The Social Justice Implications for Community Engaged Research: Whose Research Agenda? and My Relationship with the Community

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*2010 Winner of the Ernest A. Lynton Award
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Abstract

The 2010 winner of the Ernest A. Lynton Award examines two social justice themes that have emerged in his community-engaged work. He argues that the traditional model of the development of the scholars' research agenda is one that can promote and maintain the academy-community hierarchy and that the scholars' social identities play an important role in the research enterprise. He concludes by illustrating how these two issues played out in one particular research study.

Receiving the 2010 Ernest A. Lynton Award for the Scholarship of Engagement of Early Career Faculty was a great honor that caught me by complete surprise. I appreciate just the fact that one of my community partners—the Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender Community Center of Colorado—felt strongly enough about my work to approach me about nominating me for the award.

The nomination process for the award is quite daunting for both the nominee and the community partner. It requires extensive reflection on one's body of work. As an assistant professor quickly approaching tenure, I was concerned about the energy the nomination would take away from my research projects; however, I ultimately found that stepping back from my work and viewing it from a more detached place was extremely helpful.

Although a number of themes emerged in the reflection process, I have chosen to write about two that were particularly important in my own understanding of myself as a community-engaged scholar. That is not to say that the other themes were less important, but rather that these two were ones that I wrestled with quite a bit.

Tension in the Research Agenda

During our doctoral training, most of us were—no doubt—encouraged to think about our research agenda, that is, our plan of short-term and long-term research goals that focus our attention on a particular subject matter so that our work forms a coherent whole and incrementally builds on itself to advance the scholarship. As Reedy and Murty (2009) point out, "Creating a research agenda should be a major goal for all

graduate students—regardless of theoretical interests, methodological preferences, or career aspirations."

The traditional model of the research agenda, however, can maintain a top-down, researcher-driven approach that privileges the power inherent in the academy while keeping the community voice secondary or, at times, completely absent. The model can get deployed in an intrusive manner that may be experienced as data extraction for the community, mirroring the exploitative dynamics of resource extraction from impoverished countries, which has marked the relationship between powerful nations and those with much less power. The model has, at times, led to distrust in marginalized communities in which past abuses have occurred (Allen, Liang, La Salvia, Tjugum, Gulakowski, and Murguia 2005; Dreger 2008; Thomas 2000). While some of the mistrust is driven by knowledge of past abuses, deep concerns about the current motives of researchers and their institutions also appear to drive the distrust (Sengupta, Strauss, DeVellis, Quinn, DeVellis, and Ware 2000).

That is not to say that the opposite model in which the community solely drives the research agenda is not problematic in its own right as well. Clearly, communities can have research needs that are specific to and important to their organizations, but which do not necessarily move the development of knowledge forward—a central goal of most academic research. Additionally allowing the community to solely dictate a research agenda may result in a body of work that lacks much coherence, if any at all. If academics had wanted to become researchers-for-hire rather than university-based scholars, this approach might be fine, but given the parameters of our commitment to knowledge generation, it is potentially problematic.

So what are some strategies in maintaining a balance in the development of the collaborative research agenda, keeping in mind the context of power and resource differences along with a deep commitment to social justice? First and foremost is constantly reminding oneself that it is a *collaborative* research agenda—it is not solely *my* research agenda as the researcher. This entails turning loose of some of the ownership of the agenda, something counter to most of our doctoral training.

Second is making sure that the research agenda is broad enough and held loosely enough so that as the researcher, I am able to think and respond in flexible ways to the needs of the community. For me that has meant conceptualizing of my research agenda as being multileveled. (See Table 1.) At the highest level, the theme of my research agenda is quite broad: the psychosocial risks and resilience of LGBTQ youth. Obviously, this theme is so broad that there are numerous avenues I could pursue; however, over time and with some foundational research with my community partner and their intimate knowledge of the struggles and strengths of the LGBTQ youth with whom they work, three subthemes have emerged: nonsuicidal self-injury (intentional self-harm such as cutting behaviors); school engagement; and the impact of gay-straight alliances. Below this subtheme topic level comes an outline of specific research questions enumerating the goals of each of the planned studies. This study goal level is developed collaboratively with members of the research team—myself,

staff from the community partner, and research assistants working with me. It is shaped by the needs of the community, but is structured to be cohesive and to generate new knowledge.

After more than a few planned studies out, the agenda becomes unknown as each completed study adds to our team's knowledge about the topic and raises further questions that need to be explored. But, the priority of which questions to explore is, again, made collaboratively with the community partner. Also, because the overarching mission of my community partner is to improve the quality of life for LGBTQ youth, the studies are designed to give our collaboration information about the topic that ultimately leads to an intervention to strengthen resilience or to attenuate risks.

Table 1. Multilevel Collaborative Research Agenda

Overarching Theme Level ———►	Psychosocial Risks and Resilience of LGBTQ Youth		
Topic Level ———►	Nonsuicidal Self-injury	School Engagement	Gay-straight Alliances
Study Goal Level ———►	1. Prevalence and correlates of NSSI	1. Structure of school engagement (subdomains)	1. Relationship of GSAs to academic achievement
	2. Motivations for NSSI	2. Relationship of school engagement to academic achievement	2. Relationship of GSAs to mental health risks
	3. Onset, type, frequency, and recency of NSSI	3. Ways to influence school engagement	3. Contextual factors influencing GSA impacts
	4. Understanding of NSSI from the youth perspective		4. Effective ways to support GSAs
	5. Harm reduction intervention (pilot)		

In my case, while I was aware that the focus of my research would be issues of LGBTQ youth, four years ago, I had no idea that nonsuicidal self-injury, for example, would emerge as a critical topic. It was only because of the day-to-day work of my community partner with the youth, that the concern began to come into view as a psychosocial risk of LGBTQ youth. The staff of the youth program recognized a pattern and from that added a single question to their program's annual program planning and evaluation survey, which uncovered a prevalence rate in which more than 45 percent of the youth were engaging in cutting behavior (Walls, Laser, Nickels, and Wisneski 2010). Trying to understand the phenomenon is the current state of our

research, and our future focus will shift to how we might intervene to support healthier, less harmful ways of coping for the youth.

Social Location Matters

The notion of objectivity has a long history as an ideal goal in social science research. However, many scholars now acknowledge that the methodologies of social sciences are, rather, value-laden methodologies. As Betz (2011) notes, "Social science observations of nature always have a normative judgment implied in an empirical judgment (value underlying fact)" (192).

One factor that shapes our values and how we see the world (our subjectivity) is our social location (Harding 1993), that is, our social position in the structure relative to others. While some social groups are privileged in the structure, others experience marginalization. Because we are all complex mixes of identities, most of us inhabit privileged identities in some areas while inhabiting marginalized areas in other areas.

As a researcher—whether I am conscious of it or not—I carry with me both my marginalized and privileged social identities and this intersectional standpoint shapes my vision of reality, including my view of my research. As an academic this also includes the positional power I hold as the researcher, and the power and prestige (not to mention access to resources and educational privilege) endemic in being part of the academy. Making these power differences visible—to my research assistants, to my community partners, and to my colleagues with less (and more) power—is critical if I am to conduct research in a manner that is congruent with the values of social justice that I profess.

When I engage in research with communities that are marginalized in ways in which I am privileged, I run the risk of interpreting research findings through the lens of privilege, failing to recognize the contextual meaning—the situated knowledge—encapsulated in the data I have before me. As a cultural outsider, I have to find ways in which to attenuate my myopic view of the world of the other. Involvement of members of the community throughout the research process is one way in which community-based researchers have often attempted to do this. However, if I am the primary architect of the study, I have the power to involve the community in certain aspects of the research that I deem appropriate and exclude them from other aspects of the research in which I judge they are not able (willing or competent) to undertake.

A couple of ways in which to disrupt this decision-making power that is inherent in my role in the process is to either engage the community in the decision as to which aspects of the research process they want to be involved in, or to commit to having community involvement throughout the complete process from formulation of the question to writing the final manuscript. There are at least a couple of steps in the research process that community members are rarely involved in, including data analysis and interpretation (Cashman et al. 2008a). While more common, community member involvement in writing the final manuscript is another process in which they may or

may not be present for. Co-authorship with community members has not, as yet, become the standard in community-based research published in peer-reviewed journals.

Managing this tension between honoring the voice of the community and the ideas, interests, and knowledge of the researcher becomes central to community-based work for those with a social-justice orientation. Both the community partner and the university partner bring unique skill sets and knowledge to the table in these collaborations and, in the best possible world, the contributions of both are acknowledged and respected. The community partner frequently knows of cutting-edge issues that are emerging in their community—even if this knowledge is still at an anecdotal phase. Likewise, their intimate knowledge of the dynamics and politics of their specific community inform the likelihood of success of interventions and the uniqueness of needs of that community. In addition to methodological skills and an understanding of theory, scholars bring a comprehensive knowledge of the existing literature to the negotiation with community partners and deploy that knowledge in a manner that is (hopefully) useful to the community.

As other scholars have noted before, the relationships—at both the interpersonal and institutional levels—are paramount to building the trust for the collaborators to be able to successfully manage this delicate balance between community and university (Amuwo and Jenkins 2001; Suarez-Balcazar, Harper, and Lewis 2005). Because levels of trust at the individual, institutional, and societal level are interdependent (Corbie-Smith, Thomas, and St. George 2002), committed partners need to attend to trust across these different levels. This, of course, takes time and dedication from both sides of the fence.

Case Example: Colorado Trans on Campus

To illustrate some of the issues that have arisen for me around my research agenda and my social identity in my community-based research journey, I will next outline the experience of one of my research projects. In this project, I—as the researcher—have a privileged identity (cisgender, that is nontransgender) while working with a population that is marginalized (transgender) along that same cultural axis.

Identification of Need

In 2006, I went to an initial meeting of a new group, TransAllies on the University of Denver's campus. The meeting was initiated by a graduate student from social work who was concerned about what kind of environment the campus provided for transgender and gender-variant students, staff, and faculty. She was particularly concerned by the lack of explicit inclusion of gender identity and gender expression in the university's nondiscrimination policy. Technically, gender identity already was covered under Colorado state law and under Denver city law, but transgender members of the community would have to undertake quite a bit of research in order to realize that. Additionally, the existing law did not cover gender expression and therefore community members who were gender variant or gender nonconforming, but who

were not transgender would not be covered. TransAllies' first order of business was to remedy this omission and in November, 2007, the university's governing board approved the proposed addition of gender identity and gender expression to the nondiscrimination policy.

In the same timeframe, staff at a community-based organization, the Colorado Anti-Violence Program, began pulling together a cross-university coalition to share resources and coordinate campus educational efforts on transgender issues. The coalition, Colorado Trans on Campus (CTOC)—comprised of both transgender individuals and cisgender allies—came together over the next year to decide on priorities for the group. What emerged over the course of these monthly conversations was the need to be able to demonstrate the numerous barriers to full participation on Colorado campuses that existed for transgender and gender-variant individuals. Transgender students and faculty could share their own stories of discrimination, microaggression, and invalidation on campuses, and, similarly, staff from LGBTQ and multicultural student offices could attest to similar experiences for transidentified students and employees who had come to them seeking assistance. However, no systematic study of experiences of transgender individuals on Colorado campuses had been undertaken that could lend some credibility to the daily lived experiences that these students, staff, and faculty faced, leaving advocates without an important tool in demonstrating the need for resources to address the needs and concerns.

Finding Funding

As one of the few faculty members on the CTOC coalition, I volunteered to research potential funding options to support such a study—with the understanding that the members of CTOC would remain involved with any study that was funded from the development of the protocol through the writing of the final report. Fortunately, the University of Denver has an internal funding mechanism through the Center for Community Engagement and Service Learning called the Public Good Fund. The CTOC group decided this fund was a good fit for the project, and with the assistance of a number of the CTOC members, I submitted a proposal to undertake the study. The proposal was funded, and the continued work on the study became the top priority for the coalition over the next year. And, in this work, a number of issues emerged that were centered on issues of social justice.

First, I—as the principal investigator of the grant—and the two graduate student research assistants who were working with me on the study were all cisgender identified. While we had all been involved with TransAllies and CTOC from early in their existence and were all committed to equality for transgender individuals, we recognized that our cisgender identities would very well shape our perspective on what was important to ask in the interview protocol, how to recruit participants for the study, how to interpret the findings, and numerous other aspects of the research process. Because of the restrictions from the funding source and our lack of openly identified transgender graduate students, there were some aspects of the study that we would not be able to change. For example, the interviews would have to be conducted

by cisgender research team members. However, other aspects of the process were much more amenable to community involvement.

Identifying the Sample and Developing the Protocol

Identifying who the coalition wanted in the sample was one of the first issues we had to address. The group wanted to make sure that the study focused on the lived experiences of transgender people, while recognizing that all transgender people do not identify with the term transgender. For example, some may identify as FtM (female-to-male), MtF (male-to-female), genderqueer, gender-variant, or with numerous other terms. However, broadening the definition of parameters for inclusion in the study could shift the primary focus of the study from gender identity to one solely of gender expression. That is, rather than the study recruiting folks who identified somewhere on the gender spectrum as transgender (regardless of the identity label they chose), the study could have ended up recruiting primary gender nonconforming gay men or lesbian women (or even gender nonconforming heterosexually-identified people)—populations that were not the primary population of interest to the coalition members. It was an arduous process, but over a series of meetings, the coalition came to a final decision on how to define the sample—while explicitly recognizing the limitations of that decision.

Next, the interview protocol for the study was developed over a number of months at the CTOC meetings to ensure the study centered around transidentified members' knowledge of lived experiences. While my research assistants and I could have developed a protocol in a much quicker timeframe than what was done, the resultant protocol was much more nuanced than anything we would have created and delved into topics that we would have probably never considered because of our lack of experience living as transidentified people. The trade-off—taking longer to develop the protocol collaboratively—we hoped (and believed) would ultimately pay off in the long run in terms of the quality of data we would gather.

Recruiting Participants

How to recruit for the study was another issue that quickly surfaced. Our goal was to conduct 30 qualitative interviews, and we wanted to ensure that we included participants who (a) were at different Colorado campuses, (b) occupied different roles within their university systems, (c) identified in different ways (transmen, transwomen, genderqueer, etc.), (d) were at different places in their transition, and (e) who had identified as transgender (or gender variant in some way) for different lengths of time. To do this, we used a snowball sampling approach, beginning with transidentified CTOC members' networks on the various campuses as well as through LGBTQ and multicultural centers on campuses. This approach—both in terms of the development of the study and the recruitment activities—gave the study more legitimacy as it emerged out of needs identified by the trans community, used nuanced language that was culturally appropriate for the community, and had trans-identified people as the primary recruiters of participants for the study.

(It is important to note that not all trans-identified individuals "transition" and that some individual occupy spaces on the gender continuum that are not either male or female.)

However, even with the stamp of approval from the members of the trans community involved in CTOC, a number of individuals identified were not open to participating for fears of possible negative impacts. Recognizing and validating the very real risks that some transgender community members faced by openly acknowledge their trans identity—even in a confidential interview with a researcher—is important. To ameliorate some of the risks, we met participants at sites off campus that were of their choosing and for a few participants took notes rather than audiotaping the interviews. But for a few—even with these modifications—the risks were too great to participate. Unfortunately, we still live in time where transgender people experience disproportionate violence targeting them because of their identity.

Participatory Data Analysis
Originally the research plan followed the approach that many community-based research studies follow. It entailed community involvement in the origination of the study, developing the protocol, identifying and recruiting the sample, and, once data were collected and interpreted, running the findings by the community for feedback through a member checking process, ending with collaboratively preparing the final report. However, as the transcription of the interviews was nearing completion, the research assistants and I became concerned that our interpretation of the data's findings might once again be unduly influenced by our cisgender perspectives of the issues. As standpoint theory argues, all knowledge and understandings are socially located with our social positions influencing what we see, what we do not see, and how we interpret social phenomenon (New 1998).

To address this concern, we turned to the literature on community-based research to determine how different scholars had involved community members in the actual data analysis process. We were surprised to find that most researchers—even those who were experts in community-based research—were not using what we came to call *participatory data analysis*. (For exceptions, see the work of Cashman et al. [2008a, 2008b]). The standard CBR approach appeared to follow a process in which data analysis and interpretation were completed by the principal investigator and the research assistants, and then presented to the community for member checking (Lincoln and Guba 1985). Why is it that, as researchers, our belief in the voice of the community appeared to falter when it came to data analysis? Even with few examples to draw on, we made the decision to move forward with participatory data analysis, with more than a little anxiety about how data analysis might not work.

From CTOC, we recruited two transidentified members and two cisgender allies to participate in participatory data analysis. After training on how to identify themes in interview transcripts, each member (including myself and my research assistant) proceeded to analyze approximately five transcripts each over a series of three months. The participatory data analysis group met four times during this time span to compare

emerging themes, develop and clarify definitions, classify quotes, and identify the relationships between the emergent themes. I went into the participatory data analysis process with many fears. Would this take way too long? Would we get bogged down in our analysis and come to a stalemate? Would the process become too frustrating for all of us involved? I had experienced group analysis among researchers before that got bogged down very easily—and those groups had even been smaller.

Although I thought the results would likely be much more meaningful due to the involvement of the community, I had not anticipated one side effect—the analysis actually moved along much more quickly than it would have had it just been me and my research assistants doing the analysis. What would have likely taken us six to nine months to analyze, ended up being completed in approximately two months. The community members were diligent in their work, thorough in their analysis, and thought about the themes and the relationships between the themes in creative and helpful ways. Rather than slowing down our analysis process, participatory data analysis actually sped it up!

The final report is currently still in preparation, but as each new section is written, the draft is circulated to the participatory data analysis group for comments, suggestions, and editing. Prior to its final publication and dissemination, the complete report will be reviewed once more by the full CTOC coalition for the same process.

Conclusion

Integrating community members into every aspect of a study is a labor-intensive process. No doubt it lengthens the time it takes to complete certain parts of a study, but the social justice concerns that are addressed—particularly when the members of the academic research team do not share the identity of the community—are numerous and invaluable. Allowing the research question to surface from community-defined needs, supporting community members in designing the protocol, and involving community members in sample recruitment, data collection, data analysis, and final report writing marry the unique skills of the researcher with the wisdom and knowledge that exists in the community. It structures the process to increase the likelihood of accountability to the community, and, I would argue, invests the privileges inherent in the academy into the social justice goals of community-based organizations. Taking this approach to community-based research has been a very rewarding and powerful experience for me as I continue to develop as a researcher.

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