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Confronting Resistance: Addressing Issues of Race and Class During Community-Based Research

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Abstract

Community partnerships have the potential to empower and arm students with the tools to positively engage with all members of society. In this study, the author explores how race and class shaped students' experiences with community-based research. Participants included 44 social science majors enrolled in an undergraduate research methods course. Students partnered with two community non-profits that served socioeconomically and ethnically distinct communities. Findings suggest that although students expressed varying levels of early resistance toward each partnership, they gained a raised awareness of their feelings toward and their unconscious reactions to race and class and began to work through initial resistance.

In the past 20 years, colleges and universities have worked more aggressively to engage students in community-based partnerships aimed at facilitating racial and cultural understanding and at helping students gain a sense of civic engagement (Buch & Harden, 2011; Hogan & Bailey, 2010). While the outcomes of such community engagement activities have been challenged by researchers as further contributing to students' feelings of power and privilege and, in many cases, of building students' self-esteem on the backs of the disenfranchised, research also suggests that a socially conscious approach to community partnerships instills in students a greater awareness of societal and structural inequalities and has a tendency to positively shift previously held negative attitudes and stereotypes toward traditionally marginalized groups (Boyle-Baise & Langford, 2004; Conley & Hamlin, 2009; Eyler & Giles, 1999; Marichal, 2010). Buch and Harden (2011) invited university students to engage in a community project working with the homeless and found that by the end of the semester, students reported fewer negative stereotypes regarding the homeless and indicated a greater desire to get involved in efforts aimed at helping the homeless. Similarly, Fenzel and Dean (2011), through a semester long community-based child psychology initiative, reported positive shifts in students attitudes toward race and social justice. At the end of the semester, students reported a greater awareness of white privilege and the existence of racism, and a greater likelihood to engage in social justice work. Ladson-Billings (2006) suggests that by confronting social and structural inequities firsthand students gain broader social awareness.

Community-based research (CBR), a socially conscious approach to the generation of new ideas, is one critical approach to community engagement (Polanyi & Cockburn, 2003; Strand, Marullo, Cutforth, Stoecker, & Donohue, 2003; Willis, Peresie, Waldref, & Stockmann, 2003). CBR, defined as "collaborative, change-oriented research, engages faculty members, students, and community members in partnerships that address a community-identified need" (Strand et al., 2003, p. 5). CBR prioritizes the research needs and interests of the community over traditional academic research while still meeting the academic needs of the higher education community. In keeping with the theoretical work of Dewey (1944), CBR advocates for a civic engagement model of education that moves higher education beyond the notion of "knowledge for knowledge's sake" toward work grounded in social action and transformation. What distinguishes CBR from traditional research and from historical ideas of charity-based community work is that it engages colleges/universities and communities in reciprocal, egalitarian partnerships where all participants are both teacher and learner. Successful CBR partnerships reconcile what Friere (1993) recognized as the teacher-student pole of contradiction so that all are simultaneously teacher and student.

In an effort to transform students' understanding of and relationships with power and

privilege, CBR uses teaching and learning practices that both confront and destabilize power differentials in society (Conley & Hamlin, 2009). While this justice-based approach to teaching and learning has potential to positively impact all stakeholders, students who engage in CBR particularly benefit. Authentic CBR learning experiences increase students' awareness of social injustice and enhance their civic engagement and responsibility. Students move from a charity orientation of *working in* communities toward a socially just orientation of *working with* communities (Morton, 1995). In a study assessing undergraduates' beliefs about the benefits of CBR, students indicated that "involvement in CBR allowed us to redefine our education, our communities, and our roles in them" (Willis, et al., 2003, p. 41). Students believed that CBR 1) enriched their traditional academic coursework, 2) empowered them to work with rather than simply serve communities, 3) enhanced their knowledge of social problems and the myriad structural factors that contribute to them, and 4) allowed for successful, authentic integration of academics and community work (Willis, et al., 2003).

With an increasing number of higher education institutions attempting to build authentic community-based learning experiences for students, experiences that are often in communities socioeconomically and ethnically different from the higher education campus community, it is imperative we continue to study the impact of such partnerships on student development. This study examines how race and class shaped students' experiences with CBR across two community partnerships.

The Course: Community-Based Research Methods

CBR was integrated into two sections of my undergraduate research methods course, a course designed to enhance students' basic knowledge and understanding of social science research and required of all department majors. A prerequisite to research methods is completion of a year-long introductory human growth and development course. In the year-long course, students complete two 30-hour field placements with a community organization. Therefore, the CBR experience was not the first introduction to community-based learning for my students.

An objective of the community-based research methods course was to help students demonstrate and apply knowledge of diversity (cultural, linguistic, ethnic, gender, socioeconomic, racial, sexual orientation) and to help students consider how their social location might influence the design, implementation, and interpretation of social science research. I believe, like many educators, that education should transform academia and be made relevant to the lives of students. Shor (1987) suggests it is naive "to see the classroom as a world apart where inequality, ideology, and economic policy don't affect learning" (p. 14). Students "bring with them their cultural expectations, their experiences of social discrimination and life pressures, and their strengths in surviving" (Wallerstein, 1987, p. 33). This suggest that as researchers we bring our whole selves to the research experience, our personal experiences, culture, ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic status, sexual orientation, and more – all of which can help to shape our research interest as well as how we design and carry out our research.

To better support the objectives of the course, students from two sections of Research Methods entered the diverse communities surrounding my institution. Discussions were held with four community non-profits to assess their research and evaluation needs. Two of the four community non-profits were selected as partners prior to the start of the semester. Each community organization provided students with two to three research and evaluation topics to collectively discuss and choose from. Students were informed of the partnerships and of potential research topics for each section of research methods prior to enrollment. Students worked with each community partner to co-create research questions, to design and implement the study, and to engage in data collection and analysis. Ideally, students would have taken part in choosing a community partner; however, due to timing our community partners were chosen prior to course enrollment.

The CBR partnerships were designed to support the needs of the community non-profits, to enhance students' knowledge of research and evaluation, and to support students' personal and professional growth and development. The CBR partnerships aimed to support students' personal and professional growth and development by better preparing students to work with diverse communities, by providing students with real-world experiences and approaches to social change, and by empowering students to establish reciprocal, egalitarian partnerships with ethnical-

ly and socioeconomically diverse communities.

Partnership One: Museum Partnership

Section one of Research Methods partnered with a local museum. Students and museum staff received the same readings for the course. On second day of the course, we began meeting with representatives from the museum. As a group we traveled to the museum for a tour and to spend time getting to know the space and the museum community (staff and visitors). On the third day, we began the process of co-creating a research plan to evaluate an exhibit designed to encourage children and their families to make healthy lifestyle choices regarding physical activity and nutrition. Five small groups emerged, with each group examining the exhibit though the use of different research techniques (qualitative and/or quantitative). Projects examined the extent to which families 1) have fun, engage with the exhibit and engage with each other, 2) are aware of the messages communicated by the exhibit, 3) make connections between the messages communicated in the exhibit and their own lives, and 4) how families from different backgrounds (ethnic, socioeconomic, educational) experience the exhibit.

Over 50% of our regular class sessions were held at the museum. Additional visits occurred on Fridays from 5–9 p.m., a time when the museum attracts more ethnically and socioeconomically diverse families.

Partnership Two: Community Center Partnership

Students enrolled in section two of Research Methods partnered with a local community center. Center staff was in the early stages of program development and wanted to learn more about programs/services currently operating in their geographic area and about the types of services community members wanted to see integrated into the new center. The center was to be built in a community where two-thirds of its families live below the self-sufficiency living standard with a median family income of just under $21,000 per year. Prior to partnering with us, the community center held over 100 small and large group meetings in the community to gain support and input. On the second day of class, community center representatives and students came together to discuss background information on the center and to discuss ideas to get more community input regarding the design and operation of the proposed

community center. (Community center representatives met us on campus since the community center had not been constructed.) We co-created a plan to conduct a needs assessment of the local community that would help our community center partner identify and understand existing community-based programs providing services within a one-mile radius of where the center was to be constructed. Five small group projects emerged from the partnership. Groups examined the extent to which existing community programs were open to partnering with the new center. They also examined membership structures that support family participation, security needs of families that would enhance engagement with the center, mechanisms to support community volunteerism at the center, and the types of services families were interested in participating in at the center.

Over 50% of class sessions were held in the community. Due to the type of research projects designed for this partnership (projects that required students to survey and interview adults in the community) and since the center had not been constructed, students carried out their projects at a number of locations in the community, including the public library, local schools, and at existing community non-profits. This led to more logistical issues to sort through with the community center partnership than with the museum partnership.

Methods
Participants

Forty-four undergraduate students enrolled in two sections of Research Methods at a small private college participated in the research. There were 21 students enrolled in section one and 23 students enrolled in section two of the undergraduate Research Methods course. Participants included mostly juniors and seniors majoring in the social sciences. At the time of the study 18% of the students enrolled at the college identified as students of color and 82% identified as white/Caucasian. Both sections of the course were taught by the author, a tenured African American professor who has taught research methods at the college for over seven years.

Data Sources

Data were collected via anonymous pre and post course evaluations, an anonymous mid-semester check-in, journal notes and observations.

In addition, ongoing meetings were held with community partners where minutes were taken and one community partner maintained a journal.

Data Analysis

To better understand how race and class shape students' experiences with CBR, a content analysis was conducted on students' pre, post and mid-semester evaluations and journal entries. Initial patterns in the data evolved from three readings of each data source by the author and readings by two independent readers (Creswell, 2008; Miles & Huberman, 1994). Patterns yielded evidence of varying experiences/responses to race and class across the two partnerships. Patterns were found regarding students' attitudes toward the CBR partnerships and toward the value placed on those partnerships.

Students who partnered with the museum engaged with participants who were mostly middle to upper-income and white. Community center partners engaged with participants who where mostly lower-income or working class and of color. Although visitors to the museum were mostly white and economically advantaged, the research developed for the museum had as one of its goals to better understand how families from diverse backgrounds (socioeconomic, educational, and ethnic) experience the museum.

Findings

Embedded throughout the CBR experience was a discussion of racial and cultural identities and of the roles race and class can play in the design, implementation, and interpretation of social science research. In essence, I wanted my students to be mindful that we bring our whole selves to the interactions and activities within which we participate, even in the scientific field of research. Like Vygotsky (1978), I believe learning is inherently linked to our interactions with others and should, as Friere suggests, provoke "conceptual inquiry into self and society and into the very disciplines under study" (as quoted in Shor, 1987, p. 24).

The majority of students enrolled in Research Methods had completed or were currently enrolled in a racial and cultural identities course, a course designed to introduce the critical study of race, culture, and identity and to encourage students to examine their own socialization and understanding of race, ethnicity, culture, and identity. Still, race and class helped to shape students' attitudes toward each community partnership.

Recognizing and Working through Early Resistance

Students enrolled in each section of research methods expressed resistance to CBR. However, differences were found in how resistance toward CBR manifested among students working with each community partner. For example, student museum partners were required to visit the museum on Friday nights (5–9 p.m.) during a time when more families from ethnically and socioeconomically diverse backgrounds tend to visit the museum. As one might imagine, not many college students want to give up a Friday night to conduct research at a museum. A student indicated, "I wish I could visit the museum on Wednesdays. I have a free block that day." Similarly, another stated, "We should be able to visit the museum anytime it's open."

To help students understand the importance of the Friday night visits, during one of our first trips to the museum, 1:00 p.m. on a Thursday, students were asked to simply walk around and observe. Students were again asked to visit the museum, but this time on a Friday night. After the Friday night visit, we engaged in discussion about our overall impressions of the museum. Students saw the diverse representation of families during their Friday night visit and they "got it." As a student indicated, "I was a little upset with the 5–9 p.m. schedule for the museum. After our Thursday and Friday visits, now I get it."

The Friday night visit provided a powerful visual representation of how the demographics of the museum shift on Friday nights between 5–9 p.m. when families pay $1 instead of the regular $12 admission fee and when working families have time to attend. Students openly shared their observations and began to critically examine and discuss how economics can contribute to the gaps we see in student achievement – how economic privilege plays a role in creating structural inequalities in students' learning experiences. The 5–9 p.m. influx of families of color and working class families to the museum suggested to students that these families are interested in and value the museum experience, and that these families attend when the cost of admission is within their financial reach. Student observations led to an even broader discussion about the educational opportunities of lower income

and working class families. Students suggested that just as families have affordable access to the quality informal learning experiences provided by the museum, they should have similar access to a quality education for their children, an education not reliant on a lottery, where one lives, or a family's socioeconomic status. Following the Friday night visit and reflection exercise, students recognized the value of Friday night visits and no longer expressed this as a concern. Students came to understand that by failing to visit on Friday nights, we would exclude the voices of many ethnically and socioeconomically diverse museum visitors from our research.

Student community center partners also expressed initial concern for their CBR work. However, their concerns were often directed negatively toward the community, with some implying that such a partnership in this predominately lower-income and working class community was a waste of student time and effort. One student indicated, "I don't think the people will use the center when it is built, so I think they are wasting money on a center in that community."

It is interesting to note that the community center neighborhood was located within the same city as our college, less than three miles from our classroom and in closer proximity than the museum. Yet, a student indicated, "I really don't have a connection to the Urbandale (a pseudonym) community because I've never heard of the city before."

I asked my students to map directions to the Urbandale community and students saw the community's close proximity to the college. We learned that at least two students in the course had completed a field placement in Urbandale and could share their experiences with the class. As a class, we then began the process of assets mapping to engage in discussion of the many positive efforts occurring in Urbandale. Students had the opportunity to learn about a number of community non-profits, two that were nationally recognized for their efforts on behalf of those placed at an economic disadvantage. Students indicated:

> The assets map helped me see what Urbandale had to offer. There are good things happening.
>
> I was feeling some discomfort about going into the Urbandale community. … I

was surprised by the number of agencies there and their willingness to help.

Students exhibited additional elements of early resistance to CBR as evidenced by their responses to logistical matters regarding the partnership. Both partnerships required students to travel via public transportation. Students traveled in groups to each location.

Transportation worked well for student museum partners. They traveled as a research team to the museum during class time and for Friday night visits. Transportation for the student community center partners was more complicated. Since the community center had not been constructed, students engaged with agencies near the future location of the center. This created logistical challenges for the partnership and sometimes hindered students' ability to connect with center staff. However, even prior to the start of data collection, student community center partners expressed fear and concern about traveling to the community center neighborhood. The Urbandale community seemed distant, remote. However, distance was not raised as a concern for museum partners even though the museum was farther in distance from campus than the Urbandale community (but perhaps believed by my students to be closer, more similar in ethnicity and socioeconomics). Faculty colleagues also expressed concern for students' safety traveling via public transportation to the nearby Urbandale community. Due to expressed concerns for student safety, I used the college's van to carpool students to Urbandale. Implementing the carpool process did not alleviate fears or shift negative perceptions of the partnership. Students commented:

> I would rather do research in a place that I'm more comfortable with…. The project as a whole is pointless and stupid in my mind.
>
> Can't we just do it by email?
>
> This project is a WASTE of MY TIME!

Confronting Race and Class
Appropriate scaffolding, defined as intentional facilitation of students' learning, helped my students begin to recognize their initial resistance to CBR and helped them move forward.

Their feelings were in some ways normal, a knee-jerk reaction to fear. A student commented, "I was scared first, but talking in class and the assets map helped." From my perspective, it was okay that my students exhibited initial discomfort toward their work in the community. However, it was not okay for them to stay in a place of fear, of resistance. Growth is in working through the discomfort – getting past the knee-jerk, unconscious reaction to resist.

Jones, Gilbride-Brown, and Gasiorski (2005) describe the often unconscious reactions displayed by my students as "a process of struggle, negotiation, and meaning-making" (p. 7), a place where students are attempting to make sense not only of the communities within which they are attempting to engage, but are also attempting to make sense of their personal reactions to working with the community. Events that occurred with each community partnership encouraged my students to consider how race and class influence their interactions with and their openness to engage with individuals from ethnic, and sometimes socioeconomic, backgrounds different from their own. For instance, during one Friday night visit to the museum – just as the demographics began to shift – a small group of six early elementary school aged children of color (children who looked African American/black and or Latino/a by appearance) entered a play space in the museum where children, mostly white, were dancing on a large dance floor. As the children of color entered the dance floor, several white parents who were present in the exhibit began to direct their children away from the dance floor. One parent indicated that the dance floor was "not safe, scary." One of my students walked over to me and repeated the comment as if she also believed the dance floor had become unsafe. I observed my students in the small group step away from the dance floor as if to coward from the experience. This interaction led to a rich discussion about the role of race and class in our day-to-day interactions. I asked students to describe their observation of what they saw prior to the children of color arriving on the dance floor. They were asked to describe in detail what they saw the white children doing and to describe in detail what they saw the children of color doing and to compare their responses. Students came to see that the behaviors had been the same for both groups – they saw children dancing, no pushing, no yelling - yet people responded differently to

the children of color. Somehow the movements, the very presence of the children of color in a space that until 5:00 p.m. had been predominately white conjured up feelings of fear and lack of safety in the minds of some white parents and some of my white students. How we as educators respond to such observations during CBR is critical since these experiences provide opportunities to engage students in critical discourse around the ways in which power and privilege can create fear and contribute to ongoing inequities in society (Darling-Hammond & Bransford, 2005; Delpit, 2006; Espino & Lee, 2011; Fenzel & Dean, 2011). These are experiences my students will encounter in their future roles as teachers, social workers, and youth advocates, experiences that I could not have created within the context of my classroom. The experience allowed me and my students to confront and destabilize their knee-jerk reactions to the children of color joining the dance floor, allowing my students to recognize their unintended, unconscious personal responses to race and class. This critical reflection component of CBR is vital to helping students gain deeper meaning from their community-based experience and to enhancing students' development (Strand, et al., 2003; Toews & Cerny, 2005; Wasserman, 2010)

Student community center partners engaged with a community that has a large Portuguese speaking population. The fact that we were a mostly English only speaking group partnering with a linguistically diverse community was discussed as a limitation early on in our partnership. We were missing the opportunity to learn from a significant part of the community due to our limited proficiency in Portuguese. However, students saw the language differences as a limitation of the community, not of our skills as researchers. This led to a discussion of who owns the limitation, we as researchers or the Portuguese-speaking members of the community? After all, we had entered as non-Portuguese speakers into a community with a large Portuguese speaking population. These community members had not asked for us and therefore, the limitation was ours. Comments made by students led to a discussion of the roles power and privilege play in defining literacy. What does it mean to view the dominant use of Portuguese as a limitation? For a class of mostly teacher educators, how might our view of Portuguese speakers in Urbandale relate to how we view English language learners in the

classroom? Should we all adapt a mainstream discourse of reading, speaking, writing? What does a mainstream discourse look and sound like, and who defines it?

Moving Beyond Resistance

Moving beyond knee-jerk responses to fear and to the less familiar is challenging and ongoing; yet it appears students made some progress in learning how to recognize and confront personal challenges with race and class in their CBR work. Findings suggest shifts in students' opinions regarding CBR and in their opinions of the communities in which they engaged. These shifts are supported by previous research that has found changes in students' awareness of issues of race, class, and social justice after just one-semester of community engagement (Buch & Harden, 2011; Fenzel & Dean, 2011; Wasserman, 2010). A student indicated,

> I didn't see why we had to go off campus. I wished I had taken research last semester with someone else. I had heard a lot about Urbandale community – not good. I was scared. …It felt good to learn about the good work of offices in the community. It made me want to do more.

Similarly, a student reflecting on the dance floor incident at the museum, stated,

> I never really thought about my social location until that night at the museum. When we talked about the dance floor – at first I didn't think anything. Now I see what even little things can mean.

However, not all students moved beyond their initial resistance. Six students continued to exhibit profiles of what Jones, Gilbride-Brown and Gasiorski (2005) referred to as politely frustrated volunteers or active resisters in that they tended to only document their opposition to CBR through written work or they openly and actively opposed their CBR experience throughout the course. A student, characterized as a Politely Frustrated Volunteer, wrote, "Race is not a class. It's not something people can be taught, not a subject. I took the class because it was required to learn about research not about race." Similarly, a student who can be characterized as an Active Resister, attempted to convince her group that their interactions with the community could be done via email or web-based data collection and that there was no need to enter the community. The student indicated, "What can happen to us? She [the professor] can't force us to go."

Missing from the analysis is a better understanding of factors that would have shifted the perspective of the six students who were less interested in engaging in future community-based research. What could have enhanced their experience and encouraged them to shift their perspectives of CBR and of engaging with the community?

Conclusion/Significance

CBR encouraged my students to consider the roles of race and class in their work and I believe made a significant difference in the lives of my students. Findings suggest that through critical reflection and analysis of their community-based experiences, students made progress toward recognizing and working through their fears and negative perceptions about working with our community partners. Such CBR experiences provide teaching and learning opportunities that cannot be gained by sitting in a classroom. Students learned that "knowledge is rooted in social relations and most powerful when produced collaboratively through action" (Fine, Torre, Boudin, Bowen, Clark, Hylton, Martinez, Rivera, Roberts, Smart, & Upegui, 2001, p. 173). Studies have indicated that working alongside faculty and community partners provide students a sense of empowerment and an increased willingness to impact society (Willis et al., 2003).

Students articulated the inherent challenges of CBR – that it is time consuming, at many times messy and uncomfortable, and that CBR took them far outside their comfort zone. Yet, 38 of 44 students indicated that if given the opportunity they would engage in another CBR partnership. A student commented,

> I feel the experience opened the doors to engaging with families from Urbandale and even elsewhere. It helped me build my confidence in myself to work with the community and maybe even lead a community partnership one day.

As a full participant in the CBR process, I was challenged to help my students come to un-

derstand that the work we engage in with communities is critical to their (and my) personal and professional growth as teachers, social workers, and youth advocates. However, while I observed significant growth in my students, this study is limited in that it does not assess the sustained impact of CBR on students' development. Future studies should assess the long-term impact of community-based research on students' development. While there are many challenges to such a partnership, such as varying levels of student readiness to work with diverse communities and the enormous time commitment on the part of faculty and students, the importance of partnerships of this nature is the empowerment that results from the learning associated with the experience. Partnerships of this nature have the ability to change how students see themselves relative to the world and to encourage students to become agents of change.

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