

# The challenges of academic and community partnership under military occupation and the complexity of power relations

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*In this paper, the reader is taken on a field trip to a village in the north of the West Bank. Events described in the report are used to explore some of the methodological dimensions of a psychosocial programme designed and implemented in joint partnership between a local Palestinian academic institution, the Institute of Community and Public Health of Birzeit University, and a Palestinian nongovernmental organisation the Community Based Rehabilitation programme. In the discussion, attention is drawn to the challenges involved in conducting field research under military occupation, and the power relations entailed in collaboration between an academic institution and a partner organisation in the field, as well as with the local community.*

**Keywords:** academic/NGO cooperation, community based rehabilitation, occupied Palestinian territory, Palestinian youth, participatory action research, power relations

## **Background**

Palestinians in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank have been living with a lack of human security, especially since the beginning of the Israeli military occupation in 1967 (Batniji, Rabaia, Nguyen-Gillham, Giacaman, Sarraj, Punamaki, Saab & Boyce, 2009). There was a short period of hope and optimism as the first *intifada*

(uprising) in the late 1980s led to the Madrid peace conference in 1991, and the Oslo Accords between Israel and the Palestinians in 1993. However, it became clear that these agreements failed to deliver peace dividends and improved living conditions for the Palestinians. Their contested capital, East Jerusalem, became increasingly inaccessible to the majority of Palestinians on the West Bank and Gaza Strip, the refugee problem remained unresolved, and in the meantime, Israeli colonisation of the West Bank continued unabated.

Faced with this depressing political climate, increasing Palestinian resistance against Israeli oppression led to the second *intifada* in September 2000. Israel reacted with unprecedented military operations, including air raids and the temporary reoccupation of the Gaza Strip and West Bank cities in 2002.

In the aftermath of this violent period, a Palestinian public health professor made the observation that the tallying of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) symptoms has been accepted as a measure of Palestinian suffering. This observation led to the subsequent decision by Birzeit University's Institute of Community and Public Health to investigate how young Palestinians cope with growing up in protracted conflict (Giacaman, Saab, Nguyen-Gillham,

Abdullah & Naser, 2004). Interest in the study was also fuelled by the belief that the high percentages of PTSD symptoms, quoted in articles on Palestinian mental health, was diverting attention away from the social need to relieve Palestinian distress and suffering to a presumed need for their clinical psychiatric or psychosocial treatment (Summerfield, 2001).

The first part of the research project (2002–04), which was conducted in joint cooperation with Queen’s University and included both a quantitative and qualitative component, investigated how young people in the Ramallah district coped in a context of ongoing violence. The study’s findings indicated that the young people from this district indeed suffered from high levels of exposure to violent and traumatic events. However, rather than looking for ‘*treatment*’, the narratives of these young people demonstrated considerable coping skills through living as normally as possible within such abnormal circumstances (Nguyen-Gillham, Giacaman, Naser & Boyce, 2008). Rather than focusing on the vulnerability and negative functioning of this group of youth, the study recommended building on the resilience of the young people, and strengthening the social fabric, by:

- developing a community model of intervention;
- strengthening youth centres and facilities;
- training youth workers;
- using creative (as opposed to conventional clinical) counselling methods; and
- utilising available community and school resources.

This approach is compatible with a ‘*growing body of research that is discerning competent functioning (or the absence of negative functioning) in extreme contexts*’ (Barber, 2009).

Together with the Community Based Rehabilitation (CBR) programme, a programme that has been successfully operating in the West Bank and Gaza Strip for over 15 years, the institute designed an intervention based on ‘*youth as a strategy*’ for rehabilitation work, as well as community and youth development. Within this framework, CBR fieldworkers establish youth groups by inviting adolescents with a disability, or young people with disabled family member(s), their friends and previous programme volunteers, to meet. In these group meetings, the young people spent some time ‘*getting to know each other*’ and learning about disability and the CBR programme. A key objective of these groups is to provide the space and time for the young people to discuss issues and problems related to themselves, and their village or community. The group does not exist merely for the purpose of disability work. It also gives the young people a chance to become agents of social support and change. In practice, the group members support a CBR worker in his/her work with the disabled through home visits, as well as in community activities. However, as the group develops, group participants also begin to take on social projects of their own choice and design, based on group capacity and the needs of the community.

### **Fieldwork report**

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The Shamal young women’s group (*note: all names of people and locations have been changed to protect identity*) began meeting in late 2007. The young women had decided that they wanted to produce a ‘*magazine*’ for their village, which is situated in the north of the West Bank. There were between 10 and 15 young women in the group, with ages ranging from 17 to 23 years. Through the training and monitoring programme with

CBR, our team at the Institute had been following the progress of the magazine. Although the young women in the group were initially very excited about the project, their enthusiasm waned over the course of the year. The group had been experiencing setbacks, for example, during exam periods or when they had to help during the olive harvest. At other times, they were busy with other activities, some of them indirectly related to the magazine. One such instance was when they decided to conduct a survey within the community to assess the community's interest in the magazine idea. This meant that they had to invest time in formulating their questions, conducting the field-work, and then trying to analyse the results. By the time of our visit, new members had replaced some of the initial group members, who had dropped out of the group. Additionally, the copy for the magazine was ready, and the head of the village council had promised funding for the printing costs. However, prior to the visit, the institute's team had observed that the CBR workers leading this group appeared to have mixed feelings, as they alternated between viewing the young women as either '*very good*' or '*totally hopeless*'. In addition, we were sometimes informed that the magazine was almost ready, while at other times, we would hear that the articles were of such low quality that they were not worth printing.

The Institute of Community and Public Health (ICPH) team was initially confused with these changing reports from the CBR workers. However, it gradually became apparent to us that this change of opinion was somehow related to the speed, or rather slowness, of the production of this publication. For the CBR workers, they might have been concerned that the final product and outcome might reflect on the success of the work with the group. This tension

between the outcome and output on the one hand, and the rather less visible but vital process of working with children or young people at their own pace on the other hand, is a feature of development effort driven by agency priorities. These priorities tend to have an over emphasis on impact and outcome, and insufficient attention to transformative processes on the ground (White & Choudhury, 2007).

Although we repeatedly asked for a copy of the magazine, we were only able to access the material from the flash disk of a CBR supervisor in January 2009. When we read the material, we were pleasantly surprised with the acceptable quality of the writing. It was not exactly '*Newsweek*' or '*Vanity Fair*', but even so, we thought that it was a very promising first attempt for a group of young women working on a village magazine (Box 1). At the time of our visit, the group was meeting in the women's centre in the middle of the village, and we sat with them in a circle. Out of 12 members in the group, two could not attend. The supervisor had warned us that some members were not very active. According to her, these young women had only joined because, as students, the hours would count towards their community service assignment, a requirement of the Open University that they were attending. This CBR interpretation of the situation presented itself as yet another example that puzzled us. From our '*academic*' standpoint, we had assumed that for these students, being involved with a group would be an interesting form of community service. However, we soon came to appreciate the accuracy of her assessment. One of the participants, who is in her early twenties and an Open University student, was already married with a baby. She showed little interest in the group's activities, other than to collect credit for the community

**Box 1: Contents page of the magazine**

Introduction	1
The CBR programme	4
A word by Im Ibrahim (CBR supervisor)	6
A word by the village council	7
My village	8
Explaining the name ' <i>Shamal</i> '	9
Institutions and population of Shamal	10
Cactus plants in Shamal	11
Olive trees in Shamal	12
Is it illness or disability?	13
People with disability	16
The Separation Wall suffocates Shamal village	17
The torture of Palestine	19
The Shamal sports club	20
Education and schools in Shamal	21
My school	22
Anemia	23
Early marriage	25
Zamzam water returns the sight of a Palestinian man	27
Popular sayings in Shamal	28
The historical battles on the land of Shamal	29
Who am I?	30
Oral history	31

service and then go home to take care of her child. She had little attention for either the other young women, the group, or the group's project.

We started with introductions and commended the young women on their work. We had, by then, read much of the magazine copy and were impressed with the originality of a very short article. During the pilot phase of the project, we had, every now and then, tried to interest the two CBR workers in the idea of oral history as a way of engaging both young and old people within the community. Yet, this idea had failed to take root, even though we tried to explain that a simple

version of oral history was feasible. The field workers felt they needed more support, and at one point, they tried to have a professional historian '*help*' them. However, this did not work, because she could not find the time to work with them. In the meantime, we had assumed that the CBR workers had either lost interest in the idea, or failed to grasp the potential relevance of oral history to community work and youth. So when we read the magazine copy, we were surprised to find a short oral history story by one of the young women. She had gone to her grandmother and written a short passage about what had happened in their village

### **Box 2: Oral history**

I was 14 days married and on that day we were sleeping, when we woke up to the sound of bullets, but we couldn't see anything. We fled into the field and sat under olive and carob trees and we stayed [in the fields] a few days, until the [Israelis] attacked us for the second time. We fled to the eastern villages, and we arrived to the village of Qorb and stayed there. The men then left us behind and they went to the valley because we had planted wheat and barley. Every day they would bring us a bit and we would beat them until the wheat grains would fall from the stalks and then we would pound them until the grains became fine and we would make a dough from the flour, light the fire and bake those breads on the round baking tin and eat them. We remained like that until one day we heard that the Iraqi army entered our land and village and when they saw the [Israelis] on the streets they killed them. After them, the Jordanian army entered and they pushed the Israeli army from our land and we returned back to our land. But, if only we had not returned, because we found our homes burned with the roofs fallen to the ground. We sat in them that day, and we went down [to the valley], we collected wood and branches and we made from it roofs for the houses. We painted over the black and we sat for some days and one day, Allah, all of a sudden, the [Israelis] attacked us another time; the Iraqi army disappeared and the Jordanian army and they delivered us to the [Israelis]. People fled to Jordan and to Syria and to Lebanon and others stayed on the land and we are from those who stayed. So is our story and my age is now 70 years and the [Israelis] are still occupying us.

in 1948 and 1967, using the verbatim words of her grandmother (Box 2).

This short passage was revealing in its simplicity. It managed to summarise 60 years of history in just a few sentences, interweaving the critical historical and personal details; the attack, the flight, survival, the return, rebuilding, further attacks, withdrawal of the protecting army, displacement for some Palestinians as others chose to stay, as well as the continuing Israeli military occupation.

The other topic we wanted to focus on during this meeting was the issue of printing. The CBR supervisor had told us that one stumbling block was the expensive cost of colour printing. Although the young women had insisted on colour, the CBR worker thought

that it was not worth the cost. We were inclined to agree with the CBR supervisor, and had prepared ourselves to persuade the young women to accept a cheaper black and white version. The young women, however, had a reply to all our arguments and in the end managed to sway us to their idea of printing 30 copies in colour. They would only distribute them to 'strategic' parties, like the women's centre, the girls and the boys' schools, the mayor, and the municipality. They would also reserve a copy for the CBR programme, one for ICPH, and one for each participant in the group. Each recipient would then be encouraged to make additional (black and white) photocopies, or to share their coloured copy with as many people as possible, including friends and

family. To get feedback from their readers, and to help with preparation for the second issue, the young women also told us they wanted to attach a little form with a few questions to each magazine. Finally, they said that they would place a copy of the magazine on the Internet, so that people originally from Shamal, but now living in the Diaspora, would also be able to see and perhaps contribute to the village magazine.

We returned to Ramallah that day impressed by the level of enthusiasm and creativity in the group.

### **Discussion: Participatory action research under military occupation**

Personal communication, meetings and joint workshops are of great importance in a participatory action research project. Yet, for the CBR and ICPH teams, planning together and calling meeting was a consistent challenge. We have had to cancel meetings because of road closures by the Israeli military. We were also forced to brave dirt tracks and makeshift roads to reach our destination. Often, meeting agendas or training sessions had to be adjusted, or shortened, when CBR or Institute staff was held up at Israeli military checkpoints. Fieldwork conditions, such as these, create a dilemma for action research. In the context of protracted conflict, where local support and engagement is crucial to project development, the essential work of project support is often constrained by the same circumstances.

This particular field trip, however, and our interaction with the group and the CBR workers, also illustrates the complex power relations inherent in a partnership between an academic and non-academic institution. Action research is aimed at the integration of theory and practice, not only in the sense

that theory can inform practice, but also in the recognition that theory can and should be generated through practice. Theory is really only useful insofar as it is used in the service of a practice, focused on achieving positive social change (Brydon-Miller, Greenwood & Maguire, 2003).

In this field report, we note the dynamics existing between the ICPH team and CBR workers as well as within the young women's group in the village. In participatory action research, it is important to recognise the power relations between participating partners (McTaggart, 1997). In the CBR-ICPH project, some of the tension had already become apparent in the previous pilot phase of the project. CBR supervisors, and many of the CBR workers at the time, would refer to the project as *'a Birzeit University project, which would end as soon as our funding came to an end'*. With the help of an external consultant who brought this issue to the table, we were able to appreciate and discuss these unequal power relations, and their impact on the project. Consequently, CBR decided to take the lead in developing and working with the concept of *'youth as a strategy'* (Coleridge, 2007). It was only when finally, two years into the collaboration, the ICPH team was invited to weekly CBR meetings, that we realised how much our partner was beginning to trust us. As the partnership began to acquire a more equal footing, CBR decided to appoint *'Dahlia'* as full-time staff responsible for the *'youth as a strategy'* component. During the pilot project, ICPH had designed and conducted the training workshops for CBR workers. In this current phase, Dahlia and the CBR supervisors became responsible for co-designing and co-facilitating the workshops with the ICPH team.

As can be seen in this field report, the issue of unequal power remains, even with

improved trust and sharing. We often find that we don't even speak the same language. Kostelny (2006) warns that much of humanitarian work on behalf of the war affected reflects a Western perspective. Here we see that even when two Palestinian institutions, albeit with different professional cultures, enter a partnership, the relationship requires ongoing and rigorous attention. The suggestion of including oral history in the project demonstrates this point. When ICPH recommended oral history as a way of engaging the community, the CBR workers seemed to have difficulty grasping the concept. This resistance may well have stemmed from their apprehension, that as an academic exercise imposed upon them, they lacked the capacity to implement what was seen as an ICPH idea. Yet, just when we thought that the idea had been completely abandoned, we discovered that 'the seed of oral history' had in fact sprouted. At the same time, CBR workers were not always able to bridge the gap between their own beliefs and the ideas of the young people in their groups. In this field report, an example of cooperation between an academic Palestinian institution, a local NGO, and young people in a project promoting psychosocial support within village communities was presented. We noted that, once the NGO itself had adopted the idea of working with young people as a strategy for integrating people with disabilities, confidence between the academic and CBR teams grew considerably. Notwithstanding the developing trust between the two partners, considerable room remained for misconceptions and misunderstandings at the level of implementation. Despite sharing a common culture, even local partners had to remain vigilant about the need for constant re-conceptualising and negotiation in this type of complex action research.

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