Abstract: As an Assistant Professor in Community Economic and Social Development (CESD) at Algoma University College, Ontario, Canada and a member of Asoporicor Holistic Association, Cundinamarca, Colombia, respectively, the authors have engaged in an ongoing dialogue regarding the inherent contradictions of forming a North-South, university-community research collaboration. For those who have engaged in and/or read about action research, the questions addressed in this paper are familiar: How can we maintain respectful relations between us? How can we ensure the project respects local knowledge? How can we ensure the ownership of the new knowledge created by the project remains with the collective? How can we balance the power dynamics between ourselves, and between the organizations involved? What the paper offers, is a dialogical reflection on how these challenges are being met within this particular project. It examines the development of a common set of values and beliefs that emerge as the researchers attempt to engage within the ‘ethical space’ (Ermine, 2005) necessary for the development of a respectful collaboration. The paper explores and develops a series of questions for researchers to consider as they struggle to find common ground where such an exchange, crossing cultural and power divides, can occur.
Speaking for Ourselves: A Colombia – Canada Research Collaboration

Gayle Broad and José Agustin Reyes

"You cannot speak about or represent something that is not yours." (Absolon and Willett, 2005:110)

This paper is set within the paradigm of “decolonizing methodologies” as explored by Smith (1999), Ermine (2005), Absolon and Willett (2005) and others, who question the possibility of establishing respectful relations across cultures, particularly within a European – Indigenous context. Ermine calls this paradigm the creation of “ethical space” where researchers and community members acknowledge and accept differing worldviews, and address unequal power relations. We offer our experience as a contribution to understanding that process – an evolution still in its developmental stages and still far from complete.

Over the past year we have been developing a participatory action research (PAR) project involving the Community Economic and Social Development (CESD) programme at Algoma University College in Northern Ontario, Canada with Asopricor Holistic Association in the Department of Cundinamarca, Colombia. From Asopricor’s perspective, the goal of the research is two-fold, to examine:

- “The relationship of Asopricor’s processes (consciousness raising, organization, transformative action, evaluation and celebration) to the development of a second-generation of Asopricor members” and to identify
- “Future opportunities for growth and development based on the evolution of Asopricor’s processes and the impact of such processes on the second generation of members” (CESD – Asopricor Partnership Agreement, 2005)

From CESD’s perspective, the research partnership with Asopricor was an opportunity to learn from “a highly successful community-based social enterprise which has developed in adverse and conflictual circumstances” (CESD-Asopricor Partnership Agreement, 2005) and make a valuable
contribution to research being undertaken on the social economy in Canada¹. Hammond Ketilson (2005:3) suggests that in the conduct of social economy research there can be

“…no single template for productive research partnerships. Each requires new approaches to collaboration, new ways of honouring identities and building relationships, new ways of inhabiting institutional and other spaces, new ways of engaging with the privileges and priorities of centre-periphery/hinterland-homeland relations”

Action research was identified by both partners as the preferred methodology, given its history as a research methodology known to be collaborative, socially transformative, and respectful of community knowledge (Greenwood and Levin, 1998, Hills & Mullett, 2000, Reason, 2001). From the beginning however, it was clear that adopting a particular research methodology was simply the first step in a multi-levelled process of negotiating spaces where collaboration, social transformation and respect for community knowledge can take place. As Reason (2001:2) points out, action researchers must

“…take into account many different forms of knowing – knowledge of our purposes as well as our ideas, knowledge that is based in intuition as well as the senses, knowledge expressed in aesthetic form such as story, poetry and visual arts as well as propositional language, and practical knowledge expressed in skill and competence”

This paper is an exploration of how we have developed our research partnership throughout the first eighteen months of a planned five-year project. We cannot speak on behalf of the institution and community to which we belong; rather we speak as individuals engaged in the research process. The general outline of the paper is as follows:

1. An exploration of our own location in relation to the research process
2. The location of Algoma University College and Asopricor, the organizational partners in the collaboration
3. The ethics of conducting this research
4. The use of a collection of community processes, in this case defined as participatory action research (PAR), as a tool for social transformation.

1.0 Locating the Researchers:

How do we identify our lenses in research? What is our location? How do we find a common point to examine differing world views?

¹ This research is funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC). The CESD program is part of the Saskatchewan-Manitoba-Northern Ontario node of the Social Economy Suite. For more details see www.usaskstudies.coop/socialeconomy
As researchers interested in effecting social change, we believe that locating ourselves within our respective communities and within the research process itself is an essential first step to understanding the lens which we are applying to our work (Absolon and Willett, 2005). As we reflect on our experience to date, we find that it has been the commonalities rather than the differences, which have been key to finding a starting point for collaboration. Rather than looking at our oppositional experience such as male/female, or north/south, it has been the finding and exploring of our similarities which has given us a basis for developing respectful relations both within the community and the academic setting. Some of those commonalities which define us include: the influence of rural upbringings with the adult experience of living in urban settings; having been members of oppressed groups who have struggled through recovery and healing to a place of initiating life projects; and learning in both formal and informal settings.

1.1 Influence of rural/urban experiences:

For both of us, spending our formative years in rural settings has been a defining characteristic of our lives although the climates and contexts of the Tocaima region of Colombia and of Northern Ontario, Canada, were dramatically different. Growing up on farms however, taught us important lessons that have informed our approach to research, particularly with regard to how we view ourselves as human beings in relationship to the environment, and in the respect engendered by that experience for applied knowledge.

Both of us grew up in farming families where the goal of our parents’ lives was essentially sustainability, both of the family and of the land, to meet the family’s needs. Working together in a collective family process to meet those needs facilitated the development of communitarian approaches and a deep appreciation for the social relations and needs of humans. The nurturing and growth of both plants and animals were key to the sustainability of the farm and rural areas, engendering an appreciation and respect for the equalizing nature of ecological systems. The plants and animals were necessary for our survival and were therefore equal in importance to ourselves – if we neglected our responsibilities and care for them, then we lost our own capacity to survive. This helped us to develop both a deep commitment to protecting the environment, and an understanding that each action we take has an impact on it, both short and long-term.

The effects of this rural location were also felt in our respect for applied knowledge. Living in close connection with the land, observing the impact of human activity, the seasons, and the other actors upon the landscape, develops a practical, applied knowledge. For example, we understand that there are
many variations in the type of precipitation – the circumstances that cause floods or mudslides are different from those that provide a good and necessary watering of the garden. Applied knowledge of this sort is developed and accumulated over years and generations and passed on through processes and approaches to the daily work.

This practical knowledge is essential for working in a collaborative way – it’s what is often called “common-sense” and gives us an instinct for identifying the next steps of an activity; a way of approaching problem-solving that differs from the conceptual and theoretical. It is practical knowledge that develops confidence within us to step into the unknown, to take one action before being able to clearly see the next, that helps us to understand that there is no “right answer” but rather a series of trials that will eventually lead to a satisfactory method. It is through applied knowledge that we understand that each and every process can be improved, that each activity has a cyclical nature to it.

As adults both of us experienced relocation to urban centres, in part because we wanted to experience a different type of life, but the relocation was also prompted by a growing recognition that as rural communities declined in vitality and urban centres grew, a new dynamic was unfolding. In urban centres we discovered a different approach to life, one where practical knowledge was accumulated on an individual rather than a collective basis, where the practice of generations is not passed on but rather where the individual is revered and celebrated. Here the collective work so necessary for the success of a family farm, was not only unnecessary, it was not valued. In the urban centre, it was the “experts” in theoretical knowledge such as scientists, economists and politicians who were revered and held greater status.

In the urban environment, we have found a capacity to separate into discrete and distinct divisions aspects to life that in the rural environment are approached in a much more holistic fashion. In rural life, for example, time is divided generally into seasons with an expectation that planting or harvesting will be done when the crops are ready – not on a specific day or days of the year, but generally around a particular season, governed by the weather, the soil, the particular characteristics of the land and region where the crop is growing. In urban settings however, time is a commodity to be bought and sold, and has become an element of the measurement of success, of failure, of efficiency, of competence. An event’s success is judged in part, by whether it began and ended ‘on time’; the number of days required to organize it. Spending time in reflection is a daily lived experience for people living in rural areas, while in urban areas, taking the time to reflect is frequently viewed as simply unaffordable and an inefficient use of time.
The relocation to urban centres – and the regular return to rural areas – has provided us with an appreciation for both experiences and an appreciation for the learnings that both have to offer. This duality of experience grounded us in understanding the importance of both the theoretical/conceptual knowledge with the practical and applied experience in identifying issues and developing solutions. The duality also engendered a critical perspective on both – while exposure to urban perspectives provided us with a new lens with which to view our rural and practical experience, so our rural eyes critically assessed the values and experiences of urban life. Belonging to both? Or belonging to neither? The experiences have led us through a path that differs from each of them but also benefits from both.

1.2 Learning in informal and formal settings:

Learning in informal spaces has been a significant factor in both our lives. The groups and organizations to which we have belonged (and still do) are the vehicle through which we have received and provided learnings and through which our lives have been given meaning. The community has informed our understanding of how knowledge is created and transferred, and provided us with a context for interpreting and critiquing the learnings provided in more formal settings.

It was the community which taught both of us a host of practical/applied skills: budget management, fundraising, incorporation of non-profits and cooperatives, negotiating skills, human resource management, media and public relations and government lobbying, to name a few. These skills were all a necessary part of the efforts of the community to recover from oppression and build alternatives. These practical skills were enmeshed in and augmented by conceptual and theoretical learnings as we reflected upon and evaluated our work, teaching us that the community not only provides a site for practical learning but also for conceptual and theoretical learning as well.

Another site for informal learning has been the social spaces of both the community and the academy. These spaces – meals taken with colleagues, time spent before and after meetings, friendships which have developed – have provided opportunities for lengthy discussions and reflections on our learnings, sometimes more informative and revealing than those which occur in the formal learning spaces. This has developed within us an appreciation for the value of making time and space for social interaction, for exchanges that have no set goals or defined agendas, but rather are designed to fulfill our needs as social beings.

Formal learning spaces have also contributed to our location as researchers. The academy has provided an opportunity for deeper reflection on the meaning
of our community experiences and learnings, providing another lens through which to view knowledge creation, dissemination and ownership. By locating our experience, our concepts and theories, and our approaches to our work within the context of others, we are given yet another lens which once more, enlarges our understandings.

1.3 Initiating Life Projects

For both of us, communitarian work, paid and unpaid has been our vocation throughout our adult lives. Our communities have differed; Gayle’s most formative involvement has been with women’s groups in Northern Ontario while José’s has been primarily with Asopricor Holistic Association in Colombia (though both of us have worked with numerous other organizations). For both of us however, it is our community experience which has moulded and informed our politics, our values, and our commitment to social transformation.

Both of us have experienced oppression and social exclusion, to varying degrees, in our lives. Our experience of oppression differs significantly but our communities have named these processes required to end oppression similarly: resistance/survival; recuperation/healing; life projects/developing solutions. The recognition of the need for the creation of life projects has been a crucial part of our learning, and a crucial element to our location as researchers. Our goal is for research to contribute to the creation of life projects.

In sum, our location in relation to this research has been informed by our experiences in three spheres: the rural/urban; informal and formal learning spaces; and projects which move beyond resistance and recovery to the development of alternative models of relating to one another and the world around us. It is through these lenses that the goals, activities, processes and outcomes of the research project have been and will be evaluated and assessed.

2.0 Locating the university and the community

As we began discussing the possibility of a research project involving the Community Economic and Social Development (CESD) program at Algoma University College and Asopricor Holistic Association, we recognized a number of factors which could contribute to the likelihood of success for this partnership. Both of the organizations have a unique history related to Indigenous peoples; both are located in regions which have developed a dependence on a single industry or crop; both organizations are attempting to develop alternative models to globalization.
Asopricor works in the geographical territory in which the Panche or Paimas nation was once located, and which is now known as the Alto Magdalena and Tequendama regions. The Panche nation was descended from one of the most fearsome Indigenous nations of the Caribbean that the Spanish confronted. The territory of the Panche nation was approximately 1,500 square kilometres and had a population of more than 50,000 people. The most important commercial center was the village of Calambata. The Panche as well as other cultures in the area, believed in a superior god, possessor of light, in the pantheon of divinities Sua (the sun), Chia (the moon) Pacha-mama (the land) and the water were the most important. In their cosmos vision peoples originated from water by the materialization of people through woman. For some of the indigenous nationalities in the area like the Chibchas and Muiscas the matrilineal line prevailed for the succession of leadership; the heir of the cacique had to be the son of a sister of his/hers, and the sister(s) of the cacique was the usual beneficiary of all the cacique’s goods and power.

Today this area corresponds to the center of Colombia which is in South America. Note that the name Colombia and America are new. In some ways, those names represent the level of colonization and destruction of the languages and cultures which were there before European people arrived. In fact, Colombia is the last in a series of names used by the Spanish and their descendants. New Granada was the initial name, then La grand Colombia and then Colombia. Behind all of those names, the idea was denial - a refusal to recognize the names of the indigenous nations, eighty-two in total with their languages and particular cultures. In the same way, the name of “America” was used in 1507 for the first time to honour Amerigo Vespuvio sailing from Italy; only a few people know that the previous names used for North America were Turtle Island and for South America was Abiayala, which means mature land. This systematic and historical denial is one explanation, among others, for the causes of our current problems in Colombia and in Latin America. There are not only economic or political causes, but also cultural; some groups have denied not only the “real” names of people and places but also the right of indigenous and local people to exist in all of their diversity and richness.

The indigenous nations of this central area of Colombia, according to some historians are the creators of the legend of “el dorado”, the massive treasure of gold which drove some of the Spanish invaders crazy with greed. It was a craziness which motivated Europeans to make long expeditions through the tropical forest, to deny the humanity of indigenous peoples in order to justify slavery or extermination, which was the destiny of Panches and other indigenous nationalities in the area, leaving a heritage of ambition and violence, which still exists today.
Today, the search for “el dorado” is not only for gold; it is also for water, petroleum, uranium, biodiversity, traditional knowledge, geo-strategic position etc. The sickness of “el dorado” is not a history of the past it is the present; it is not exclusive to a region or country; it is a system of values, which affects people everywhere. All cultural, economic, social and political organizations have changed since the arrival of the conquistadores as well as the relations between women and men and humans and nature. According to Galeano (1985: 99) three conquistadors, Gonzalo Jimenez de Quezada, Nicolas de Federman, and Sebastian de Benalcazar, were together in the same place, at the same time, and they were looking for El Dorado. They took possession of the land in the name of an outsider god and king, thereby displacing the inhabitants in the imaginary and in the physical, making local people foreigners in their own land. This situation continues today through the mega projects and foreign intervention of multinationals, a situation that continues not only in Colombia but throughout Latin America, North America, Australia and other countries in which indigenous populations exist. The consequences have been the same for Indigenous peoples, Afros, and peasants - forced displacement, slavery, extermination, sexual assault, and destruction of their beliefs. Time of the dead. Never before has the word ‘dead’ had such integral meaning for indigenous, Afros and other peoples.

That is one of the major reasons why a Life project like Asopricor needs to collaborate, and has been doing so with other social movements. Asopricor alone cannot resist that global logic.

Since 1978 the Association for the Holistic Development of Rural and Urban Communities (ASOPRICOR) has been working in the City of Tocaima and outlying communities and villages of the Tequendama and Alto Magdalena regions in the center of Colombia. Today it works in twelve municipalities and directly involves approximately 600 families. Asopricor in some ways represents the continuation of the resistance that in the past the Panche and other indigenous nations made against globalization and capitalism, represented in earlier times by the Spanish empire and the Roman pope. Asopricor works in four major areas: culture, politics, economic and social relations, and environmental relations. Its objective is to recover the equilibrium between all of these aspects. Asopricor’s ultimate goal is life, joy, justice and liberty – money, or economic development is only a tool in realizing that objective.

Like the Indigenous peoples of Colombia, the Anishinaabe peoples of Northern Ontario have had their territories exploited by European forces, led by the British and French. Their social, political, cultural and economic organizations were attacked and in some cases annihilated through the consistent refusal of Europeans to recognize their autonomy and right to self-determination. The consistent refusal to honour the terms of treaties, the imposition of the Indian
Act, which reduced sovereign peoples to “children” and women to non-entities without property or decision-making rights, the establishment of “reserves”, and the residential school policies which forced separation of children from their families and almost eradicated the language and culture, have all attempted to destroy Indigenous peoples. Despite this, the Anishinaabe continue to assert their knowledge and reclaim their historical heritage.

Since the collapse of the fur trade and the self-sustaining economy of hunting and gathering, the Northern Ontario economy has been characterized by its reliance on resource-based industries and the establishment of ‘one-industry towns’. While mining, logging and the pulp and paper industries have been the most dominant, in Sault Ste. Marie the establishment of Algoma Steel in the late 1890s has been the controlling force of the city’s economy. Like the rest of Northern Ontario, Sault Ste. Marie has been severely impacted by globalization and the North American Free Trade Agreement, having its workforce at Algoma Steel reduced by three-quarters, from 12000 workers in the 1980s to less than 3000 today. Indigenous people have been for the most part excluded from this resource-based economy, with unemployment rates in some communities exceeding ninety per cent.

Algoma University College is located in Sault Ste. Marie, a city established over 300 years ago as a major trading centre at the hub of Lakes Huron, Michigan and Superior. For millennia before that, the area was known as Bawatung, or “meeting place” for the entire Anishinaabe Nation which stretched from the Eastern coast of Canada as far west as the Rockies, north to James Bay and South to the northern parts of the Mississippi delta. The fast running waters of the St. Mary’s rapids provided rich fishing grounds that brought the peoples together to celebrate the return of spring, and fed them well throughout the summer months each year. When a crisis occurred within the nation, it was frequently at Bawatung that the councils would meet to discuss possible resolutions.

The land on which Algoma University College is built was shared with the Anglican Church of Canada by Chief Shingwaukonce of Garden River First Nation for the purposes of establishing a ‘teaching wigwam’ or school. The Chief’s vision was that this educational institution would be a site for the mutual and respectful exchange of knowledge between Indigenous peoples and Europeans; instead, under the policies of the government of Canada, an ‘Indian’ residential school was established. Closed in the early 1970s, the Shingwauk School contributed to cultural genocide through instruction only in English, only from a European worldview, and through a rigid set of social protocols that reflected a view of Indigenous peoples as uneducated, immature peoples incapable of mastering complex concepts or intellectual pursuits, and practicing a heretical form of religion.
Algoma University College moved to the site shortly after the residential school closed in 1970. As Sault Ste. Marie and the Algoma District’s university, the institution has experienced difficult growing pains and is still tiny by most post-secondary standards, with a student population of 1100. After a serious decline in student enrolment and a financial crisis in the mid-1990s, the university has emerged over the last decade as a driver of economic development in the City with the building of a large IT centre, and its partnership with two non-profits to substantially expand the physical plant.

The university has also been increasing its commitment to meeting the needs of Anishinaabe students with the introduction of an honours degree in Anishinaabemowin (the language), the development of the CESD programme in 2001, and a soon-to-be introduced programme in Anishinaabe studies.

The geographic location of the university, together with its historical imperative to provide culturally relevant programming to Indigenous students, gave rise to the development of the CESD programme. CESD was designed to address the community’s need for change agents – change agents who could work in a holistic way to address the political, social, cultural and economic needs of smaller, northern, rural and Indigenous communities. The program incorporated a number of elements somewhat unusual in university programmes: it took a holistic, interdisciplinary approach to community development, including business, economics, political science, social welfare and geography courses; it emphasized both the content of community development and its processes; and it integrated both theory and practice. The founders of the program ensured that the content of the course reflected the life experience and worldview of Indigenous students, and as a result CESD has consistently benefited from an enrolment of over fifty per cent Indigenous students. This classroom experience has had a profound effect on students and faculty, creating a space for cross-cultural dialogue and learning. Field placements in community settings are a required part of the program, and have extended that dialogue and learning substantially.

Thus the history and context of the two organizations, Asopricor and Algoma University College, also share experiences which have led to some common conclusions; economic and/or political tools are only part of the solution - social transformation requires a holistic approach; socially transformative dialogue and exchange benefits from a variety of perspectives and cultural approaches, and creating spaces for these exchanges is a vital part of the work; bringing together the formal and informal spaces of learning can make a valuable contribution to social transformation.

3.0 Attempting to create the ethical space:
According to Ermine, research conducted within an ethical space implies “The idea of a divide, produced by contrasting perspectives of the world, [and] entertains the notion of a space where an ‘engagement’ triggered by dialogue sets the parameters for an agreement to interact modeled on ethical and honourable principles” (Ermine, 2005:2).

This research is rooted in an experience begun five years ago, called the ‘Minga for Life and Against Violence’, where thirty Canadians travelled to Colombia as part of the Canada - Colombia Solidarity network. "Minga" is the name given by indigenous people in the Andes region to an ancestral practice of communities uniting their efforts towards the achievement of a common goal.

Both of us participated in the ‘Minga for Life and Against Violence’, José as a member of Asopricor, Gayle as a representative of the Ontario New Democratic Party.

Over the past five years since the initiation of a dialogue by the Minga, we have developed a partnership that includes community to community, organization to organization, and people to people. We have learned that this kind of partnership also involves relationships between community/organization/people that requires a willingness to suspend judgement and assumptions, and talk through (mis)perceptions to common understandings. The Minga developed a space for common reflection and understanding about the circumstances surrounding the life projects in Colombia, and for the approaches taken by the Colombian partners in working “for life and against violence”. It provided a basis for developing the trust necessary to relinquish power and control and respect the autonomy and processes of one another in conducting research.

Through the clarification of a shared set of underlying values we believe we have formed the foundation for the creation of an ethical research space. These values include: acknowledging the inherent right to determine one’s own development – in the administration, execution and reflection on the experience; that knowledge can be, and often is, collectively owned; that the control and benefits of collective research must remain within the community; that the community’s knowledge and processes are to be valued, honoured and accredited. These values have informed the process of the research.

We have both moved from acting, learning and researching in the informal spaces of the community, to acting, learning and researching in the formal space of academe. Within the academy, we have found that to establish an ethical space for research requires a number of factors: clarity of shared values and beliefs and the implications of those for action; ongoing dialogue and reflection on the contrasts and commonalities of our perceptions; a respect for

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2 Information and publications from the Minga can be found at the “Pueblos en Camino” website at: www.en-camino.org
collective ownership of knowledge; and a willingness to explore and extend the limits of the institutional framework within which we are working.

3.1 Ethical research requires ongoing dialogue and reflection

Following our initial meeting through the Minga in 2001, we have been working through language barriers, developing a level of trust with one another, exploring our values and beliefs to better understand the areas of common concern, and developing a respectful approach to one another’s work. For the first four years, that dialogue and reflection occurred primarily in informal spaces, in social gatherings of the Minga participants. In the past year, as José entered the CESD program as a student, that space has shifted and now includes – though is not exclusive to - the formal spaces of the university.

We have established some formal spaces within our work at a regular weekly meeting and at a monthly forum, both of which include other researchers and CESD team members. There is also, however, an ongoing need to maintain the dialogue and reflection in the informal spaces – in community groups, in social situations, over meals or coffee. In this way the research project blurs the lines between the informal learning spaces of the community and formal learning spaces confined by the university's borders.

Since neither of us can, individually, make a commitment on behalf of our organization we also have to engage in numerous conversations, meetings and dialogues with other individuals and groups. As researchers, this requires a preparedness to enter into community processes, whether that community is a community-based organization such as Asopricor, or institutionally-based, such as CESD. It is also necessary for us to find opportunities to express ourselves as individuals, not as representatives of our organizations, while at the same time acknowledging that we are oftentimes perceived to be speaking on behalf of the organization.

To reach common understandings, it is necessary to communicate, to have dialogue in a spiral-like process of revisiting issues, context and histories. It is necessary to risk the vulnerability of misunderstandings, of making explicit our implicit assumptions. In our communication across cultures, we have found that it is these implicit assumptions that are most problematic, and that are most challenging to uncover within ourselves and within the dialogue.

This implies a different research methodology, one in which the process of the research includes the researchers (in the PAR definition) and academics in a new mutuality, where academics participate in the community in new ways, in the social and informal spaces of the community. It also suggests that co-researchers become more engaged in the formal spaces within the academy.
Traditional assumptions about research have included the premise that research is finite, with a concrete beginning and end, constrained by time and resources. Our experience in this project suggests a contrasting view that community research requires a longstanding commitment to the community’s goals, supportive of its values, and evidenced by an engagement in one another’s lives.

For both academic- and community-based researchers, this raises a number of questions: How willing are we to engage in one another’s communities? In one another’s lives? Are we prepared to have difficult conversations, making ourselves vulnerable to one another? Can we set aside our egos and our status, and put the community ahead of our own personal interest? How can we even recognize when we are getting in the way of the research itself?

3.2 Ethical space respects collective ownership of knowledge

The formal learning spaces have also extended our understanding of the duality of individual and collective knowledge creation and ownership. The community-based collective ownership of knowledge has not traditionally been recognized by the academy, rather recognition has been accorded to the individual(s) who publishes about the phenomena. This has been highly disrespectful of the community’s knowledge, while elevating to the level of ‘experts’ those individuals who have published. This practice, readily accepted by universities, has caused communities to be highly mistrustful of researchers, as they have found their experience and knowledge to be misappropriated, and quite frequently, misinterpreted by those who were previously welcomed into their lives.

At the same time, we also acknowledge that knowledge is not entirely collective; individuals, including ourselves, have had our knowledge shaped by these varied communities and organizations in which we are or have been members, yet our individual location is unique within that context. Thus as individuals we can claim a certain perception that is our own knowledge, but always we must be vigilant of ourselves, that we do not usurp the rights of the collective ownership of much of that knowledge.

Discerning the line between the individual knowledge and the collective knowledge is a challenging process, and for both of us has raised our awareness and understanding of the powerful nature of knowledge ownership and control. When is a researcher entitled to author a paper or make a presentation? What protocols need to be observed before any research results are released? What is considered to be a research ‘result’?

3.3 Limits and potential of community – university research
Having a history of community work, both us were well aware of the potential problems of a community-university partnership in a research project. Three factors tend to cause serious problems for such a partnership: power, prestige and funding.

The university is recognized as being in the more powerful position in a community-university partnership, and for Asopricor, an earlier experience with a research institution and funders had made it cautious in working with a university. This earlier experience had in some ways also prepared Asopricor, in that it had established a set of criteria for developing research partnerships as a result. CESD on the other hand, as a relatively new programme within a small university, had much more flexibility than many more established organizations, and was less inhibited by tradition. This facilitated a more equalizing relationship from the beginning of negotiations. Despite this, it still required approximately three months and several conversations to draft an agreement between the two organizations that was acceptable to both.

For universities and academics, their value is often determined by the prestige that arises from being considered an “expert” or owner of knowledge on a particular topic, thus the issue of prestige is a particularly challenging issue to address in community-university partnerships. In this project, one of the challenges presented by Asopricor to the university is that it is a “holistic” organization or life project, addressing change in a holistic fashion, and thereby challenges the academic notion of ‘experts’ who are able to define themselves as such, by narrowing their focus to a small portion of change, such as the ‘social economy’ for example. Research which uses a holistic lens, requires a relinquishing of power and control of the research, to the extent that the researchers are not clear on where or to what conclusions the research may lead. By its nature then, it demands that the research and its supervision be flexible and also comfortable with the research going in directions where the expertise of the ‘research supervisor’ may not extend. The supervision of this type of project in fact, vests with all of those community members engaged in the research project. This poses not only a power-control issue, but also poses difficulties for funding, and/or for placing the research within a particular frame such as ‘social economy’. In short, the outcomes of the research may not reflect either the funding criteria or the research priorities of the university. For this type of research, having the confidence to follow where the research leads, rather than imposing institutional needs on the community process of inquiry, is a necessary but sometimes frightening engagement for the academic.

Both CESD and Asopricor are collective enterprises where “we” is a normal part of the vocabulary. For this research partnership, this has facilitated addressing the issue of prestige which is related to individual and/or organizational capacity.
to claim expertise or ownership of a particular project. A participatory research project is, by its nature, a collective enterprise, yet there is still sometimes difficulty in recognizing that collectivity in the publications and/or research products.

Research set within a university is to some degree limited by its hierarchical structure with specific requirements set by funders who control the resources for the research. The institutional structure also imposes requirements upon the research process, for example, an expectation of a beginning and end point, which may not conform to the community’s timing and processes. The principal funding for this research has been obtained through the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC), though it is clear that this funding alone will be insufficient for the project. Fortunately, the CESD program has also been able to provide some seed money as it recognizes the significance of this project to its goals of building partnerships with other organizations which share its values and beliefs. Some funding will not be accessible to the project due to the need to respect the community’s autonomy; for example, funders may not support proposals without guarantees of publications which Asopricor may not be prepared to approve.

Communities also have a number of limitations that make research challenging, for example, more resources in the form of leadership, financial supports and sometimes confidence or recognition of its own capacity for research. For Asopricor there are barriers to finding the time and space for reflection – in the busy day to day lives of community members, the quantity of activities and projects being undertaken, and the violent context, the time for reflection can be easily squeezed out by the urgent need for action.

Asopricor is currently facing some challenges which make this research project desirable at this time. As the first generation of Asopricor founding members enter middle age, their children are entering and graduating from college and universities, making life decisions about whether to return to rural areas, or pursue careers in larger urban centres, causing concern within Asopricor about succession planning. Additionally, due to the violent context surrounding the organization, its human resources and leadership are necessarily in a constant state of flux and renewal, with a number of its members/leaders forced into internal or external exile.

This context made research with a university desirable, and José’s location within the CESD program, and as a founding member and leader within the organization, a viable and likely partnership. As a Canadian university, Algoma provides Asopricor with a valid space for the conducting of its research, i.e., by participating in a research project, Asopricor members who are meeting
together are seen to have reasonable cause for doing so, and therefore do not pose a concern to any of the vested interests surrounding them.

For CESD, the research partnership with Asopricor was also desirable due to the programme’s emphasis on community-based research, and the opportunity it afforded for student field experience. At the same time, the project fit generally within the parameters of the Social Economy research being undertaken by CESD. By placing these concerns regarding power, prestige and funding clearly on the table for discussion early in the research process, we have attempted to create a space for dialogue and eventual understanding between ourselves, where the work of the research can proceed.

4.0 Using PAR as a tool for social transformation

Social transformation is about shifting the power, prestige and money from a concentration in the hands of a few, to a disbursement throughout society. According to many practitioners, Participatory Action Research has the capacity to achieve social transformation through conducting research in a way that provides space for those on the margins of society’s power to be heard (Ristock and Pennell, 1996; Reason 2001). But any research methodology can only be a tool for social transformation, and like other tools, can be used skilfully, or not, depending on the hands of the craftspeople wielding it.

Is PAR an appropriation of the community’s knowledge by the university? How can PAR practitioners ensure that they themselves do not exploit or appropriate the community’s collective knowledge? How does the establishment of a set of experts in PAR methodology contribute to social transformation?

Our community work has taught us that making change is a cyclical process of planning/acting/reflecting, which results in the development of new theory informed by the experience of taking action in the community. For both of us, the discovery that these community processes were acknowledged by the university as a valid form of research has been relatively recent. This discovery has created mixed emotions in us: while on the one hand it is satisfying to see community processes and knowledge being transferred within the formal learning spaces, on the other, it is somewhat disconcerting to discover that the creation of this knowledge is being credited to academics. While Reason (2001), for example, acknowledges that action research has roots in community processes, particularly in social movements of the South, much of the literature still privileges social scientists’ knowledge, particularly of the theoretical basis of the methodology.
For both of us, knowledge of the processes now termed as “participatory action research” or PAR, preceded our exposure to an academic setting. The knowledge of the processes came directly from our experiences in the community – and it is worth noting, very different community settings. The cyclical, iterative process of developing a vision of a life project, acting upon its development and assessing/reflecting upon our progress – this is a common process which communities must and do undertake in the process of seeking more equalized power distribution within society. It is a process which occurs naturally, a ‘common sense’ approach, to raising our own consciousness about the current power relations, and how to achieve change within them. It is a process necessary for social transformation – if communities only act, without assessing the consequences of that action, without reflecting on whether the action is supporting the vision towards which they aspire, then change will not occur.

So what is PAR then? It is a reflection of these community processes, which has now been recognized by academics in their observation of the community and documented by them, and now it is acknowledged as a research methodology. Because of the role of the university in society, its recognition as a creator and holder of knowledge, this acknowledgement of PAR lends credibility and legitimacy to the community’s processes. At the same time, it raises the question of whether this constitutes an appropriation of community knowledge by the university.

For PAR researchers – or at least those who are drawn from the ranks of academia - this poses a difficult question. How can academics support community-based research processes without appropriating the collective knowledge generated by the project? This is not a question that can as yet be answered – on the one hand, the university provides its credibility and its resources to a set of community processes which is necessary and/or useful to communities for the achievement of its goals. On the other hand, it raises a set of issues for the community regarding the ownership and control of its collective knowledge – both of the content of the research, as well as its knowledge of the methods of generating knowledge.

Academics have acted in good faith with their community partners by trying to open a space for the community and its processes within the academy, yet at the same time the nature of the power dynamics is such that prestige (and with it, funding) has accrued to those academics who have described and supported the community’s research processes. Despite this, the knowledge and understanding of community processes has been enlightening for many academic researchers and the expansion of this type of research in recent years has made a contribution to transforming academics. Exposure to the community through the research methodology of PAR has raised these
questions of collective ownership of knowledge, of benefits of the research accruing to the community, of community members as co-researchers, and of the community determining the research questions. This is beginning a process within the academy which may contribute to social transformation as more and more academics benefit from the community’s knowledge, and recognize the need for dialogues and exchanges which respect the community and acknowledge its expertise. Eventually this may contribute to a shift in the power from the university to the community, as both become more comfortable in negotiating research space.

For academics, though, this raises another challenge in their participation within an ethical research frame, for if we are not cautious, only academics will have sufficient ‘expertise’ in community research processes, to advise and inform the community on how to do its own work.

**Conclusions:**

This research collaboration between a university located in the North, and a community located in the South, is intended to contribute to social transformation through the sharing and creation of knowledge. The research itself is a crucial piece of work for the Asopricor membership and others currently living in Colombia where so many of the social actors have been disappeared and/or killed. Without reflection and documentation of the socially transformative processes which have been employed so effectively by Asopricor are not passed on to others, they may be irrevocably lost. It will also hopefully, contribute to building respectful relations which support such a development in this cross-cultural context.

In our experience, a number of factors have been helpful to the development of this project. First has been the gradual evolution of the research collaboration over a period of years from an initial community action called the *Minga*. This unrushed timing allowed both of us to develop a level of trust and comfort with one another, that has extended to the organizational partners. It has also given us time to identify and clarify a set of shared values, beliefs and experiences that form the foundation to the project.

Second, Asopricor’s advanced awareness of PAR methodologies and its well-developed philosophies, values and processes, positions it well for working with a university. It has clearly identified its research questions, including process questions related to retaining its autonomy and participating as an equal partner in the research. CESD, with its emphasis and experience in community-based research, and its history and context, is also well-positioned to work cross-culturally with a community organization such as Asopricor. The project fits
extremely well with CESD’s research priorities, field placement opportunities, and its overall mandate.

Finally, the shared goal of the two organizations, and of ourselves, of social transformation through a holistic approach provide a solid foundation on which to support this mutual exchange of knowledge and resources. Change will only come about through finding the ‘ethical space’ where we can listen to one another, and begin to engage with one another in a respectful way, based on “ethical and honourable principles”.


Bibliography


