectively while living with HIV in a hostile environment. The arrival of a *mzungu* in their midst dedicated to their work, and who bypassed more traditionally powerful CBOs such as a women's organisation associated with the town's elite, might have been a further legitimisation of the organisation and its leadership in the otherwise hierarchical organisation of everyday village life.[1]

These men and the other fifteen members of the organisation were keen to participate in research. They were keen to learn from participation, and indicated that they were grateful that they were being taken seriously. Of course, their lack of formal education and relative wealth normally undermined their position in local society, in addition their status as HIV-positive people further undermined their (moral) authority, despite their activism. They felt this and acted accordingly; their activism was of the non-contentious sort. For example, when I proposed to Mr M, Mr K and their wives that they each write a

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[1] The role of (politicised) hierarchy in the organisation of Tanzanian communities is further discussed in Boesten, Cleaver, and Toner, 2008, Green 2003, and Bujra 2000.

diary about their daily lives they were happy to be able to contribute to the research in this way. When I said I would pay them to write the diaries they were even happier, saying that nobody ever paid them despite the widespread reliance on them (by NGOs and donors) as 'responsible examples' of how to live with HIV. They felt that, although they were often presented as examples, they were rarely rewarded for that input. Interestingly, the result was not four diaries about overlapping lives, but four separate notebooks in which they noted their findings about HIV in the community. They had turned themselves into research assistants and went around their community doing research. If there was a moment of 'action research' in which the participants would feel empowered because of their participation in the project, it was this moment.

However, I soon felt I could not involve these four people as permanent research assistants on the project because this arrangement also generated jealousy among the members who were not paid for participation in meetings or interviews. I could not decide who to pay and who not to pay based on ethical research guidelines. Paying for interviews is generally 'not done' as it is believed or assumed that it distorts people's will to participate and possibly the information they provide although I often gave individuals money for various needs, and gave all interviewees soft drinks and often food.[2] However, paying for specific tasks, such as diary writing, is often seen as acceptable (Wiseman, Conteh, and Matovu 2005). Nevertheless, as the tension between people started to rise over who should become a paid participant and who should not, I envisioned conflict over whose story was more valued and decided it was better to stop the diary writing in favour of participant observation and conventional interviewing. I felt it was ethically no longer responsible to pay individuals as this created tensions among participants and could easily be interpreted as favouritism in a clientelist society.

The material interest that people, both leaders and members of the studied CBOs, had in participating in this project was not surprising. Nevertheless, it made me feel uncomfortable and guilty as the contradictions displayed the ambiguities of what 'engagement', 'solidarity', 'participation' and 'mutuality' meant in practice. I got paid for doing research, so why shouldn't they? The research participants were poor and ill, and they were well aware that I would not be doing what I did on a voluntary basis, and they

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[2] The issue of payment was extensively discussed in both the UK and Tanzania research teams and it was generally felt that payment would undermine the research and future engagement with interviewees.

easily made the link to their own interests. Thus, without the promise of *direct* material or political benefit, I needed to convince people of the usefulness of their participation in terms of *potential* material and political benefit. Of course, such potential benefits gives general purpose to this type of social research and the research proposal indicates that better understanding of the workings and effects of community-level organisation among people living with HIV/AIDS (PLHA) 'would feed into national and international policy with regard to HIV/AIDS prevention and care' (Boesten, Bujra, and Pearce 2006). However, for local groups, this promise of 'understanding in national and international policy' does not necessarily generate much enthusiasm, as these goals are distant and abstract. However, there was a more concrete benefit to such international research, which, as I indicated above, was the contribution we could make to the mobilisation of funds. Considering the difficulty of rewarding individuals equally for their participation in the research, this idea of a contribution to the collective efforts the groups were making could have a positive effect on both resources, and group cohesion, participation, effectiveness, and in the end, the willingness to be open about one's status and thus to reduction of stigma.

A relationship gone wrong

Despite my good intentions, my strategy of focusing on collective instead of individual benefits for the purpose of avoiding internal conflicts over allegations of favouritism backfired when the collective itself proved to be uncomfortably compromised. As a result, my promises of 'feeding into national and international policy', although still relevant, would not bring any direct benefits to the participating CBOs, nor would my promises of fundraising to help the CBOs further materialise. I felt that this was a fundamental failure not only on my part but of our (mine and the local research participants) collective endeavours against AIDS.

My overall analysis of the relationship-gone-wrong is two fold: one, there was a clash of interests between me, the researcher, and the so-called researched. Simply put: poor, local people may not be as interested in research methods and outcomes as we are, but they have other motivations for participating in research. These vary from the expectation to receive direct benefits, i.e., money, food, or other in-kind contributions as a reward for participation, to the expectation of gaining status capital that could be mobilised to improve access to community resources. The individual interests that the participating people had in the research was sometimes at odds with the collective interests of the organisations. These differing interests in participating in research do not necessarily have to hamper collaboration, and usually some kind of understanding between researcher and participants is reached. However, in this case, these differing interests did undermine the actual process and outcomes of the project, as access to resources became a central point of conflict between participants –and indeed between me and the participants.

This brings us to the second issue that contributed to a soured and unconstructive work relation between (parts of) the community and me. The research opened a can of worms that seemed to flourish in the prevailing system of clientelism and dependency combined with hierarchical leadership. The research not only made the worms visible, it also gave the people disadvantaged by the actions of a few a sounding-board and a window of opportunity to break with the situation. People expected me, a relatively powerful outsider with access to the leadership of various organisations, including government representatives, as well as with potential access to funding, to solve conflicts between members and leaders, between beneficiaries and organisations, and even between

organisations. My active participation in daily life, so valued in participatory research, made me part of something I could not be part of unless I was willing to take up the role of mediator between factions. My own promises of 'giving back' something concrete, i.e., financial support, had put me in the uncomfortable position of gaining too much power over the studied organisations, a position I believed a researcher should never have.

I will shortly outline the events, after which I will come back to the above analysis and conclude how this might affect the validity of the research outcomes and ideas about participatory research.

The research design focused on three different organisations of PLHA I knew existed from the previous project. The main focus was a group named Migule; a self-organised, mixed gender group of mainly PLHA, and some concerned HIV-negative people who had lost loved ones. This group was the most active and encouraged the other two selected groups, a women's organisation and a men's organisation, to develop activities. However, when I came back to the town to set up the project in March 2007, more CBOs of PLHA had been set up, initially suggesting that the hypothesis that 'coming out' might be empowering was true. However, soon it appeared that the new organisations were all run by the same two men, my allies Mr M and K, respectively chairperson and secretary of Migule, and two or three others, and had overlapping membership bodies. The CBOs were set up because the groups had understood that grassroots organisations could open doors to funding agencies. These parallel organisations differed enough in aims and objectives that they could form alliances with different umbrella organisations at district, regional, and national levels, and thereby get access to a series of resources.

The leadership was not secretive about this, but saw it as a legitimate strategy for action. The main CBO, Migule, had responsibility over 33 orphans, and had access to many more affected children, HIV-positive people, and elderly people affected by the death of their children and often caring for grandchildren. Migule had plans to set up an orphanage with vocational training, supporting people with small businesses, and were lobbying for their own food programme (independent of the World Food Programme (WFP), which had a food programme that led to controversy in 2005, when I carried out my first round of research, see Boesten 2007). In order to do this, they set up different organisations. The plans were not only legitimate but necessary, and these CBOs seemed able to do it, albeit only if and when community support, institutional support and

financial support could be mobilised. The issue of the fragmentation of these projects into different CBOs with overlapping membership seemed to be no more than a problem of organisation that could be solved.

However, as soon became clear, those who appeared on the membership lists only thought this strategy was legitimate as long as they would also reap the benefits. Soon, the accusations began: beneficiaries complained they had been put on lists without being asked; they complained that they had been promised this or that but had not received anything, and perhaps most destructive of all, the pioneer group of active members in Migule felt sidelined by the leaders who were making all the decisions. As I spent five months in the area, and living in small places soon makes one part of the circuits of gossip and rumour, it was not always easy to keep my distance from the conflicts, especially as I was, as I should have been, heavily involved in making plans, organising activities and writing funding proposals. Those who felt left out came to me and my research assistants to complain. The 'confidential interview', was, of course, an excellent opportunity to do so. Still, nothing was lost yet; we tried to make sure that the leaders, members, and the beneficiaries talked to each other about potential points of conflict, instead of being forced into a 'mediating role' as had happened in the controversy over WFP food distribution during the research project I carried out in the same place two years previously.

But then the rumours became outrageous. Members of the leading CBO told my research assistants about the sexual misconduct of the two main leaders, M and K. Apparently, they, both men in a predominantly female organisation, took advantage of their position and seduced 'school girls' and had 'relationships' with other PLHA. The rumours came from two women, a mother and her daughter, and the daughter was herself accused of sexual 'misconduct' (i.e. unsafe sex while knowingly positive). I noted the accusations down, thinking this was an interesting twist in a growing conflict over access to resources. But I did not necessarily believe the stories.

But then one of my locally recruited research assistants, a young woman involved in the CBOs as an unpaid secretary because of her typing skills and her ability to speak English, came to me in great distress. This woman, Happy, had arrived in the town only recently from Kenya, where her family lived. Happy was sent to Tanzania to live with a relative in the hope that there would be employment for her. Living close to the house of

the chairperson of Migule, Mr M, Happy befriended his family, became close to his wife, and finally started doing some voluntary jobs for the organisation. Happy had been a capable and hardworking research assistant and hoped that the plans we were working on with the organisations would finally provide her with a paid job. She had no interest in maligning the leadership of the CBOs.

According to Sarah, M had an affair with one of the orphans who received support and training from the organisation. This was distressing for Sarah, as she trusted M and thought him her friend, but also, and perhaps mainly, because it hurt M's wife, Sarah's best friend. According to Sarah, the affair had been going on for a while and was accommodated by the second leader of the organisation, Mr K, who provided cover and a room in his house to M and his lover. According to Sarah, the girl in question was just about 18, and thus legally not a child anymore. It was not clear if she was HIV-positive at the time or not, but the rumours suggested that she already had had an abortion as a result of the affair, pointing at unsafe sexual activity with this knowingly HIV-positive activist.

This story was not only outrageous but it was also compromising, as M was the main front man of the different CBOs for and by PLHA. It was, of course, none of my business whether he indeed had had an affair outside of marriage. However, if the story was true, and bearing in mind that M is an HIV-positive man claiming to care for, among others, AIDS orphans in his own home, this situation could be problematic, especially with regard to our efforts of seeking funding. In addition, the idea of 'responsible sexual behaviour' (safe sex) was promoted by Migule, and they were one of the main information points and condom providers in the town. If the rumours were true, the leaders of the organisation had severely jeopardised their credibility and, as power was so concentrated, also their organisations' integrity.

When Happy took me apart on that Monday morning to tell me the story, she insisted that I should solve the whole issue there and then, confront M and make sure it would stop. I thought that was a bit premature. Then she insisted that I talk to the 'sewing' girls, the young, orphaned women who received sewing lessons on the front porch of the house where the CBO met, and of which the girl in question was a part. These women would confirm Happy's story. I felt cornered. A group of leaders, including M and K, was waiting for me in another room, Happy was very upset and refused to do any translating, and my

other translator was late. I probably should have gone to the agreed meeting and dealt with this story another time, but I did not as I was confused and shocked by the story and unsure about how to proceed. And to be honest, I was not sure if I could look M and K in the eye with a straight face without showing the crack in my affection for them. Then another research assistant walked in, and after a short discussion, we approached the girl in question who was on the front porch. In a rather culturally inappropriate way, I asked her if the story of her affair with M was gossip or was true. As this was supposed to be a secret affairs, of course she claimed it was gossip.

Although my response to the story was less than diplomatic, and perhaps the consequence of cultural difference (it might be seen as very Dutch to be so upfront; it was definitely contrary to Tanzanian ways), the result was that it generated the proof I wanted. Before morning, all involved 'knew that I knew'. M and his 'accomplice', K, were visibly insecure about how to approach me and started to avoid direct conversation with me. Shortly thereafter, various people confirmed the story (including the town's 'most important man', the chairperson of almost everything and the only qualified physician, a man heavily involved in AIDS activities at local and regional levels[3]), and more details came out. M's wife also came to see me, as she wanted me to stop the affair as soon as possible and without making too much fuss. However, the issue seemed completely beyond my capabilities and my sphere of legitimate influence as a researcher. Nevertheless, everyone seemed to expect that I would confront M. Should I break my promises of collaboration with the organisations of people living with HIV/AIDS, as some CBOs of HIV-negative people seemed to expect? Should I leave the issue to be solved by those involved, and not get into the mess, which is what my academic instinct told me? I did all that, and then walked away as fast as I could.

That last week that I spent in the town, I felt as if time had been suspended. Some people sought me out, others actively avoided me. We carried out the previously agreed meetings, including a film showing and discussion about HIV, drugs and sex work in the guesthouse area of the town, and a collective exercise to 'count' HIV-positive people and

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[3] A twist to this story was this chairperson's justification of M's behaviour, as he himself had a extramarital affair with an elderly teacher and AIDS activist, a public secret in the town. Although the chairperson justified the relationship between M and the girl as 'potential love', he did believe that M should step down as chair of Migule. An additional twist was the teacher's rivalry with Migule, as she herself headed a women's organisation against AIDS in the village, which distributed WFP food baskets. See Boesten 2007.

AIDS deaths in the neighbourhoods. M and K, the two people I had worked with most closely during the two years of research, went through the motions but were clearly embarrassed by the situation and did not look me in the eye. The town's leaders even approached me to ask what I was going to do about the situation, if I was going to suspend my support in favour of, for example, a women's organisation I had previously dismissed as largely corrupt and clientelist. Had I not been wrong in my initial judgement, had they not been right? I did not feel it was up to me to judge, but that was inevitably what was going to happen.

In the end, I spoke to both leaders to tell them that their positions as leaders of the different CBOs was undermined because of the affair and that if they wanted the financial and institutional support for the plans we had made, they should step down as chairman and secretary of the main organisation. The two men sat on my couch, M looking at the ground as a child being reprimanded, K crying his eyes out, as a child receiving his punishment. I could not determine if this was meant to be manipulative instead of childish, so I chose to ignore it. But I could not justify actively supporting leaders of organisations fighting AIDS that were sexually irresponsible at best, sexually exploitative at worst. In addition, it was clear that the members and beneficiaries had lost all trust in the leadership, another reason to stop supporting the leadership. I delegated communication about the diverse plans and projects to the previously mentioned local NGO Village-to-Village, under the condition that K and M would step down in favour of other capable members. V2V staff was asked, when necessary and when solicited, to help the organisations in the leadership transition. M and K agreed with this arrangement. The next morning I took the bus to Dar Es Salaam, frustrated, angry, and relieved at the same time. I had five full note books and fifty taped interviews to work on. However participatory the two research projects had been at the start, in the end I left the project 'participants' with a series of problems to deal with, while I could walk out with enough data to write a book and help further my career. Although this is hardly an original dilemma, the preceding tensions did make me feel exceptionally uncomfortable about this inequality.

Power, participation, and betrayal

Leaving the organisations behind with their own problems gave me the feeling that I was betraying them. I had betrayed the community's trust by not investing further in these organisations, and therefore, in the community's efforts to fight AIDS. However, I also felt betrayed by the leaders to whom I had devoted so much energy and in whom I had placed so much trust. As Judith Stacey recounts with reference to her research experience in Silicon Valley (1991, pp 111-119), the relationship between researcher and the researched cannot be equal, and genuine engagement does not lead automatically to better relationships. Most researched will have to live on within the social structures they form a part of –even if these are dynamic and changing -, while the researcher inevitably leaves the site, and thereby, the social structures. The freedom that the researcher has 'to walk away' is not the problem. The problem is that the researched have far less freedom to walk away, or walk in and out. While the researcher may think that important lessons have been learned and that the way is open for meaningful social change, the research participants do not necessarily want to act upon what has been learned during the research, either for personal or collective reasons. 'Engagement with' does not undercut confidentiality; that means that individuals' interests in their own, existing, social structures easily undermine a complete, open engagement geared towards social change. As Stacey observes, 'For no matter how welcome, even enjoyable, the fieldworker's presence may appear to the 'natives', fieldwork represents an intrusion and intervention into a system of relationships, a system of relationships that the researcher is far freer than the researched to leave. The inequality and potential treacherousness of this relationship is inescapable.' (1991, p113)

In this case, the idea of social change through research (Freire) was undermined by a) individual interests people have in the unequal structures in place, and b) the difficulty of reaching agreement over the nature of social change and the role of individuals in that change. Advocacy for social change in situations of war and oppression, as described in Sanford and Angel-Ajani (2006), Bourgois (1990), Nordstrom (2004), and other 'engaged' anthropologists, is an easier claim to make when the enemy is external to the group/community studied. The idea of working towards social justice for marginalised groups suggests perhaps that these marginalised groups are on the 'good' side of the equation. What happens if they are not? Who decides what or who the enemy is, and what or who should change? Is it not the case that I, as a Western researcher, chose the

rules of engagement based on my ethical notions not only of doing research, but of AIDS activism? I am not claiming that this in itself is bad, especially as many of the research participants wanted me to uphold these rules. But this did put me in an exceedingly awkward and undeserved position: that of moral judge and actual mediator. This in itself put into question the terms of engagement and the boundaries of involvement. At what point is a *detachment* from research participants and their struggles justified, or even necessary?

One way of mediating engagement/detachment is by formalising the contribution the research/er makes towards the participants by sharing research results. However, in this case, the idea of 'giving something back' to the researched proved to have limits as well. While I silenced my academic consciousness by sending research results in the form of illustrated and accessible briefing papers in both Swahili and English, thereby meeting the minimum requirements of making sure the research could be used by the studied community,[4] the promise of investing time, networks, and skills in their projects did not come to fruition. This was a project about encouraging social change through engaging with and investing in existing efforts of grassroots movements, an objective which had to be abandoned as a result of the conflict. There would have been one other option: I, and with me V2V, could have invested more time and energy in helping the organisations to re-organise themselves, elect new leaders, and mediate among (ex) leaders and members. However, this still leaves open a set of unanswered questions with regard to the powerful position of the external researcher and the legitimacy of intervention. Considering the postcolonial setting in which white persons are perceived as either missionaries or development workers, this level of engagement with research participants does not address inequality, as is often hoped by feminist researchers, engaged anthropologists, and participatory development workers, but emphasises and makes inequalities visible.

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[4] This form of sharing research results is in itself less than perfect. As this project looked at the constraints and possibilities of community-based organisations, and the results showed that there were multiple problems that included the behaviour of leadership, and organisations' problematic, and not uncontested, approach to accountability and transparency, it is then up to the organisations themselves to do something with that information. Receiving and acting upon criticism is perhaps not the most widespread capacity people have, especially not if that criticism is tainted by internal conflict and given by someone inevitably perceived as external.

Concluding remarks

So who betrayed whom? Who exploited whom? Does this evaluation jeopardise the participatory status of the overall project? From a purely scholarly point of view, I believe that the events on the ground do not devalue the research outcomes themselves. The data gathered, including the data associated with the various conflicts that appeared to be present, are valuable in understanding the dynamics of grass-roots activism and AIDS prevention and care in impoverished settings surrounded by, perhaps well-meaning but not necessarily effective, 'development interventions' –including the one that underpinned this research. That analysis belongs to a different paper. It is, however, still relevant to think about how the idea of inclusion, participation, and collaboration in the design and practice of the research soured an otherwise productive research relationship between me, the researcher, and the subjects of research, the participants.

The situation became impossible because I felt that I was pushed into a powerful mediator role that I believed I should not have (while my 'power' was simultaneously limited, as the actions and manipulations of the participants had showed). This was facilitated not because of my engagement with people's (personal) lives, but because I was in the position to refuse further collaboration in seeking access to resources. This, in turn, was the result of my eagerness to help out materially without getting into a complex web of favouritism and clientelism by supporting individuals. The question then is if this was principally a misconception, a confusion of roles I should have avoided, or if this was good practice gone wrong because of the individual misconduct of a pair of insincere persons. If the latter, than I had been manipulated for a long time, and these individuals' actions do devalue the research results to the extent that their 'activism' and 'dedication' becomes an empty shell. However, from an analytical point of view, I believe there is more going on.

The sexual misconduct of a leader of an AIDS organisation does not necessarily stand on its own. Data shows that few HIV-positive people in the studied area were open about their status to their sexual partners and few practiced safe sex, even if they were 'officially' open by being members of organisations set up by and for HIV-positive people (Boesten forthcoming). Affective and emotional feelings and socio-cultural arrangements add to the political and economic structures, which influence people's sexual behaviour, and these feelings and arrangements are as much in need of analysis as are the more

structural constraints to responsible sexual behaviour. Thus, the behaviour of the leader in question is interesting within the context of the studied material, even if it has hurt people and contributes to negative stereotyping (Bourgois 2003). The researcher is there to further our understanding, not to change people's behaviour or to alleviate individuals' suffering.

Or is she? The principles of action research and participatory development research suggest that the researcher is indeed there to change people's behaviour, to raise consciousness, and to empower people –in contrast to purely ethnographic research. However, as Frances Cleaver observed (1999), the Freirian aim for social transformation that is now almost intrinsic in participatory development ideology –and indeed in certain academic research circles- has resulted in a series of instrumental exercises that are inadequate for addressing 'deeper' determinants of social change. Nevertheless, dismissing the power of a Western researcher to transform Tanzanian society does not necessarily lead to dismissing the engagement that that researcher might have with the efforts of research participants in changing their own lives. That is where the crux lies: research is not about providing support, because providing support for social change (i.e. *intervention*) means that clear agreements would have to be made about each participant's role and behaviour in the process (e.g., responsible sexual behaviour for HIV-positive advocates of safe sex and HIV prevention). The individual engagement of the researcher with the research participants does not necessarily include such agreements, and is based on trust rather than rules. If seen from this point of view, I and the members of the organisations in this Tanzanian roadside town were all betrayed by the behaviour of the two leaders involved –my trust in M and K's behaviour was betrayed (based on my own expectations, of course), while the members trust in M and K's ability to secure my support was betrayed. Importantly, one could argue that I, in collaboration with V2V, betrayed the members by abandoning them when they called upon our mediating power. This conclusion can only be drawn in the context of a working relationship geared at development and social change with the participants. But crucially, that had not been the objective of the research, and the necessary agreements were unspoken. Nevertheless, from the perspective of social research directed at furthering understanding, this project has certainly given us new insights into the motivations and interests of HIV-positive activists and the possibilities and constraints of AIDS activism at the Tanzanian grassroots.

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