The End of the Honeymoon: CBPR, Positional Privilege and Working with Community Coalitions

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This chapter tells a story about the CBPR research project, "Making Communities of Color Count" which partners researchers at the School of Social Work with the Coalition of Communities of Color in Multnomah County. It is not the only story about this project, as the voices of community partners and the rest of the research team are quiet in this retelling, but it is the one that centers the experience of the lead academic in this partnership. I center the joys and challenges of CBPR research, and the avenues that such opportunities offer for academically-based researchers, replete with avenues for learning, critical self-reflection and even for self-recrimination. This story centers the times I was stuck, confused and implicated in the forces that maintain the marginalization of communities of color. The reader will also see joy and enthusiasm sneak through, for this project has been, ultimately an incredible source of productivity, service, learning and empowerment (in its most dynamic of ways, as community partners have become more visible and influential through the project).

While the research team worked diligently to build and sustain a space of deep support and reflexivity, the recent months have been ripe with a focus on the outward focus to finalize reports and take findings into the policy arena. Subsequently, time for shared reflection has been narrow and as a result I authored this work independently.

The chapter begins with the story of purpose, initiation and the engagement process – for together, these three encapsulate the essence of the project. The story then forwards to the end results, because it is the opportunities for advancing social justice that make such efforts worthwhile. I aim to inspire possibilities for advancing social justice among marginalized peoples, but to do this with eyes wide open on the power dynamics that infused this CBPR project, and with assurance that all community-academic partnerships will be ripe with issues tied to positional privilege. The second half of this chapter shares a reflection on the "messiness" that is CBPR, interpreted, however, through the anti-oppressive lens of power and inequality, holding the central dimension of the academy as one of positional privilege. This lens provides, from my interpretation, a valuable and viable contribution to understanding the "mess," reworked instead to be a manifestation of positional privilege. At the conclusion are thoughts about creating accountability practices that minimize the chance of partnership deterioration.

Purpose

Coalitions house a significant amount of tacit knowledge, but are often thwarted by their marginality and overshadowed by mainstream knowledges and institutions. Life in the margins serves to build insights about the ingredients needed to build power and legitimacy, particularly when those insights are borne of current advocacy experiences. From unsuccessful grant applications, to voices not included at decision making tables, to tokenistic responses to needs, the marginality of the Coalition of Communities of Color led them to the door of Portland State University (PSU), requesting a partnership that could reverse the challenges created by their marginal status and increase their influence. Our collective colloquial framing of this issue was that our researchers could "arm" the community with a research base that would serve their advocacy objectives. In this practice, we aimed to use the academy strategically – to yield research that, in the eyes of policy and funding professionals, was deemed legitimate and credible.

The goals of this research were to develop an academically-rooted knowledge base for these communities, thereby lending the academic "stamp of credibility" on research data that would transform their tacit knowledge into formal knowledge, and thus build the stature and legitimacy by having such a research base for their advocacy work. The form this knowledge was to take was the development of a series of community-specific profiles that outlined the local dimensions of disparities across communities, as well as identifying risk and protection factors, drawing from the social determinants of health framework. Designed to enhance advocacy by rooting recommendations in research data, these tools were to become methods to assist communities of color to speak for themselves.

The second goal was to "push back" against data sources that, from the Coalition's perspective, undercounted the size of their community and thus deepened their marginality. The beginning of legitimacy is visibility – and current research practices served to render their communities invisible, and subsequently with little claim for resources, attention and involvement. There was, again, a tacit knowledge base that led them to believe that their numbers were much higher than official databases identified. The second goal then became to identify conventional research practices that rendered communities of color invisible and advocate for changes. Envisioned was that researchers would engage directly with policy and funding bodies to help unpack how conventional research and evaluation practices contributed to the invisibility of communities of color and their ongoing marginalization. Alternatives to conventional practices informed by conventional (white) discourses and knowledges were to be strategically advanced among researchers, policy practitioners and funding bodies.

The third goal was to operate outside conventional practices and, using the legitimacy of CBPR principles, develop "community-validated" population counts in order to replace reliance on conventional sources for determining the size of the community. Because "money follows numbers" (meaning that funding is most robust where there are larger populations), it has been essential to gain a firm and accurate grasp on the real size of our communities of color. These "community-verified" population counts are much less vulnerable to the whiteness that is embedded in conventional data collection, coding and analysis practices (Curry-Stevens, Cross-Hemmer, Maher & Meier, 2010; Zuberi & Bonilla-Silva, 2008). These counts are intended to replace conventional counts and to be used when funding and policy decisions are connected to the size of the community.

At this juncture in the project (two years into the 3½-year project), we are able to comment on the beginning signs of the policy and research impact, along with heightening of the credibility of the Coalition of Communities of Color. Shifting the discourse on the size of communities of color is still nascent as the community-validated counts are still underway, and cracks in the consensus about conventional measures are not strong enough yet to suggest change is being advanced.

Context

There are three central guiding principles designed to poise both the research partnership and the work itself in the most durable and fruitful manner: CBPR methods, anti-oppressive analysis, and the value of community-led interventions in the distress of communities of color.

Our principles emphasized a collaborative, community-led research partnership that shifts in the balance of power (heightening the power of community groups) and ensures that the work unfolds as usefully and least damaging as possible. To achieve these goals, we adopted community-based participatory research (CBPR) methods with strong features of capacity-building objectives (for both the community and the academy), and anti-oppressive practice sensibilities that hold experiences of racism and whiteness central to the practice of the work. Within CBPR, power sharing and community empowerment are at its foundations. Each partner at the table is viewed for its uniqueness. While PSU researchers brought research expertise, an ability to consolidate and translate vast amounts of research, to popularize research findings and to build a research agenda, our efforts would be completely inadequate without the Coalition's partnership. The Coalition partners have wisdom and experience to interpret data and its shortcomings and to ensure that a research agenda will have maximum utility. Their lived experiences in serving community needs have been invaluable as the cornerstone in all research sensibilities. Examples of this will be highlighted in this chapter.

The lenses of anti-oppressive practice and corollary of empowerment are aids in understanding the goals and objectives of this research initiative.

When we hold power central to understanding social relations and experience, we find that dynamics of oppression and privilege are in evidence to explain disparities of experience and outcomes for communities of color. The lived experiences of communities of color have already been described one of marginality. Coupled with the other four dimensions of oppression (violence and the threat of violence, cultural imperialism, powerlessness and exploitation as profiled by Young, 1990), the oppression of communities of color coexists with White privilege. It also coexists with resistance, agency, survival and defiance. Rather than solely reaping oppression on people of color, these communities are similarly catalyzed into action – one of which is to formulate their own institutions while another is to organize into coalitions to enact social action and collective resistance.

Members of the Coalition of Communities of Color have given priority to expanding what have become known as "culturally-specific services" as the key feature of their efforts to address distress in their communities. As an institutional form, these services are designed and owned by communities themselves, and whereby people enter such institutions as insiders instead of their outsider status in mainstream services. Research into the uniqueness of such services (also termed "ethnic agencies" by Holley, 2003) shows better results in terms of improving individual health and wellbeing outcomes and also in terms of improving social capital by engaging in community development and systemic advocacy. Culturally-specific service organizations are more likely than mainstream organizations to have the following elements: hiring staff from the community and those who speak their language, include community practices in supporting the individual, engage in community development to increase cultural pride, decrease isolation and exclusion, encourage cultural consciousness, build power, address issues of racism, locate services in the community and offer holistic programming (Gilliam, 2009; Holley, 2003; Uttal, 2006). When these organizations welcome people of color, they provide them a respite from racism, and an experience of inclusion.

Initiation & the emerging relationship

From the very beginning, this research project was unique. Rather than an academically-initiated partnership, Coalition members approached the School of Social Work at PSU to begin a research partnership designed to help strengthen the Coalition's advocacy practices by generating a research base from which it could more authoritatively and influentially engage with policy makers and funding bodies. While this process adheres to the practices of "sanctioning" as profiled by Homan (2008), it stretches beyond this into a level of self-authorizing that is not yet talked about in the CBPR literature. Accordingly, the beginning of the collaboration was thus infused by the power of the Coalition – by inviting us to the table, they could simultaneously un-invite us. The traditional tables were already tipped because of the conditions under which our partnership began. This was a helpful power dynamic to add to the research process – for it ensured that the Coalition remained in control of the project, as opposed to the researchers.

The relationship itself began with an array of discerning practices to assess each other's capacities. The researchers drew heavily from community-based social work practice sensibilities about how to enter communities respectfully, working slowly, listening deeply, and meeting individually with an array of Coalition members to begin to build relationship. Building credibility was a slow process, and our three-person research team worked hard to illustrate our reliability, resourcefulness and willingness to be led by the community. A significant contributor to credibility is the illustration of trustworthiness. Features that were valued in this partnership was timely delivery of materials, respecting the expertise of community members, being led by the Coalition – which implicitly requires the suppression of one's own expertise and belief in the value of one's contribution.

As one can imagine, suppression of expertise is difficult to navigate for those in the academy. I walked a difficult line in this process, wanting to assure community partners of my experience in such research, my background in coalition-based advocacy and my abilities to understand racism and White privilege. While the community wanted to know of such expertise, the legacy of such expertise (among the academic as an institution) tends to be ripe with arrogance and exploitation. Such contradictions led to a series of challenges arising during and outside of Coalition meetings. The most painful of these was a direct challenge that my prior experience was mostly irrelevant to the project. While the comments in this area were likely borne of a desire to advise me to better learn the local context, I experienced it as criticism possibly borne of cultural imperialism (as my prior experience was in Canada).

It served to unsettle me in ways that I now understands as confidence-shaking and a narrowing of my sensibilities – as I was implicitly encourage to "not know" how to move forward. While "not knowing" is an asset in addressing injustices (Mandell, 2007; Beres, 2008), the impact on me was to diminish my confidence and agency within the project for several months. Complicating these tensions between expertise and humility (Dean, 2001; Tervalon & Garcia, 1998) was an awakening among research team members who typically had conducted research and participated in coalitions as insiders and as allies. Our experience was as coalition members, rather than as coalition partners, which in this project meant we were not members of the Coalition itself. This became a difficult space to navigate and frequently we needed to remind each other that we needed to step back from that of participant, to a much less vocal and more uncertain role as possible contributors – and only when that participation was requested. From our prior experience as insiders, we needed to relocate to a space of outsiders, and this was frequently painful and difficult.

Lots of mistakes were made, but simultaneously the entire research team was deeply moved, challenged and nourished by the expertise of the Coalition. This, in general, has helped us all as professionals to embrace a stance of "not knowing" and deepening suspicion of our expertise and the value of academic stature.

I learned much about the impact of policy on communities of color – nothing could have prepared me for the depth of learning in this arena. I learned from Coalition members about their treatment by policy practitioners, with experiences of being uninvited from task forces, being ignored from tables that decided much about their communities, and being tokenized and perceived suspiciously as advocates for their communities. I learned about why disparity reduction efforts were fruitful in the juvenile justice sector in the early 2000s and why they have deteriorated since then. And I have learned the humility of how to now know that we cannot ever understand issues facing communities of color without their leadership, their insights and their ability to contextualize and interpret research data. We have learned the methods of data collection that thwart the visibility of communities of color – and the ploys and invisibility that emerge when researchers draw from datasets in inappropriate ways, and we have begun to identify the ways in which whiteness is inscribed in conventional datasets and subsequently on policy research and practice (Curry-Stevens, Cross-Hemmer, Maher and Meier, 2010).

The participation of communities of color in designing solutions and holding mainstream institutions to account for their outcomes is essential to narrowing disparities. Mainstream groups have failed communities of color by allowing systems and institutions to continue to have significantly better impacts for Whites than for people of color.

Implementation

While these were the explicit objectives of the research partnership, additional priorities have emerged through the engagement process. As one can imagine, the close connection between academic and community partners has led to a series of requests for expanded and additional work to be incorporated into the project, and owing to the compelling nature of these requests, has led to an expanded vision for the project. This has been a source of both tension and celebration.

The good news is that the research is valued by the community. The bad news is the working conditions have been draining – with timelines expanding, new rounds of data have been published and our work thus requires considerable updating of the materials even before documents have been published. We have had to stretch deadlines. On the surface, this has meant that the work has ballooned, with consequences in the rest of our lives. But underneath the real issue centers on how much the researchers have been willing and able to maintain a true partnership and a real commitment to the priorities of CBPR – whereby the community comes close to "owning" the project and ensuring the maximal relevance and usefulness of the research.

Research findings & impacts

Findings show that there are massive disparities between communities of color and Whites, that these disparities are worsening across time, including inter-generationally, and that comparison data reveals worse data here in Multnomah County. The composite of these data show that there is a particularly toxic environment for communities of color.

These disparities exist across all institutions examined in this research, from the economic situation as measured by incomes, employment, unemployment, housing and occupation, to the precursors to economic performance such as education, health and hunger and similarly throughout the human service networks such as child welfare, juvenile and adult justice, housing support programs, policing, and involvement with public service employment. The 150-page research report documents the fullness of these disparities and the consequences on communities of color of such disparate experiences on daily life. Emerging are three significant impacts for this research. The first are impacts on policy practitioners. The second are impacts in the research community, and the third is the impact on me and, consequently, the academic institution where I am located.

As intended, the community now holds enhanced legitimacy and influence, as it is "armed" with academically-legitimated research data that illustrate widespread disparities, inequities and injustices. With these data, the Coalition has engaged with County and City elected representatives in order to press for change. Audience has been sought and secured, and beginning commitment emerging to advance a racial equity agenda in multiple levels of government. A corollary of these efforts was the need to develop a comprehensive policy platform to accompany the recommendations. The lessons for policy makers are potentially profound – the policy environment here is particularly toxic for communities of color and that other regions have created conditions that are more equitable and fertile for disparity reduction.

The core dimensions of the Coalition's advocacy efforts include 11 key recommendations. While detailing these are beyond the scope of this chapter, they denote a shift from tokenistic funding for services that tend to communities of color to enhanced funding that incorporates more holistic tending to need, and reach firmly into the arena of committed practices across systems to reduce disparities. In addition, the research arena requires racial equity as well – from ensuring that all programs and services remove whiteness from their data collection practices, to disaggregating data by race and ethnicity, to ensuring that all human services (inside and outside of government) report data on the race and ethnicity of service provision as well as outcomes of these interventions. Simultaneously, there is a call to transcending the culture of "politeness" and naming racism as embedded in systems and outcomes. The Coalition calls for the end to quibbling over the data and collaborating to advance solutions to advance racial equity.

In the weeks following the emergence of these findings and the racial equity agenda, we find the beginnings of a reform effort emerging. The most pronounced are commitments from both City and County Councils to meet with Coalition members and develop an intervention strategy. Already in evidence are acknowledgements of the undercounts in conventional population counts, and utilization of more robust measures of these communities. And various human services are beginning to disaggregate their own data and meet with the Coalition to discuss findings and methodological improvements that will increase the visibility of communities of color and their social progress. While we are a long way from progress on disparity reduction, the beginnings of an altered landscape of expectations, visibility and accountability are emerging.

While the Coalition is obviously concerned that changes will merely be "window dressing," we need to proceed as if these are earnest and sincere efforts to reduce disparities. At the same time, the Coalition, its research partners and allies are involved in a robust policy dialogue about how to entrench improvements. Equity issues have been on the table for decades, and while gains have sometimes been made and lost, little has been entrenched in policy. The current environment is thus one that relies on the good intentions of occasional leaders. As such, these commitments are vulnerable to change, actualizing what is predicted by Lopes and Thomas (2007) that privileged people are "dangerous allies" in anti-racism efforts. White allies (among which I count myself) are vulnerable to shifting priorities because they lack the "fire in one's belly" that flows from lived connections to racism – when one's children and community depends on racial progress, the commitments are deep and durable. The worst situation is that allies in this struggle have sporadic and fleeting commitments that arise when confronted on these issues. Accordingly, the Coalition seeks solutions to racial equity that are durable and entrenched in policy, with concrete and transparent decision making practices, and heightened accountability to communities of color. An enhanced role for communities of color is required to "police" reform as self-policing is notorious for avoidant and defensive practices.

With the newness of the advocacy impacts of this research, it remains to be seen whether the stated interests and commitments of elected officials, policy researchers and funders will result in concrete benefits for the community.

Shifting from detailing problems to documenting solutions noticeably shifts one's stance from defensive to proactive, and with the shift energies for change grow. The authority with which the Coalition demanded a response from City Council was profound – delivering heightened expectations for action, along with setting agendas for subsequent working meetings – illustrates both the frustration with failed promises of the past, as well as surging agency to act, for the Coalition is now "armed" as was intended at the outset of this project.

While the final impacts of the project will unfold over time, the existence of deep disparities has been undeniably placed into evidence and the terrain with which we understand inequality has been durably altered. The research reports will remain a durable contribution to how one understands inequality and social justice in the region.

Challenges to an equitable partnership

Challenges of this project spread through its inception, undertaking and results, and all can be connected back to the feature that is "positional privilege" of the nature of academic groups partnering with community organizations, in this case a coalition. The context of positional privilege is one that places the academy at the top of this hierarchy and the community partner at the bottom. The fundamental power relationship between the two, including the dominant discourse that surrounds how we understand knowledge and credibility, has infused the relationship.

While most CBPR practitioners would call the relationship "messy," such a term does not convey much truth about the reasons for such mess. Discursively, community partner seems to be ill-prepared for the rigors or timelines of academic research, and are portrayed as adding complexity and even dalliance in regards to research timelines. This discourse thus implicitly frames community partners as the cause of the "mess," rather than laying blame with the academy. I suggest that instead we consider an anti-oppressive lens through which we understand even this most basic framing of "mess" and be willing to extend ourselves (as academics) to consider that, really, it is our privilege that infuses such partnerships with "mess." Advancing a focus on positional privilege provides an avenue to explain such mess, as experienced in our partnership. This section will profile the numerous avenues through which positional privilege infused the relationship. These issues stretch from the mundane to the substantive to the macro context. Each will be profiled in turn. The insidiousness of the reach of power should not have surprised me, as I work from an understanding that there is never an absence of power, racism, classism and positional privilege. And yet, one reason for the insidious perpetuation of power and oppression is its invisibility to those on top – at least when we are attempting to work as anti-racist allies. As our relationships are socially constructed, so too is the nature of our roles and positionalities.

On a day-to-day basis, many dimensions of privilege have challenged our practice. After one Coalition meeting, the minutes were distributed with only one name credited for any specific contribution – mine. This is a concrete example of how credibility and authority are reproduced without intention. Through this simple and apparently benign action, I as the leading academic was portrayed as the one whose ideas were authoritative and deserving of credit. Simultaneously, the voices and very beings of our community partners disappeared – one more act of invisibility in a legacy of such treatment. But this time, it was our very own project that promoted such invisibility. Our response was to request for the minutes to be changed and for future practices to involve creating minutes in draft form, for authorizing at the next meeting. And yet, this was not enough. For once distributed, the harm was done. A more immediate checking process was established with our input before the minutes were distributed.

At a level of greater substance, the project was established with academic partners clearly as outsiders to the Coalition project. We were not members of the Coalition although at many times in the process, we dearly wanted such stature. I wanted to bring the fullness of my "wisdom" to the table, and help infuse the work of the Coalition in many ways. In all my prior work, I was welcomed to join partnerships as equals, with voting status and open arms. In this partnership, I was treated more apprehensively, as the history of "research and run" dynamics and failed partnerships preceded me. And maybe, too, as I consider this, I messed up! Notice how pervasive my tendency is to blame the Coalition rather than turning scrutiny on myself.

Evidence of the Coalition's cautionary stance showed up in many ways. The first was that the Coalition Coordinator was going to serve as "gatekeeper" for the research team to enter the community. This measure was taken to protect the communities from our insensitivity and, implicitly, our arrogance.

Such a framing draws from Hobgood's (2000) notion that privilege breeds as series of separation that becomes both ignorance and arrogance of the lives and realities of marginalized communities. Frequently, I was prone to being irritated with this public stance of lack of trust – and I now see this as a essential practice of the Coalition to preserve the integrity of the Coalition from our gaze which held considerable potential to oppress. The purpose of our engagement with the community was to collect information about research and advocacy priorities. The status of the research team held the power to exploit, and to influence and to fail to be responsive. The Coordinator's role was certainly essential to preserve the integrity of the community, and to protect its members from the research team. While I certainly complied with this practice, I saw it as a mostly unnecessary practice that slowed down the research and led to prolonged scheduling and stretched timelines. Notice, again, that through my lens, the mess becomes attributed to "them" rather than "me."

Early in the process, I was invited to meet with a Coalition member who wanted assess my cultural competence before scheduling a meeting with a gathering of community members. The meeting went wonderfully, as I prided myself on illustrating the right politics, the right understanding of power, and sufficient humility about the ways in which I could never understand the fullness of lived experiences of racism. The concept of cultural humility draws from Dean (2001), and Tervalon & Murray-Garcia (1998) who highlight the harm done by embracing the "expert" and "mastery" dimensions of the concept of "cultural competence." In many cases, cultural knowledge will be infused with biases, assumptions and stereotypes. For any privileged body, even those who work in dedicated ways towards being an ally, building expertise about the "other" is ripe with arrogance and error. Simultaneously, the assumption that the core relational task is knowing and understanding the "other" is primed with potential to ignore the substantial power differences that exist between, in this case, the academic and the community. Tervalon & Murray-Garcia implicate both dimensions of injustice in the notion of cultural competence, and instead advance humility.

Notice, however, that I framed this experience as one where the community was testing my capacity, and I assured them of my competency, while simultaneously indicating a sufficient dose of humility. I was delighted to have passed this "test" yet illustrated, as I now have the courage to explore, that I wanted to define myself through the framework of "exceptionality" (Mayo, 2004; Thompson, 2003) as an academic. I understood myself to be an exceptional academic, practicing so as to exhibit ally skills, and seeking to be given recognition and assurance of my value in this role. While these are good skills to possess (for certainly not having them would make for a worse relationship), the fact that I took easily to the "exceptional" status reveals a troubled relationship between community and academic partnerships. It is an inadequate response to the challenge of positional privilege.

The solution needs not for the occasional academic to be granted approval to be exceptional. Durable and lasting solutions flow from a reconfiguring of the academy to reduce the positional privilege held within. Rather than deferring to the "exceptional" academic, the academy needs to be restructured so as to ensure that, ultimately, the power relationship is equalized and hierarchical arrangements devolve to equitable ones. We need to grow into a transformation of identity, whereby community members become the ones to study and lead research projects. While CBPR is an advance in power sharing over conventional research practices, we need to work towards greater accessibility to post-graduate education in the academy, such that members of the community can become academics.

And notice, again, that I slipped into the seductiveness of being exceptional. Rather than asking Coalition members to hold me accountable, I implicitly suggested that I could be entrusted with the wellbeing of the community. As I write this, I shake my head with awakenings as to the arrogance of my stance and the risks that it posed to the community. Such, as will be illustrated, can explain some of the troubles we tripped into during the summer of 2009. And again I kick myself – note my language! I draw upon images of "tripping" which suggests an innocence that I would like to wrap myself in. UUgh! I am aghast of my desire for innocence and the corollary of the insidiousness of privilege and power, and the ability of discourse to cloak power in frameworks that hide the culpability of those with positional privilege.

Fast forward to the summer of 2009, when I lead our research team into a stance that is infused with ignorance begat from positional privilege. From my roles as academics in critical schools of social work and education, I had been acculturated to a critique of positivism and embraced the heightened value of qualitative research for its redress of power inequities and presumed stance of objectivity.

Using subjectivity as a cornerstone in this work, we sought as Hesusius (1994) advocates, to use all we could to understand and document the lived realities of communities of color. Bringing forward qualitative research as the "solution" to such research shortcomings, the research team conducted a set of consultations with each of the communities to determine the foci for these undertakings, prioritizing community needs for the most useful of the possibilities before us. Over the course of several months, we became deeply invested in these endeavors and our reliance on qualitative research to more accurately define the lived realities of communities of color.

The research team was due for a rapid awakening when we discovered that we did not have the support of Coalition's core members for these plans. While we had been directed to consult widely with member groups, and had reported back on these findings, there had not been a consistent group of members at these Coalition meetings to affirm our emerging direction. With six steady months of moving down the path towards a qualitative research agenda, we were stopped short at a special meeting to confirm the research agenda. Abundant confusion and anger resulted, and while this was an appropriate "course correction," it rattled both our work and the relationship between us and the Coalition. I dubbed this "the end of the honeymoon" and the point at which a more authentic relationship emerges. Part of this authenticity was to end idealizing the relationship, and particularly my position of innocence from infusing the research with my own space of ignorance, borne of the separation that flows from my stance in academia.

While at the time I experienced this transition as a demotion (for I was losing authority and the co-leadership role), it was simultaneously an appropriate taking of power by the Coalition. After all, CBPR intends to raise the power of community groups. This is evidence of the shift in that relationship. Fortunately, I was able fairly quickly to perceive their action in this way. While I sometimes wanted give voice to my anger and defensiveness, I also understood that I had failed them and had operated from a place of arrogance in presuming their needs, and in doing so let valuable time slip away. We lost approximately 3 months in this process, yet returned with heightened energy to be productive in the new agenda to generate materials on disparities. Such reframing is possible as an ally, and my work to advance my understanding of positional privilege supported my almost-soon-enough learning – not fast enough to prevent the meltdown of relations but fast enough to redeem ourselves and continue the project. I believe that the project could have imploded at this time, and the willingness of the researchers to understand the dynamics in terms of power, oppression and privilege prevented this unfolding. Giving over power to the community and recognizing how positional privilege was influencing the relationship was essential to the success of the project. Our simultaneous willingness to pass significant financial resources back across the table to the Coalition also helped to rebalance power in the relationship.

Today, I see that my internalized privilege, rooted in critique of positivist research led me to prematurely and unilaterally reject positivist research that would, in fact, heighten the legitimacy and influence of the Coalition. As Lorde (1981) said, the master's tools cannot dismantle the master's house. But my arrogance prematurely foreclosed the possibility of quantitative research leveraging more significant influence than qualitative findings would offer. Working in the context of marginality, the Coalition needed, indeed, to work with the tools of the master to obtain credibility and legitimacy. Rather than changing the rules of the game, the Coalition understood from their lived experience that they had little choice but to frame their needs with dominant language and research concepts. Coalition members knew this from their experience advocating for more funds and a place at various decision making tables.

While the process of this "course correction" was painful, I have since come to understand that on the Coalition's part, it was immensely frustrating and unnerving to see how their researchers failed to understand and appreciate their political realities. Their perceptions were that they needed to pull us up short, and ensure that we got their message quickly and directly. They were too invested in the process and the possibility for real change to dally with being gentle. It worked! The course correction was rapid and stark, for the team rejected the qualitative agenda they had developed and turned with full force to quantitative dimensions of experience such as poverty levels, annual incomes, disparities with White communities across many institutions, and outcome data on issues such as mortality, birth weights, occupational segregation and educational attainment. The first in a series of seven reports on the status of disparities has been released, with its rigor revealed though the breadth and depth of disparities facing communities of color (Curry-Stevens, Cross-Hemmer & Coalition of Communities of Color, 2010).

The best framing of this research experience was that I released my hold on my stance as an embedded activist (prior to becoming an academic) into that of a privileged academic, replete with what Hobgood (2000) calls a pattern of separation, isolation, ignorance and arrogance. The arrogance stance is illustrated by my erroneous assumption that qualitative research had ethnical superiority and integrity of value with anti-imperial methods. In reflection, I believe I slipped into this space when I left activist learning circles for academic ones – and lost my rootedness in research forms that would maximize the influence of marginalized communities. What made matters worse was that I was very reluctant to let go of an idealized image of myself whereby I was sure my sensibilities were activist-oriented and I was a trustworthy partner with the Coalition. Earlier text in this chapter reveal that my status as an "exceptional" academic ally complicates my ability to perceive this dynamics, as my investments in being innocent of relations of domination were a significant feature of how I understood myself. My current assessment is that these convictions made me a "dangerous ally" (Lopes & Thomas, 2006) as I took a stance that ignored the nature of positional privilege and the ways it was likely to manifest in the research process.

Today, I understand that my involvement in this project has heightened my understanding of the role of position privilege in thwarting power sharing and understanding the utility of various research methodologies. Fortunately the Coalition had the gumption to confront us and to demand alternate accountability practices.

Concluding advice

Those of us engaged in CBPR tend to be at the margins of our professions, tending to be lesser funded than those working within traditional paradigms (although currently in an expansion phase), and accustomed to a marginal stature due to our epistemological beliefs in the subjectivity of research practice and world views that are conflict-driven (for what else would explain the excessive social and economic divides between the academy and the community?). We perceive ourselves as allies to communities that struggle with various forms of oppression, and have typically engaged in such work before entering academic life.

Integral to such a stance, however, is a position that is inclined to position ourselves as innocent to relations of domination. The author of this chapter got into trouble because of it. I became, as Lopes and Thomas predict, "dangerous allies" (Lopes & Thomas, 2006, p.225) because my desire to position myself as an "exceptional" academic. This dilemma of exceptionality dodged the research team in numerous ways – from our inability to see how out-of-step we became with our Coalition partners, to our possessiveness over money, to our entitlements to take a leading role in determining the stages of the research process. In this stance, we became toxic partners.

Our best advice is that positional privilege, reproducing relations of domination, an inability to identify enacted privilege and being insufficiently self-critical will undoubtedly arise as process dimensions of community-campus partnerships. In our case, we were fortunate enough to have partners who did not fire us, who provided us with a harsh awakening, and who let us redeem ourselves.

It is insufficient to have power shared between the community and the academy – given the insidiousness with which positional privilege infuses all research practices, community groups must in fact hold more authority in the partnership. To come to the tables as equals is not enough; the balance of power needs to rest with community groups.

Remaining accountable to the Coalition was the only avenue for remedying the relationship. Fortunately, we had strong enough structures in place to support this, and an astute enough awareness of the dynamics of oppression and privilege to quiet our defensive reactions to being challenged by our partners. It has, however, taken until today to acknowledge the depths to which the privilege of academic life and our preferred stance of "exceptionality" interfered with our ability to be lead by our Coalition partners.

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