

Editorial

Research Collaboration: What It Means to Work with Someone

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I am very happy to contribute to this Special Issue on the works of Peter Aspinall. Peter was a prolific and leading scholar in studies of ‘mixed race’, census categories, and ethnicity and health. I did not personally know Peter Aspinall well, but in the course of our research collaboration, I learned about him as a scholar and what it means to work with someone. I will reflect upon my working relationship with Peter, who was a colleague of mine at the University of Kent.

When Peter and I first met (I believe around 2005), I was in the School of Social Policy, Sociology and Social Research (SSPSSR), engaged with both teaching and research. Like many of my colleagues in SSPSSR, I did not have much contact with research staff in the Centre for Health Services Studies (CHSS), where Peter was based. Since I had completed an edited volume on mixed people (with David Parker) in 2001, I had been keen to carry out empirical research on different types of mixed people in Britain. But I did not know of any scholars at Kent who shared my interest. Then, one day, I heard about Peter and his interest in this topic. Peter brought a wealth of experience, especially in relation to his knowledge of the UK Census categories; he had been an expert consultant to the Office for National Statistics on the Census ethnicity question and categories. Peter was also a quantitative social scientist. In contrast, I was more interested in theory and was wholly qualitative in my research. I think we understood that, by joining forces, our respective strengths would complement each other. Back then, research on mixed people in Britain was still relatively new, and I was keen to explore the experiences of mixed people in Britain, as most of the extant research was based on studies of North America.

I recall first meeting Peter in the Gulbenkian Café at the university. We had coffee and cake and talked a great deal about the changing demographics of Britain. Unlike me, he ate to live and really could have lived solely on chocolates and cake if he had been able to subsist on those alone. I recall he was once at my house, and he only got excited about eating when it was time for pudding!

We quickly hatched a plan to apply for a grant with the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC). Upon winning this grant, we realised that we had to secure the agreement of a number of different higher education institutions throughout England, and we had many meetings (all in person back then) with HEI gatekeepers (including some pro-vice chancellors of research) to convince them to let us have access to their student body. There were lots of shared train rides and coffees. Behind Peter’s soft-spoken manner was an intensity and enthusiasm to research and engage with others.

As the PI of this ESRC grant, Peter was responsible for the survey component, and I carried out the interviews and qualitative analysis with our respondents. I will be frank. We butted heads a few times over the direction of this project, with each of us leaning toward our areas and methods of expertise. But, when the book, *Mixed Race Identities* (2013), finally came out, I could see how it benefited from the fact that Peter had pushed for a more quantitative approach, while I had urged more of a qualitative approach. Reading over that book now, I sincerely believe that its strength lies in the mixed methods approach, and the fact that we each brought a different skill and knowledge set to the project. Reading over some of Peter’s many articles in the course of his career, I am struck by the elegant precision of his writing and observations. His work was exacting in the best possible way.



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After Peter left the University of Kent, his energy and work flowered. We did not have a lot of contact after he left, but I know he forged ahead in a variety of research projects with other scholars. I was especially interested in the historical book he and Chamion Caballero published, *Mixed Race Britain in the Twentieth Century* (2018). Peter was always quick to respond to any email queries I had about census categories and content. His emails were a valuable source! And, of course, he was always happy to meet for an occasional coffee and cake (he never got more interested in savoury food!). His drive and energy were quite remarkable. Peter was a driven scholar, who was genuinely interested in learning and reading assiduously. He was always keen to engage with other scholars and researchers—this desire did not diminish. He leaves a major academic and policy legacy.

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