

Power, Privilege and Participation

Meeting the challenge of equal research alliances

By Swati Prakash



Over the past decade a growing number of organizations engaged in environmental justice struggles have recognized the need to bolster their capacity to investigate links between environmental exposures and health problems. In the face of the enormous scientific resources of polluters (and in some cases government agencies), it is increasingly difficult to make the claim that disproportionate environmental exposures in communities of color are linked to racial disparities in health. Corporations and government agencies, with the backing of well-paid scientists, often claim there is no proof. Consequently, many community-based organizations have been backed into a corner of having to defend our position that environmental racism does indeed exist. As a result, a growing number of these organizations are seeking to access the resources of academic institutions to strengthen our struggles for justice.

As a response to this dilemma, WE ACT for Environmental Justice has created several community-based research alliances with the Columbia Mailman School of Public Health in Northern Manhattan. We've established these alliances as a means of adding scientific and other expertise to our local organizing campaigns, and of building community

knowledge, capacity and leadership. Over the years, our collaborations with various researchers at Columbia have enabled us to measure air pollution at various street corners in the community and show a correlation between diesel traffic and black carbon pollution; to assess the short-term impacts of air pollution on the respiratory health of high school students at three New York City schools; and to measure the effect of in-utero (before birth) environmental exposures on the health of newborn babies. Most importantly, WE ACT and community residents have taken these research results directly to elected officials and others in powerful positions in order to demand cleanup of polluted air in communities of color in Northern Manhattan.

The relationships we've created with Columbia researchers have evolved over a decade of both cooperation and struggle. One of the biggest challenges has been overcoming the inherent inequality in power that exists between an academic institution like Columbia's Mailman School of Public Health, and a community-based organization (CBO) like WE ACT. Whereas the term "partnership" is increasingly used, in the spirit of community-based participatory research (CBPR), to describe relationships between universities or colleges and CBOs, it's often done so without acknowledgment of the inherent inequalities between these distinctly different entities.

While CBOs and universities may share an interest in CBPR, they have distinctly different histories, capacities, and sets of resources available to them. These differences add up to significant disparities in power. These disparities are usually not acknowledged at the beginning of a potential research relationship, or are obscured by mutual optimism in the partnership's ability to overcome structural inequalities between collaborating institutions. However, these inequalities emerge as academic researchers assert the authority to secure funding, define the research problem and methodology, conduct the research, assess findings, and write and publish findings. Communities are often left with information but no more skills or capacity than they had initially.

Invisible Inequities

Differences in power begin with a difference in access to financial resources, including both overall institutional budgets and shared grants. For example, imbalances in overhead rates (the percentage of a grant that goes towards basic organizational costs like rent, phone and electricity bills) mean that academic institutions often receive a

disproportionate share of joint grants. Due to a difference in salary structures between CBOs and universities, when salary is used as a literal estimation of the worth of each partner's time, the community organization often emerges as the lesser-paid entity. This problem is compounded by the unfortunate impression that community knowledge and expertise is not "worth" the same as that of formally trained researchers. The existence of many unfunded community advisory boards for research projects across the nation illustrates the persistence of this exploitative belief.

To further complicate these financial challenges, the portion of shared research grants that do go to a community organization is often a significant proportion of their total budget. This creates a financial incentive among CBOs to continue the research relationship. The resulting financial dependence on research grants may undermine an organization's efforts to stay "on mission" and exercise the autonomy to say no to new research ideas posed by their academic allies, even when those projects are only tenuously related to the justice goals of the community organization.

A less obvious form of power imbalance emerges when institutional privileges mirror and amplify race and class privileges among the individuals involved in a research effort. Many organizations comprised of and representing communities of color find themselves at the research table with formally educated, middle- and upper-class, overwhelmingly white re-searchers. The trappings of formal education go far beyond substantive knowledge, often manifesting as assertiveness in one's personal communication style, a firm belief in one's understanding of what's in the community's "best interest," a sense of entitlement to make decisions for the group, or a sense of entitlement to the time of the community organization's staff. In the worst cases, researchers not only passively benefit from their privilege, but also actively exercise it to further their own career or research goals.

Although this imbalance is somewhat alleviated when the research partners are people of color, class privilege remains an obstacle. Furthermore, whatever the identities of participating individuals, individual differences in privilege must be understood in the context of institutional differences in access to resources and opportunity. Race and class privilege remain the elephants in the room for many research endeavors, with few tools or incentives to encourage members of new research alliances to squarely address the inequities of these and other forms of privilege.

Making The Relationship Work

Like any meaningful commitment between two distinct entities, the establishment of true partnerships in the realm of research requires a great deal of care and a deliberate investment of resources. Despite being among the most crucial ingredients for successful ventures, thoughtful attempts to equalize power are often the most easily overlooked. As starting points for establishing and maintaining healthy research relationships between academic and community partners, we recommend the following guidelines:

Common goals

Community-university research collaborations often launch projects ambitiously assuming that they have a shared goal, such as documenting environmental exposures or health status in a given community. Several years down the line many of these collaborations come to find that their goals are not so common after all, or that a single shared goal is not sufficient to hold the research relationship together. Articulating and agreeing on a shared set of goals—as well as identifying individual goals and agreeing to support one another on reaching those goals—is an important first step in building a strong structural foundation for collaborative research.

Written principles of collaboration

Drafting principles of how two (or more) entities will work together is a key ingredient for a healthy relationship. Furthermore, developing a well thought-out, written document is often the best way a CBO can assert its own power, and safeguard against the many subtle ways that power differences play out between individuals over the course of time. Principles of collaboration ideally include the respective values and goals of participating organizations, as well as the shared vision and goals of the collaboration.

The key components of these principles should discuss, at a minimum, items such as: communication (both

internal and external); decision-making; project management and oversight: financial arrangements; “proprietary” issues such as who has the right to do what with the research results; and how community capacity will be built to truly understand and utilize the research results to support organizing or policy advocacy. These principles should be signed by the equivalent of a principal investigator or executive director on both sides, and also be included in the written work contract or subcontract between the university and the CBO to give it the weight of law.

Mutual respect and trust

Initial trust-building measures include reciprocal “orientations” to each participant’s respective world. For example, WE ACT invites our academic research partners on a Toxic Tour of Northern Manhattan to orient them to the often-invisible environmental and social realities of community residents. It’s important to us that researchers feel a sense of investment in the community we are working and living in, and that the research has a “face” of various community residents and leaders, to help give the study a sense of life and spirit. We extend this orientation to include an overview of the wider environmental justice movement to help complete the picture of who we are as a community-based organization and why we have engaged in this project. In return, our research partners have, at various points, oriented us to the realities of the tenure process and to their other research interests and facilities.

Shared Learning and Capacity Building

The community-based participatory research relationships we have developed with researchers at Columbia University include a commitment to building the capacity, knowledge and skills of both entities. On the community side, WE ACT’s Environmental Health & Justice Leadership Training is a program that has trained more than 100 community leaders in the basics of environmental health and science. The training, based on the graduate-level Environmental Health core course at the Columbia Mailman School of Public Health, has been developed and is delivered in collaboration with our research allies. By way of reciprocation, WE ACT staff frequently guest lecture in various courses at the School of Public Health, providing a “real-life” context of environmental racism and the local community for students. We also offer our perspectives on the ways in which students, as future public health practitioners, can be effective allies for social justice.

Finally, WE ACT has significantly built its capacity to effectively organize and advocate for environmental health and justice by internalizing scientific and technical capacity on staff. My own background in environmental health and science (combined with the engineering expertise of a field technician recently hired through one of our collaborative research grants with Columbia) has helped us break our dependence on our good friends at Columbia for understanding and proactively addressing often-complex health and science questions.

Long-term Needs of the EJ Movement

The Environmental Justice Movement has several opportunities to bolster our power and effectiveness by strategically accessing the resources of scientific and academic institutions. One of the long-term needs is to break down the dichotomy between community “insiders” and academic “outsiders” by helping bring more people of color, particularly individuals from communities most affected by environmental racism, into relevant academic fields and institutions. This means supporting youth from our communities to enter the academic world. Internalizing scientific capacity also means challenging the limiting concept that organizers and other staff of CBOs cannot or should not “do” science themselves but should depend on their scientist allies.

The next long-term need is to effectively combine academic and technical resources with community organizing, the central approach for many CBOs to achieving environmental justice in local communities. This means working to maximize the benefits of partnerships while retaining an organizing focus, avoiding the pitfalls of financial temptation, knowing when to say “no” to new research proposals, and remembering that science and academics are a means to an organizing or advocacy end rather than the end in itself.

The time and measures that it takes to establish and maintain healthy, non-exploitative research relationships between academic and community partners are rarely built into project plans or grant applications. Yet not taking these measures into account amounts to setting up a relationship for failure. Moving forward, funders of CBPR must also play a role in affirming that the “hidden costs” of building meaningful relationships are as important as

the costs of “analyzing samples” or communicating results to the public.

Accessing the potential of academic collaborations to strengthen our campaigns for justice remains within the reach of many environmental and social justice organizations. As we work to realize this potential, it becomes increasingly important for community-based organizations to communicate, share lessons, and support one another to ensure that these alliances unfold in a manner that truly empowers communities struggling for environmental justice, and for safe and healthy communities.

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