A theory-based model of translation practices in public health participatory research

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Abstract

This article explores the innovative practices of actors specifically mandated to support interactions between academic researchers and their partners from the community during public health participatory research. Drawing on the concept of translation as developed in actor-network theory and found in the literature on knowledge transfer and the sociology of intermediate actors, we build a theory-based model of the translation practices developed by these actors at the interface between community and university. We refine this model by using it to analyse material from two focus groups comprising participants purposively selected because they work at the nexus between research and practice. Our model of translation practices includes cognitive (dealing with the contents of the research), strategic (geared to facilitating the research process and balancing power relationships among the partners) and logistic practices (the hands-on tasks of coordination). Combined, these three types of translation practices demonstrate that actors working at the interface in participatory research contribute to multidirectional exchanges and the co-construction of knowledge among research partners. Beyond the case of participatory research, theorising translation practices helps understand how knowledge is produced at the interface between academic and experiential (or lay) knowledge.

Keywords: community-based research, intermediate actors, knowledge transfer, actor-network theory, Canada

The formation of alliances with communities has become central to public health research, especially that involving more vulnerable and excluded groups (Cargo et al. 2003, Cornwall and Jewkes 1995, Israel et al. 1998, Mantoura et al. 2007, Tsai Roussos and Fawcett 2000, Williams et al. 2005). Taking a diversity of forms – from formal partnerships to more informal networks – such alliances are expected to increase the relevance of research and practice by providing a space for coordinated action among actors who have a diversity of insights and responsibilities across several sectors (Geddes 2000, Green et al. 2001). Based on established research alliances such as those described above, this article aims to contribute to
a sociology of knowledge production at the interface between formal academic knowledge and the experiential (or lay) knowledge of practitioners.

Participatory research promotes a discourse of cohesion and shared objectives. Yet there is also a critical condition to participatory research: balancing power relationships between partners, that is between academic researchers and practitioners (broadly construed to encompass community representatives, practitioners and decision-makers). In this respect, alliances provide conditions for the mutual involvement of partners at all stages of the research, from problem definition to the dissemination of results (Israel et al. 1998, Williams et al. 2005). Alliances also provide conditions for the acknowledgement of each partner’s specific knowledge and competencies – whether scientific or experiential – in the generation of new knowledge (Bilodeau et al. 2003). However, creating such conditions is no easy feat because academic researchers and their partners all have their own agendas, time frames and unique professional cultures, not to mention different conceptions of what is legitimate in terms of sources of knowledge, what the specificities of the problem are and what constitutes participatory research. The question remains, therefore: how can alliances be sustained so that participatory research works? A common observation from the literature is that it takes a deliberate and sustained effort to develop formal and informal links between academic researchers and practitioners. It requires tools, competencies and strategies, such as listening, advocacy, democratic leadership, cultural competencies, negotiation and the use of a common language such as figurative models (Allard et al. 2008, Cargo and Mercer 2008, Israel et al. 1998, Tsai Roussos and Fawcett 2000). A particularly valuable facilitator is the presence of individuals specifically mandated to work at weaving formal and informal links among partners (Cargo and Mercer 2008, Israel et al. 1998, Tsai Roussos and Fawcett 2000, Williams et al. 2005). Such partnership facilitators have skills in ‘communication, meeting facilitation, negotiation and networking’ (Tsai Roussos and Fawcett 2000: 385) and ‘provide the glue to keep the research partnership together’ (Israel et al. 1998: 185). Besides ‘framing and communicating the vision and mission of a partnership to a broad range of stakeholders’ (Tsai Roussos and Fawcett 2000: 385), they facilitate the coordination of participatory research, mobilise partners around a common concern and contribute to what is generally called knowledge transfer.

This article contributes to our understanding of formal bridging mechanisms in participatory research alliances. It proposes a theory-based model of translation practices at the nexus between academic researchers and practitioners in participatory research. The model is refined through a purposive study of actors who serve this role in different types of research partnerships.

Theoretical framework

Action researchers (Williams et al. 2005), translators (Bernier et al. 2006), support staff (Israel et al. 1998), leaders (Cargo and Mercer 2008, Tsai Roussos and Fawcett 2000) and knowledge brokers (Lomas 2007) are all labels given to individuals whose role is to deal both with the content of research and the processes of participatory research (leadership and organisation). Whatever the name used, they all have the same general mandate: to create and maintain connections between social entities that were previously unconnected. The concept of translation is therefore key to understanding what is happening in the participatory space located at the interface of research and practice. In our exploration of
the concept of translation, we draw on three bodies of work: actor-network theory (ANT) (Latour 2005), the knowledge translation literature (Bowen et al. 2005) and the sociology of intermediate actors (Nay and Smith 2002).

Translation in ANT
ANT describes how human and non-human actants (for instance, the rules of academic research funding) from different spheres that share an interest in a given problem forge and support cooperative, inclusive and innovative solutions to a problem (Latour 2005). Central to this theory is the concept of translation, which distinguishes four operations in the iterative process of forging networks that support innovative solutions (Callon 1986). The first is problematisation, in which actants reach a shared understanding of a given situation, taking into account their different social positions and potentially competing interests, values and expertise. The next is interestment, in which strategic negotiations between these actants serve to align their various interests and their identity in the network and to define whether and how each can contribute to solving the identified problem. The last two are enrolment, in which actions and practices contribute to stabilising the role of each actant in the network; and mobilisation, in which the different actants are included in order to reach a critical mass in the process of forging innovative solutions. Although these four operations are generally seen as acting sequentially, translation is actually an iterative process that retraces simultaneously changing relationships between the actors involved and new ways of reconciling different knowledge as the various negotiations and translations take place. As Latour has shown in the case of scientific facts, negotiations based on existing knowledge and experiments – that is, formulating, testing and validating and invalidating propositions – is central to the production of new knowledge (Latour 1987).

Applied to participatory research, the concept of translation as developed in ANT points to the importance of considering both the actual relationships among the partners involved and the contents of their exchanges (Potvin et al. 2010). In other words, it emphasises the processes of mediating and aligning interests – the actions and strategies deployed to find common ground among the respective interests of a range of research partners – as well as the co-construction of new knowledge through multidirectional exchanges among partners (Potvin 2007).

Translation in the knowledge transfer literature
The literature on knowledge transfer and translation is a rich documentation of the processes whereby knowledge is generated, circulated, transformed and put into action as it travels from one social sphere to another (Hartz et al. 2008). Although the main concern in health sciences is still the transfer of academic knowledge to health policy and interventions, the community-based research literature is increasingly concerned with the co-construction of knowledge between academic researchers and practitioners (Armstrong et al. 2007, Bowen et al. 2005, Bowen and Zwi 2005, Landry et al. 2006, Mitchell et al. 2009). For instance, de Leeuw et al. identified seven theoretical models of how knowledge is generated and transferred at the nexus between research, policy and practice (de Leeuw et al. 2008). This conception of knowledge translation also underlies the notion of ‘linkage and exchange’, which is promoted by the Canadian Health Services Research Foundation, whose aim is to support bidirectional partnerships between academic researchers and decision-makers (Lomas 2007). The assumption is that practitioners and decision-makers who have an interest in the production of knowledge are more likely to use it when it comes to the decision-making process (Mitchell et al. 2009).
Translation in the sociology of intermediate actors

Sociological studies of actors whose professional legitimacy relies on their ability to work across different organisations, sectors or policies is useful for our research. They provide insights into how work at the nexus between different social entities can be carried out in such a way that knowledge is translated effectively among actors during participatory research and circulated freely across various networks. This body of work has focused on the management of relationships between participants (networking), conflict resolution (for example, mediation in legal practice or healthcare), the re-establishment of social links between public institutions and citizens (social and institutional mediation) and the selling of ideas based on partners’ interests (brokering) (Nay and Smith 2002, Williams 2002).

Comprehensive approaches to intermediation and boundary spanning encompass practices centred around logistics (equivalent to coordination in everyday thinking), influence, negotiation, role management, interests and values, and interpersonal relationships (Stern and Green 2005, Williams 2002). Nay and Smith (2002) propose a crucial distinction between the strategic and cognitive dimensions of intermediation that takes into account both the process of managing interactions and the ideas exchanged in partnerships. The strategic dimension involves managing the positions and interests of partners, the goal being to achieve solutions or agreements that meet some of each partner’s objectives such that each finds a reason to maintain the partnership. By contrast, the cognitive dimension requires resources and legitimacy to deal with the contents of the partnership because it is necessary to translate (following Callon) issues from the language of one social sphere into that of another social sphere in order to support the formulation of a common understanding of the issues under scrutiny. The congruence of strategic practices (power relationships) and cognitive practices (meanings and contents) is the foundation for a potential shared intervention.

In sum, the conception of translation in ANT highlights the fact that creating connections between different social entities involves more than just managing interests and processes: it involves actually co-producing knowledge. The knowledge transfer literature shows that participatory processes such as research partnerships are conducive to the creation of such connections between social entities, especially to the co-production of knowledge. Finally, the sociology of intermediate actors distinguishes between practices of intermediation that deal with contents versus those that deal with the processes of interactions. Combined, the three bodies of literature identify key characteristics and practices at work at the nexus of research and practice. We now apply these insights to participatory research.

A theory-based model of translation practices in participatory research

Translation in participatory research, as defined in the three bodies of literature examined above, is therefore a multifaceted, innovative practice that allows for multidirectional exchanges and the co-construction of knowledge among academics, community representatives, practitioners and decision-makers. Building on these theories, we assert that translation consists of three distinct types of practices. Firstly, there are cognitive practices, which deal with the contents of the partnership. They contribute to circulating the partners’ knowledge and preferences in all directions and, ultimately, help frame research questions, knowledge production processes and translation into the various partners’ networks. Then there are strategic practices, which cover all the activities, tools and competences that are mobilised to raise and maintain the different parties’ interest in participatory research.

Finally, logistic practices are the hands-on coordination tasks that create the actual conditions for the partnership – activities like convening meetings, telephoning partners and writing meeting minutes. Rather than being mutually exclusive, these three types of practices
occur concomitantly. Knowing the partners’ respective interests is crucial to reaching a mutual understanding among partners, just as logistics underlie and support the other two types of practices. All three kinds of practices are fundamental to translation and so ultimately shed light on the co-construction process in participatory research.

Methods

This research is rooted in various participatory research projects that have been created in Québec (Canada) under the auspices of the Research Chair on Community Approaches to Inequalities in Health (Potvin et al. 2002). This chair’s mandate is to develop research in close collaboration with intervention partners, and it has set up structures to support this collaboration. Since 2007 the Chair holder, along with her team and partners (health institutions, municipalities and private foundations), has been engaged in a reflexive research endeavour examining the practice of community-based research in health promotion. As part of this process these parties all gathered for a 2-day workshop in January 2008. This workshop served to identify a critical structural component of participatory research: the individuals who manage the interface between partners from the spheres of research, the community and, in some instances, institutions.

Following this workshop, we decided to further identify and analyse the key innovative practices of these individuals – what they do, how they do it and how they view their role. We did this by holding two 2-hour focus groups. As is standard practice in this type of research, we purposively selected participants for each focus group based on their explicit mandate to manage the interface between practitioners and academics in different settings (Whitehead et al. 2004). In our case studies, the level of community participation varied from situations in which practitioners were actively involved in all stages of the research to ones in which practitioners were only consulted and kept informed about issues of interest to the research. In this article, the term ‘participatory research’ covers the entire spectrum. Focus groups were chosen as the most appropriate method for exploring and highlighting the key common components of these practices, as opposed to the specificities of the research project or individual personalities. Examining interactions among participants is a way to generate detailed information on practices, which can then be used to generate hypotheses (Kitzinger 1994).

The three Group 1 participants were involved in projects linked to the Chair. They all shared a strong commitment to community-based research and a common intent to formalise the relationships between research and practice. One of the participants was serving as the Chair’s coordinator. She collaborated with both researchers and practitioners involved in research projects associated with the Chair and with the Chair’s Advisory Committee, which is composed of academic researchers and representatives of community organisations and institutions. The second participant was the coordinator of participatory spaces in the evaluation of a programme aimed at supporting vulnerable young families in 19 sites across the province (a participatory space is a dedicated committee in which researchers and practitioners discuss a project). The last participant was a research assistant who was serving a similar role in a research programme examining the implementation of a community-school programme in a health district. Although these three participants had different titles, they all described their mandates, broadly speaking, as managing participatory committees, supporting practitioners and community partners within the research project and contributing to the research by developing links with practitioners and, in two cases, occasionally collecting data.
The five Group 2 participants were more closely linked to communities and practitioners. They were involved with projects that did not have the same commitment to participatory research as the Chair. Three of the participants in this group were employed as research assistants or activity coordinators in local health and social services organisations. They acted as intermediaries, either between their organisation and external researchers seeking the collaboration of practitioners for their research projects, or between research activities within their organisation and community partners. The fourth individual was responsible for an organisation that provided support for participatory research projects in the field of social economy, while the last participant was the coordinator of a university-based research partnership on family issues.

As part of their commitment to participatory research, the Chair holder, the Chair coordinator and their partners had theorised the role of the ‘translator’ (based on ANT) as a tool that facilitates reflexivity and creates a more equitable power balance among partners (Bernier et al. 2006). The Group 1 participants were therefore likely to frame their practices within this context. By contrast, the Group 2 participants had no prior knowledge of the translation framework developed by the Chair and, consequently, their role in practice-related settings was not conceptualised within such a framework. The purpose of this second focus group, therefore, was to critically assess the specificity of practices discussed in Group 1.

One of the authors conducted the focus groups while another took notes, which served as a basis for writing a preliminary summary of the issues raised in the discussions. This summary was circulated to the participants. With permission from the participants, and in accordance with the research ethics requirements of our university, the focus group meetings were digitally taped and transcribed verbatim. So as to limit bias in how the Group 1 participants recounted their professional practices, the contribution of the Chair holder and the other co-researchers was limited to commenting on and approving the interview guidelines. They were not in any way involved with conducting the two focus groups and the primary analysis of data on these groups. While both CC and YS had received bursaries from the Chair at the time of research (as a postdoctoral fellow and a doctoral candidate, respectively), neither were part of the hierarchy comprising participants and researchers.

The first step of the analysis consisted in reviewing the literature and elaborating the theoretical model described above. This served to orient both data collection and the first round of coding of the verbatim transcripts from the two focus groups using qualitative analysis software (AtlasTI) (Coffey and Atkinson 1996, Miles and Huberman 1994). We then further refined the theory-based model through an iterative process of data analysis and theory-building in order to characterise precisely the different translation practices entailed in participatory research. The main focus of our analysis will be data from Group 1, while data from Group 2 will serve to reinforce and contextualise the translation practices that emerged in Group 1.

Results

In this section we first present results on the nature of interactions in both focus groups and then on how the participants shaped innovative relationships between academics and practitioners in participatory research. The participants in both groups implemented all three kinds of practices but to varying degrees: the Group 1 participants relied primarily on cognitive practices, while the Group 2 participants relied on strategic ones. The logistics of translation tended to be downplayed in both cases, but especially in Group 1.
The nature of interactions in the focus groups

Firstly, both groups were openly critical of academic research. For instance, the Group 1 participants insisted that their intermediation was necessary to compensate for the ‘lack of social skills’ of some researchers. They discussed their difficulties in keeping up with the expectations of practitioners in terms of the production and use of results. The Group 2 participants even expressed doubts about the long-term legitimacy of their position, arguing that when a project matures, there may no longer be a need for an ‘intermediary’ to bring partners to the table. Such open acknowledgements of the challenges of working at the interface, albeit in anonymous interviews, can be interpreted as a way of asserting the relevance and specificity of work at the interface.

Secondly, participants in both focus groups engaged in conversations in which they built on what other participants communicated to then describe their respective practices in greater detail (comparing situations, coming back on an idea to refine their own point of view, making hypotheses as to why situations might be different). Following Kitzinger (1994), such interactions can be classified as complementary (indicating that participants shared similar practices) or argumentative (underlining the differences between their respective practices). For instance, argumentative interactions underscored the fact that the Group 1 participants each had their own particular way of interacting with researchers: one participant said that she needed to exert pressure on researchers to ensure that results of particular interest to practitioners were made available to them. Another participant commented that she adjusted her practices according to the researchers’ commitment to participatory research. The third participant said she remained on the lookout for relevant results and the best moment to deliver these.

Interactions also allowed the participants in both groups to identify several factors that they felt hindered their ability to mobilise academics and practitioners. In all cases the participants reported – through complementary interactions – that their mandate was initially too vague and was under-formalised (an ill-defined task list, the absence of operational support structure and reluctance on the part of some partners), and so its contours had to be delineated as they went along. Secondly, the discrepancy between the status and work title of some of the participants (four of whom were research assistants, including one in Group 1) and their translation practices was misleading to partners. Third, all three Group 1 participants reported having been assigned secondary responsibilities such as administrative management, data collection or team coordination; tasks that impinged on their translation activities.

The argumentative interactions relating to the scale of the project or employment setting (university or university-affiliated research centre in a health institution) of each participant highlighted the importance of these issues for translation practices. Working in a large multisite project or being based in a university introduces a distance between the intermediary working at the nexus and practitioners, and this affects the intermediary’s ability to develop close working relationships and sustain informal contacts. The Group 1 participants expressed doubts as to their ability to create an interest for participatory research beyond the people directly involved in the research partnerships.

Translation practices in participatory research projects linked to the Chair (Group 1)

A detailed description of the cognitive, strategic and logistic practices of translation in participatory research is shown in Figure 1. The interconnectedness between the three types of translation practices is clear from the overall pyramidal shape and merging colours.

In general, our results show that the conception of translation developed in the Chair’s research programme has permeated the practices of the Group 1 participants. This is
reflected in their ability to discuss their practices using abstract concepts from ANT (two of them talked at length about the interestment strategies they used), and to talk purposefully about what they actually do and bring to the research project. The participants also believed in the co-construction of knowledge and the assertion that partners with less material and symbolic resources must be given a voice.

**Cognitive translation:** Individuals working at the interface in research projects linked to the Chair (Group 1) supported the elaboration and continuing implementation of a vision of their particular participatory project that was shared by all partners. All three Group 1 participants were strongly convinced of the relevance of participatory research, all adhered to values of social and environmental justice and all pledged to foster the translation of knowledge into action. One of them expressed her pragmatic philosophy on the relevance of research, which was based on her research experience, thus:

> As you said, interventions aim to change lives, to improve lives. And research too. But sometimes the research is so far removed ... I want to at least bring them closer together.

To bring the cultures closer together, the participants created multiple opportunities for dialogue on the respective contents and constraints of public health research and practice by setting up committees. They also went beyond this to endorse a leadership role. One participant described her role thus:

> What you said in your last point about leadership is quite striking: [it is] more than bridging a gap between partners, it is promoting the [research] project ... the researchers are involved in other things. Therefore, implicitly, they wait for you to push things forward ... with you actually making the decisions.

The participants also used a second cognitive practice: formulating research questions in such a way that they made sense to applied researchers and practitioners. By listening to practitioners (for instance, by sitting on a municipal committee on neighbourhood development) or by taking part in data collection, individuals working as translators gained knowledge on developments relating to health actions and from there provided informed input for the development of research questions. One participant from Group 1 emphasised the importance of this listening and scouting role, noting how her listening to people's research needs had motivated her to write a synthesis and reformulate issues into research.
questions, which in turn sparked the development of a research project that then received funding.

The Group 1 participants were ‘specialists in crossing borders’, as one of them noted. Having experiential knowledge of research and practice from previous training and employment positions, they had mastered the norms, values and language of both social spheres. More practically, they maintained a dense network of contacts in local health and social services institutions or community organisations and were cognisant of academic literature on knowledge transfer and participatory research. In addition, the Group 1 participants knew what research orientations and what empirical and theoretical issues were of interest to researchers because they worked in close collaboration with them. Such knowledge of the two worlds of public health practice and academic research is a valuable asset when it comes to engaging in cognitive translation practices.

**Strategic translation:** Translation also consists of raising and maintaining all partners’ interest in participatory research, through reconciling and possibly transforming their potentially diverging interests. The Group 1 participants used three distinct practices.

Firstly, they managed the research process and thus facilitated participatory research: they took time to explain the process of participatory research to partners, created committees to keep track of progress and maintained formal and informal relationships with researchers and practitioners. More specifically, they also made sure the researchers fulfilled their part of the contract – for instance, they established deadlines for when they would need to discuss results with practitioners and oriented the selection of results to be discussed. When explaining her practice, one of them said: ‘The most tangible thing that I do is to “chase” researchers’. Another asserted that ‘participatory research practice is not yet entrenched in academic research; it all depends on the researchers’. Such management of the research process is key to building and maintaining trust within the partnership (Cargo and Mercer 2008) and it is inextricably linked to the values of equality and reciprocity inherent to participatory research. This illustrates just how intertwined the cognitive and strategic practices of translation are.

Secondly, the Group 1 participants used a wide array of interestment devices and strategies to raise and maintain practitioners’ interest in participatory research. Particularly prominent was the use of specific communication skills and techniques such as the circulation of notes and reports as a follow up to discussions, and an attention to language and form in the presentation of research results. For instance, one participant insisted that effective transmission of results requires a show that is entertaining in both content and style.

The participants also relied on both large and small events to tighten collaborative relationships among research partners. Thus, in one case, a series of meetings between researchers and practitioners resulted in the joint writing of recommendations to the government on how the programme should be changed. In another case, a participant gradually, over time, convinced partners of the relevance of organising a major conference to showcase the different projects undertaken at the research centre. In all such activities, the research timeline was a crucial constraint that needed to be managed. For instance, the participants needed to time meetings aimed at raising research questions with funding deadlines, or time the holding of workshops with major public health events so as to create momentum.

Finally, the Group 1 participants showed a concern for balancing power relationships between research partners. They tried to protect practitioners from excessive demands related to research requirements and worked to ensure that community members received financial compensation for their participation in meetings. Thanks to their past professional
experience, they were also able to facilitate the researchers’ access to public health settings, thus helping to overcome a certain naivety with respect to professional practices on the part of researchers – a factor known to complicate participatory research (Williams et al. 2005). This concern was also apparent in the issues that these participants reported: an imbalance between how much researchers and practitioners learn from each other and the often minimal change that research brings about, the failure of researchers to always readily discuss their research orientations and the tension that exists among community partners and that needs to be overcome in the participatory research process.

The logistics of translation: The Group 1 participants tended to downplay the time and effort they put into logistics, the third practice in our translation model. They mentioned only briefly that they had to set up committees, maintain informal relationships with community partners and promote research projects by creating communication tools (such as concise transcripts and leaflets). However, it is clear that strategic and cognitive translation and the interweaving of the practices associated with each require considerable logistical resources: managing the timetables and deadlines of participatory research, organising events, setting up mechanisms for securing partners’ participation, scoping the academic literature, phoning partners and so on.

Translation practices in other participatory research settings (Group 2)
By contrast with the Group 1 participants, individuals who managed participatory research processes in health and social services institutions and other research support organisations or projects did not discuss their practices within a framework of translation theory or the co-construction of knowledge. Nevertheless, our results show that their practices serve to ‘operate’ translation, albeit to a lesser degree than in Group 1.

Cognitive translation: Compared to the Group 1 participants, the Group 2 participants made a more limited contribution to cognitive translation. They tended to talk about the research project as a whole or about their organisation’s mandate, rather than about what they actually did. Nevertheless, some of them reported having inspired additional research questions by making researchers aware of issues of interest for the practitioners, or having sought out researchers interested in investigating issues identified by practitioners from their organisation. One participant, who worked for an organisation that supports the establishment of participatory research projects, was particularly proactive in formulating research questions; he sometimes helped junior researchers write research protocols that were consistent with participatory research requirements.

Strategic translation: Strategic translation represented the bulk of the responsibilities of the Group 2 participants, and it consisted of three distinct practices. Firstly, all five participants were responsible for organising knowledge transfer activities. Such activities constituted the greater part of the mandate of two participants, and they were an essential part of the participatory research package supported by the research support organisations for which one of the participants worked. A fourth participant had initiated similar knowledge translation meetings so that research results generated within the institution could be shared with practitioners.

A second type of strategic translation practice reported was clarifying the expectations of partners so that everyone understood the challenges and limits of participatory research. This responsibility is similar to that reported by the Group 1 participants. One aspect of this was reminding researchers that research methods must take into account service
provision and the management duties of practitioners and managers. In one case, the participant had pointed out that four focus groups would probably be more than the practitioners could handle, given their duties. While some researchers were simply unaware of the specificities of participatory research methods, others were looking for research settings rather than actual partnerships. The Group 2 participants also worked to demystify the research process by explaining how it works, by highlighting the publication requirements faced by researchers and by encouraging practitioners to take part in participatory research committees.

Finally, two participants working in health institutions had to negotiate the integration of participatory research in their organisations. They were responsible for setting up contacts between outside researchers and the individuals or bodies in their institutions (for example, research ethics boards, managers and practitioners). In this capacity, they contributed to the negotiation of the participatory research partnership, including the formulation of research methods and questions, in order to ensure its compatibility with public health practice and management duties.

Logistic translation: The Group 2 participants reported that they were responsible for administrative tasks, such as drawing up budgets and other institutional management duties. They also promoted participatory research through information and promotion activities and organised meetings between research partners. One of the participants defined her mandate as primarily dealing with the logistics of research partnerships.

Discussion

Our results support a main conclusion from the literature: the presence of actors working at the nexus between research and practice in dedicated research partnerships (Group 1) facilitates the participatory research process by mobilising partners around a vision of participatory research and contributing to knowledge transfer (Cargo and Mercer 2008, Israel et al. 1998, Tsai Roussos and Fawcett 2000, Williams et al. 2005). Furthermore, our model of translation incorporating three dimensions allows for a finer picture of what such actors actually do in order to bridge the gap between academics, community representatives, practitioners and decision-makers.

Cognitive translation is bringing insights from practice to research, and then ‘translating’ these insights into research questions and into a process that recognises the legitimacy of practitioners. This was clearly a major innovative feature of practice in Group 1. Our comparison with Group 2 shows the very close proximity of Group 1 participants to the research sphere, a factor that facilitated their shaping of the contents of participatory research (cognitive translation). As the Group 1 participants were part of the research staff, they not only had a valuable handle on the research process and a greater capacity to influence the participatory research process and its contents but also the advantage of being somewhat removed from public health practice itself. This is in sharp contrast to the situation of Group 2 participants who, because of their functions, had a vested interest in public health practice and could influence how the research process was implemented in health institutions (strategic translation).

Our second main finding is that strategic translation supports the research process and fosters the continued involvement of all partners. By circulating and translating information derived from research to public health practice and vice versa, by establishing committees and procedures and by raising theoretical and empirical issues, actors working as translators...
in participatory research projects ensure that research processes allow for the effective participation of all partners and address practical issues in health practice. In this respect, the practices of these actors resemble those of their counterparts in other settings (including those we examined in Group 2). A specificity of practice in Group 1 was that the participants’ practices were geared to the actualisation of the vision of participatory research, which the participants themselves had contributed to developing (see section on cognitive translation): they endorsed their responsibility for increasing the relevance of research for public health practice, paying particular attention to balancing power relationships and developing interestment strategies. By contrast, the Group 2 participants had less influence on research per se and mostly aimed to increase mutual knowledge of the research and of public health practices through knowledge transfer and the clarification of expectations.

Finally, although this was not always explicit in the statements of participants in our focus groups, both cognitive and strategic practices are supported by a wide range of logistic tasks, and it is these tasks that create the foundation of sustained interactions among research partners. The participants working as translators in public health settings (Group 2) were the only ones to dwell on the logistics of translation. This finding, coupled with the lesser emphasis they placed on cognitive translation and the greater emphasis on their organisation’s mandate rather than their own specific duties, leads us to conclude that the Group 2 participants accorded less legitimacy to their part in the research process. In contrast, actors working in research projects that promoted the participatory model were given a somewhat clearer mandate and greater autonomy to influence the contents and vision of participatory research, which could explain their de-emphasis of the importance of logistics.

Translation, therefore, is far from being a mechanical process: rather, it is the skilled crafting of cognitive, strategic and logistic practices that interweave the values, interests and ideas of each partner so as to contribute to new problematisations of participatory research and the research issue under scrutiny. Actors working as translators thus have a potentially greater impact on the participatory research process than generally attributed to support staff in the literature (Israel et al. 1998). In fact, they address a number of challenges identified in the literature: maintaining trust and respect, carving out time for academic partners to maintain research activities and having infrastructural support to implement research in non-academic settings (Cargo and Mercer 2008).

The main limitation of our study, as mentioned in the methods section, is that the Group 1 participants were predisposed to frame what they do in terms of a translation model, as it was ANT that inspired the theoretical approach developed by the participatory research programme under investigation. However, our results for Group 2 show that actors working at the interface between research and intervention in different settings also ‘operated’ translation, albeit to a lesser extent and without being aware of it. This implies that being aware of what one is doing – that is, being able to theorise about one’s practice – and being in a supportive environment, encourages the development of translation as defined by a mix of cognitive, strategic and logistic practices. In addition, theorising such practices further supports their development.

A second limitation is related to our unusual use of ANT. In this theory, translation is a process resulting from interactions among the full range of human and non-human actants involved, rather than an activity located in a specific actor’s practices (Latour 2005). By contrast, the context of this research has led us to place a strong emphasis on the actors and structures (research partnerships) supporting the translation process. This being said, we do not claim that only formally mandated translators can develop such translation practices. We have kept true to ANT in that we have analysed the translation practices developed by these actors with a view to understanding how they have facilitated interactions among all
partners. To fully understand the translation process in participatory research it would be necessary to understand all interactions among all partners.

The small size of our purposive sample may also constitute a limitation. However, it may also be deemed acceptable given that the translation practice examined in this research is truly innovative and currently being used only in a few participatory research projects. And it has never actually been the subject of thorough study. Furthermore, in order to increase the generalisability of our study, we have used a theory-based model to analyse our observations – one that draws on research focused on actors who play similar intermediary roles in other contexts, such as cross-sectoral programme/policy implementation.

Participatory research is a problematic space in that it requires sustained interactions across two distinct social spheres, academic research and professional practice (Cargo and Mercer 2008). One major difficulty is that while we know how academic and practical knowledge are produced and used alongside each other in public health (Popay and Williams 1996), we still lack theories to explain how knowledge is produced at the interface between academic research and public health practice. Our description of what actors actually do at the interface between academics and practitioners in participatory research – our distinguishing between cognitive, strategic and logistic translation practices – highlights how the knowledge production process occurs at the interface between academic and experiential (or lay) knowledge. In this sense, it is a first step towards a sociology of translation practices. Such a sociology could have implications well beyond the confines of participatory research in public health. To fully understand the knowledge production process, further research is needed on the specific skills required to operate translation and, particularly, on how partners from different social spheres endorse and contribute to translation practices in a given participatory situation, both when mandated and not mandated to do so.

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