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## **Creating a shared “activity timespace” in ethnographic collaboration: Aligning knowledge, synchronizing rhythms, re/constructing roles**

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**Abstract:** This article has three aims. First, it suggests that for collaborators to navigate their way out of uncertainty, they produce a shared “activity timespace” (cf. Bryant and Knight 2019a). I argue that this involves (i) the coalescence of future orientations, as a shared understanding of the purpose(s) of the collaboration is produced; (ii) rhythmic synchronicity as activities become coordinated; and (iii) the reproduction of the roles of collaborators in relation to one another. The second aim is to illustrate two ways in which ethnographer and collaborators navigate their way out of a space of uncertainty to create a shared activity timespace. One is intentional and uses questioning to align knowledge. The other is unintentional, as the ethnographer is encouraged to “be there” until an opportunity to collaborate emerges. The third goal of the article is to suggest that analysis of anticipation within ethnographic collaboration needs to focus not only on the anticipation of events but on our roles in relation to one another (cf. Stephan and Flaherty 2019). Through collaboration, it is not only anticipation about what the future could be that is forced into flux, but about how those futures might come to be built, as “cultural futures” (Appadurai 2013) are embedded within expectations of how to act and what aim for in collaborative encounters.

**Keywords:** Ethnographic collaboration; temporality; anticipation; participatory development; community empowerment

### **Introduction**

This paper is based on collaborations that took place as part of a multi-sited ethnography exploring “empowerment” in a UK-based community development initiative called Big Local. Collaboration can mean many things in ethnography. In this case, I approached four groups that had formed as part of Big Local and explained that I was conducting research into how groups involved with Big Local organised collectively. I also said that I was keen to collaborate with the groups on their work and suggested that their community research might be a good starting point. I had no prior connection to the groups I contacted. As Holmes and Marcus (2008) observed, research of different forms is already integral to many sites of anthropological investigation today. This is true of the groups with whom I worked: both conducted community consultation exercises to help them decide what to spend their funding on and gathered data to evaluate the activities they ran. It was this research which became the site of our collaboration.

The ethnographic sketches below illustrate two very different journeys into collaboration, each of which began in a space of uncertainty, with little shared understanding about what we would do or how we would work together. I propose that this space of uncertainty was in part produced through our respective anticipation of one another’s roles and knowledge: I anticipated that the core actors in the community groups would have a plan for what they wanted to research and how; they anticipated that I, as a researcher, would know how to do research relevant to their work. Through a series of encounters we came to develop a shared activity timespace guided by an emerging understanding of the purpose of our collaboration, and, through doing so, reconstructed our roles in relation to one another. The next section explicates how and why ethnographic collaboration offers a fruitful lens through which to theorise the *making* of time and, more specifically, the future, before elaborating on the contribution that this paper makes to such an endeavour.

## **Theorising temporality for ethnographic collaboration**

Three related observations formed a pivotal moment in anthropological engagement with time and temporality. First, that there had long been a tendency for anthropologists to “place the referent(s) of anthropology in a Time other than the present of the producer of anthropological discourse” (Fabian 1983, 31). Second, that given the sociality of time, we are not passively governed by “clock-time” but are active producers of time: we are, “in some sense always ‘in’ time [...] and yet we make, through our acts, the time we are in” (Munn 1992, 94). Third, that anthropological analyses of time have “poorly tended” to the future (*ibid.*, 115). These were among a series of contemporaneous observations that sparked a growing and creative interest in the dimensions, forms, and textures of time as dynamic, emergent social phenomena.

Since these observations, much progress has been made in theorising the social production of time, including the future. Several dimensions of this progress are useful for unpacking the relationship between collaboration and the social production of time; the *making of collaborative futures*. One significant point is that time is non-linear (Lemke 2002): the future is not only within the present (Adam and Groves 2007) but also, in some ways, constitutes it (Nielson 2011). By turning to the future, the anthropological gaze shifts from fixity and reproduction towards process and change (Appadurai 2013). To explore this interrelationship between future and present, anticipation has been developed as an analytic tool, understood as the experience of imagining or previewing the future (Molé 2010). Such experience is active, in that subjects construct that future in their imaginations (Appadurai 2013) but also in the sense of “acting in advance” (Ingold 2013): bringing that future into the space of the present shifts the possibility for action in that present. Anticipation is embodied and affective (Bourdieu 2000) thus differing from expectation which, as Bryant and Knight (2019a) have theorised, is a cognitive process based on past experience.

Another significant point is that time, as socially produced and experienced, is multi-scalar and multidimensional, with interdependencies across temporalities. Different temporal orientations and rhythms are “brought in” to an encounter, as each situation “temporally overflows” (Tavory 2018). Ethnographic collaborations of the kind I deal with in this paper begin from a space of uncertainty, as the purpose of the collaboration is not premeditated by one party but must be forged collaboratively. These spaces of uncertainty are ripe with creative potential: by embracing uncertainty we move out of the familiar and into the unknown, where new forms of being, knowing, and doing might emerge. Such a process is not and cannot be neat, smooth, and final: each person engages in a situation through multiple temporal orientations and rhythms (Otto 2013; Stephan and Flaherty 2019). The synchronicity and convergence of these will only ever be partial and contextual.

This paper makes two theoretical contributions. First, I argue that one of the major tasks that needs to take place for collaborators to navigate their way out of the space of uncertainty is for a shared activity timespace to be produced. I borrow the concept of “activity timespace” from Bryant and Knight (2019a) as a way of conceptualising The Collaboration as a timespace with a future orientation characterized by particular activities, the intention of which is to lead collaborators towards a shared purpose<sup>1</sup>. I suggest that the emergence of such a timespace involves (i) the coalescence of future orientations, as a partially shared understanding of the purpose(es) of the collaboration is produced; (ii) rhythmic synchronicity that enables the coordination of activities; (iii) the reinterpretation and reproduction of the roles of collaborators in relation to one another.

Second, focusing on (iii), I propose that the anticipation of roles in relation to one another, as well as the more frequently explored anticipation of events, is an important dimension of the analysis of anticipation (cf. Stephan and Flaherty 2019). Further, such analysis is particularly suited for inquiry into ethnographic collaborations, as well as having

broader utility for those seeking to explore the micro-dynamics of power relations. Bryant and Knight have suggested that the way we anticipate apparently imminent events affects how we act in the present (2019a) and that future orientations shape our relationships in the present (2019b). I propose that analysis can be brought even “closer to home” by examining not only our anticipation of events but of each other: how does the way I perceive my role in relation to my interlocutors influence the way I behave? Who does each of us perceive to have the knowledge or skills to guide the interaction? How does this influence who comes to control the direction of the wider collaboration? I suggest that the anticipation of roles is dispositional, relational, and contextual: our habitus shapes how each of us perceives the situation and ourselves within it because, in the words of Bourdieu, “habitus is that presence of the past in the present which makes possible the presence in the present of the forthcoming” (Bourdieu 2000, 210). This raises questions of power, already integral to any ethnographic collaboration (Hilton 2018) and, in this case, including the question of who has the power to plan a future and control a pathway towards it (cf. Munn 1992, who notes that controlling time is itself a form of power).

### **Emerging from uncertainty: Producing a shared activity timespace**

The following sections present two very different journeys into collaboration. Both begin in a space of uncertainty that came into being as I approached the groups to invite them to participate in my research, and we then set about finding a way to work together. The initial encounters form a chain of interactions (Collins 2004) through which our shared activity timespace is produced and our roles reinterpreted in the process: it is through rhythms and temporal regulation that we come to coordinate action (Zerubavel 1985). With the first group, Pondmead Action Community Team (PACT)<sup>ii</sup>, questioning became an epistemic practice aimed at trying to align purpose. With the second group, Newberry Inclusive Community

Engagement (NICE), I was encouraged to simply “be there” by observing, learning, and becoming more socially embedded until an opportunity for collaboration emerged. Therefore, with PACT, the collaboration was sought proactively, while with NICE it emerged organically.

Both PACT and NICE had received funding as part of the same community development program, Big Local, which was launched in the UK in 2011. As part of Big Local, 150 neighbourhood-sized areas in England were selected to receive a million pounds each for residents to spend on their area and communities. This funding had to be spent by newly formed community groups consisting predominantly of residents living or working in the areas. While I refer loosely to PACT and NICE as “groups,” meaning the key actors involved in decision-making for, designing, and running their programs of activities, some roles are inscribed into the Big Local program. These roles impact the way individuals participate in the worlds and work of the groups, and the kinds of behaviour appropriate to their position within the context of that group. “Steering group members” are volunteers who collectively make decisions about what activities will be run using Big Local funding. “Workers” are employed by the steering group so cannot be steering group members and, as such, are referred to as “non-decision-makers.” Big Local “Reps” are community development professionals hired by Big Local to provide support and guidance. I was the only collaborator who did not have a named position as steering group member, Worker, or Rep, within the groups. Further, I was only an active participant in a small portion of their work, while most people were involved with several parts of the groups’ respective programs. This meant that while I was a core actor in the collaborations I largely remained an “outsider” to the group and attended meetings in an observational capacity, apart from when our collaborations were agenda items. This outsider status was made visible on a small number of

occasions, when steering group members asked me to comment on a topic to give an “outside perspective.”

We discussed the question of anonymity early in the research process. Whether to use pseudonyms or not poses an ethical dilemma (Turin, 2021), as naming “is an act of power” (Guenther, 2009:413). Some of my collaborators wanted to be anonymous in the research, while others were not sure. From my perspective, the choice to be named had to be a group choice: given that they had agreed to participate as a group, and that it was not possible to anonymise the Big Local program, if anyone in the group was named then the whole group would be identifiable. None of the groups decided collectively to be named, and so I use pseudonyms for both groups and all collaborators.

***Pondmead Action Community Team (PACT): The intentional creation of a shared activity timespace using questioning to align knowledge***

Having approached PACT’s Big Local Rep, Betty, I was put in touch with three steering group members: Sylvie, Pauline, and Jack. The five of us arranged to meet. I was anxious as I prepared: aware that my collaborators might interpret my role as researcher to mean that I would have something useful to say about their research straight away; a reasonable expectation. Yet, I knew almost nothing about the group and their work at this stage, let alone their research. Indeed, this is a paradox of ethnographic collaboration: as ethnographers, we are schooled in the importance of “not-knowing,” and aim to be reflexively engaged with our assumptions and the need to suspend familiar ways of knowing, so that we might provide insight into the epistemologies of the communities we study. Yet, in collaboration, we need to draw on our knowledge to be able to contribute something useful. I reasoned that the group would surely know that I needed background information to be able



to offer ideas, and so embarked on this first meeting anticipating that they would teach me about their work, and this would provide the basis for a discussion about research design.

We met at a community centre owned by another organisation in the area, with which Jack was involved. Jack made coffee and we settled around a table in the corner. I had my notebook and pen, ready to absorb knowledge. Betty had brought some guidance documents on “measuring change” produced by Big Local, to which she drew the group’s attention as a source of inspiration for the research journey. Pauline and Jack did not have “props;” their knowledge of PACT’s work was intricate and embodied, evading the possibility of documentation. As we began to discuss PACT’s intentions for research, it became apparent that Pauline and Jack had very different ideas about what doing research might entail. Pauline wanted to capture the stories of their Community Food Initiative clients, with whom she worked closely; her social and practical “closeness” to those involved in the initiative enabled her to see the research potential. Pauline’s desire for in-depth focus on one activity was balanced by Jack’s more holistic approach: he wanted to develop a system for gathering data consistently across all of the activities they ran. While these two approaches were not necessarily contradictory, the different lenses did not immediately align. They also seemed to expect that I, as a researcher, would already have knowledge that could form the basis of a plan for how to conduct research that would be useful to the group. However, I did not yet know what purpose this research could serve for them, which made it difficult to know where to start. In other words, I thought that they were the experts in their work and so would know what kind of research they wanted to do, whereas they thought that I was the expert in research, so would know what kind of research would be appropriate for their work.

We had entered a space of uncertainty in which both parties anticipated that the other would guide the first steps. How could collaboration progress? In this first encounter I realized that I had made a mistake in assuming that members of PACT would already have a

shared understanding about what kind of research they wanted to do: after all, my own research questions and methods had been in a state of emergence for around 18 months. On realising my mistake, I changed tack, and asked, “Why do you want to do research?” and “What do you want to use the information you gather for?” While this initially increased the scope of possibility even further, it meant that we could explore the “bigger picture” of the group’s journey and how this research fit into it. As such, The Question became an epistemic practice through which we tried to learn from one another’s knowledge and piece together a shared understanding of what we might want to achieve.

The conversations around these questions shaped initial encounters with Pauline, Jack, and Sylvie, through which I began to see how each individual vantage point on the group shaped their ideas around doing research and was entangled with their temporal orientation, each of which informed the development of the shared activity timespace. Sylvie, as chair, took a strategic role that balanced long-term organisational planning with knowledge of Workers’ remit, skills, and workload. The former temporal orientation informed what data we planned to collect, and the latter how we planned to collect it. Pauline had an agile temporal orientation that enabled her to adapt to the changing needs of Community Food clients. She was constantly doing research by speaking with clients, so did not need a formalised research approach to help her strategize, instead wanting to “capture” stories about how Community Food had helped clients in the past. Jack was keen to “scale up” the work of PACT, and so wanted to design research that was “light touch” and could be expanded to fit all kinds of activities that they might run in the future. Sylvie and Jack suggested I speak with the Workers—Beatrice, Sarah, and Rich—to find out more about what they had done and what might be possible. I was aware of the not-yet-clear purpose of our collaboration, nor my role within it. This was disconcerting but, perhaps, necessary.

Over the coming weeks, an activity timespace guided by a shared purpose emerged: to design a system of gathering feedback on all of the activities run by PACT, with some consistency, but using methods appropriate to the different activities and without burdening staff unnecessarily. This activity timespace was produced through the different temporal orientations of steering group members as decision-makers (past experience; adaptability and responsive planning; long-term planning) but also synchronised with the rhythms through which staff delivered the program (preparing and running weekly activities; monthly reporting; seasonal events). As the shared purpose came into being, our roles were reinscribed. By suggesting I work directly with the Workers, Sylvie and Jack encouraged me into the role of coordinator. Sylvie became overseer: as I put together a research design and we created resources, I checked everything with Sylvie, who provided direction. Beatrice, Sarah, and Rich became both informants and co-designers: they provided information about what had been done, some of which became embedded in the plan unchanged, as well as ideas about what would work better. Betty checked plans and provided feedback. Pauline stepped back from the collaboration to continue focusing on Community Food.

***Newberry Inclusive Community Engagement (NICE): The unintentional creation of a shared activity timespace through “being there”***

One of the NICE Workers, Georgina, met me at the door and led me up the narrow staircase of the old, converted house that NICE shared with another local organisation. We arrived in the office, where Julie greeted me warmly over the top of her computer monitor, saying that she would have to dip in and out of our conversation as she needed to prepare for the steering group meeting that evening. As she continued printing and stacking papers, she asked Georgina to talk me through an evaluation of one of the activities that Georgina had been working on, and that Julie thought I might help with. The office was overflowing with

signs that the intention of this space was to prepare for action. The walls were lined with event posters and giant calendars. Resources spilled out of shelves into piles on the floor. Snacks and packed dinners the tell-tale sign of the Workers' irregular schedules: community work does not take place in the neat timespace of a 9-5 desk role.

As we sat in the middle of the room between desks, Georgina started talking me through the evaluation, which was of a project she had led for years and had evaluated several times. Her confidence and experience showed. I did not have a sense for how my input could be useful. Talk turned more generally to NICE's work, and Julie dipped in to tell me about some of the projects she was most proud of—those that she felt had lifted spirits in the community or created connections. I felt myself pulled between my desire to steer the conversation to the topic of our collaboration and the motion of Julie's narrative. Was this not exactly the sort of "bigger picture" information I had sought with PACT? This information would surely help me to see where I could contribute, yet the pieces of the puzzle that I could see at that moment did not fit into my picture of "community research:" Julie and her colleagues conducted research, in part, by engaging in a constant flow of organic interactions through which they gathered information via a dense web of connections. I knew that informal information gathering provided many layers of value to community groups and did not want to play a role in shoehorning the group into a more formal approach.

We looked at the clock: the steering group would soon start arriving for the meeting. Georgina and I set off down the stairs loaded with stacks of paper and boxes of cups, teabags, and biscuits. As we left the office space, along with the time set aside to discuss collaboration, the tone of our conversation shifted to lighter topics. I had the sense that the opportunity to forge a collaboration was passing and felt that we had made little "progress" towards an idea. This pattern continued over the coming months. I was invited to NICE's meetings and started to build a picture of who they were, what they did, and how they

worked. At every opportunity I said “let me know how I can help,” which was always met with enthusiasm and thanks, but no suggestions. Although I do not propose that this was her explicit intention, Julie’s encouragement that I simply “be there” enabled me to begin learning “the rules of the game” (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992); to absorb the social fabric of the group and make the epistemological shift necessary to make sense of the group’s potential future (cf. Otto 2013, 67). I kept thinking about how I might contribute but could not see how to do so without a substantial shift in the way they gathered information.

Eventually the spark of an idea surfaced. Julie called to let me know that they had added a last-minute steering group meeting to their schedule and that they had thought it might not be useful for me to attend, but to come along if I wanted. This meeting had been called so that the group could take first steps in developing their plan for the coming years. To prepare, they needed to conduct a “community consultation” and had been thinking about a survey. Wonderful, I thought—something I might be able to help with! I slipped over to talk with Julie and the chair, Mark, during the break, and offered to help with the survey.

The idea was well received, and over the coming weeks Julie, her colleague Liz, their Big Local Rep Ray, and I drafted questions. My desire to help design something useful without disrupting their approach was brought into tension when I noticed that Liz, on two occasions, deferred to Ray and myself to make decisions, as the “experts.” The notion of expertise is indicative of how the association of individuals with powerful institutions validates their knowledge; the power of the expert is “discursively [...] dispersed throughout the social system” (Fischer 2000). Liz’s deferral illustrates the interactive textures of expectation and anticipation: her expectation about the knowledge a researcher and a community development professional might bring led her to anticipate our authority in answering these specific questions. Entanglements of (cognitive) expectations and

(sensory/affective) anticipations therefore act as vehicles through which societal structures pattern specific interactions.

The emergence of our shared activity timespace had been more gradual and less intentional than with PACT. As NICE included me in meetings, I gradually pieced together knowledge about the organisation. The seed of an idea emerged, which was then fleshed out as we began negotiating what we wanted to achieve, and how, in relation to the community consultation. During this process, Ray had what might be called “professional vision” (Goodwin 1994), which enabled her to see what needed to be done, by whom, in what order, and through what timeframe. She delegated tasks and created a timeline that synchronised our work with the development of NICE’s plan. Therefore, while the purpose of the collaboration had emerged unintentionally, the rhythmic synchronicity was led by Ray, who drew on her professional experience and knowledge of the group.

### **Conclusion: Making collaborative futures; making futures collaboratively**

This article has argued that as collaborators embark on collaboration they navigate from a space of uncertainty and into an activity timespace oriented by a shared sense of purpose. Roles are reinterpreted as they become entangled in this new activity timespace, and rhythmic synchronicity facilitates the coordination of action.

Further, I proposed that analysis of the anticipation of roles in relation to one another enables “close up” investigation of the affective, embodied, and relational dimensions of power, including each actor’s perceptions of their respective knowledge, or expertise, and whether actors or their knowledges are validated by powerful institutions such as academic institutions or a program funder. Having the resources and capacity to control a passage to the future is also a mechanism of power. Therefore, although planning is a form of labor and, as

such, can be an appropriate contribution for ethnographers to offer capacity-limited organisations, it is also a form of epistemic control.

Further investigation is needed to understand the qualities and textures of both uncertainty and of shared activity timespace in ethnographic collaboration, as well as the relationship between the two. This paper has engaged in formative theorization, identifying a progression from the former to the latter. However, further research may unpack a more dynamic, constitutive relationship.

A further mission of future research is to develop ways to engage collaborators with collective reflection on, and theorisation of, this shared activity timespace and the forms of power that shape it. The hegemony of knowledge associated with powerful institutions can unintentionally dominate intricate community-specific knowledges unless actively disrupted, as cultural capital trumps social capital. This happens via the subtle vehicles of (cognitive) expectation and (sensory/affective) anticipation. The anthropologist's habitus of schooled not-knowing makes this active disruption difficult: it becomes necessary to both live through that habitus and to step outside it; to anticipate a path of shared knowledge production, but to halt the vehicles of hegemony that guide its path.

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<sup>i</sup> Bryant and Knight's development of the term referred to epochal activity timespaces such as the Time of War, characterised by the imminence of a particular type of activity, in that case violence. Here, I find the term useful for articulating a link between practice and temporality; activity and purpose; collaboration and future, so shift the term to the more idiosyncratic timespaces produced within collaboration.

<sup>ii</sup> As well as changing the names of the groups and individuals to protect their anonymity, I have also changed details about the areas, the activities the groups run and, occasionally, the official roles of individuals.