



# The Role of the Researcher in Community-Based Qualitative Research

## Introduction

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This chapter discusses issues related to researcher role, positionality, and ethics within CBQR, a type of research in which the role of the researcher is highly involved. Community-based qualitative researchers are not working with existing data sets, like many researchers conducting large-scale quantitative research studies, but are seeking to conduct research in concert and collaboration with community organizations, leaders, and residents, and thus, they need to build productive and communicative relationships with various individuals and **stakeholders**. This section focuses on issues related to the background and role of the researcher and how to be mindful of these issues at all stages of the research process. Reflections are used to illustrate the importance of researchers conducting community-based research to examine and interrogate their background and be reflexive throughout the research process. This chapter also discusses ethical concerns and issues related to conducting research within community settings.

## Learning Objectives

After reading this chapter, students will be able to:

1. Recognize and better understand the importance of researcher background, positionality, and self-reflexivity within all stages of community-based qualitative research (CBQR) studies.
2. Identify different forms of privilege, and explain how these figure into the process of building rapport and relationships with research co-participants.
3. Examine general ethical issues and concerns related to conducting research with human subjects and the more specific ethical issues and responsibilities entailed in collaborative and participatory community-based studies.
4. Describe certain characteristics and various roles of community-based qualitative researchers, and indicate why these are important to the implementation of a CBQR project.

## Examining Our Own Background, Experiences, Assumptions, and Biases

At the outset of a community-based research project, it is essential for researchers to examine their backgrounds and perspectives—often referred to as **positionality**—as our personal, educational, and professional experiences greatly inform our viewpoints on a host of issues and phenomena, often including the ones that are the focus of our research. We all possess particular lenses and ways of viewing the world, and to approach the research process as if we are value-neutral does a disservice to our research, to community residents and research participants, and to ourselves. For example, our upbringing and family background impart us with particular values that may or may not align with others with whom we are collaborating as part of the research project. Factors and characteristics such as race, class, gender, sexual orientation, religious affiliation, and age all play a central role in shaping our identities, as well as in how we orient toward the communities in which we conduct research and the topics we choose to study. In addition to these background characteristics, our educational and professional backgrounds and experiences are integral in the formation of various beliefs and notions, such as how individuals best learn and what it means to be a good worker. For example, those who work in fields such as medicine might be accustomed to diagnosing, and then curing or fixing, problems or ailments, and they could enter a community with that diagnostic and interventionist mindset, which may or may not be welcomed or appropriate. Individuals who have been educated or have worked in a highly structured or hierarchical environment

might be less comfortable in educational and professional settings where learning takes place *in situ*—or on site and less formally—or where authority is shared rather than top-down.

This process, of reflecting on one's background and positionality and how it figures into research, is referred to as **reflexivity**: It "is a process that challenges the researcher to explicitly examine how his or her research agenda and assumptions, subject location(s), personal beliefs, and emotions enter into their research" (Hsiung, 2008, p. 212). Different than quantitative research projects, in which there has "long been a tendency to view the self of the social science observer as a potential contaminant, something to be separated out, neutralized, minimized, standardized, and controlled" (Weis & Fine, 2000, p. 34), in qualitative research, reflexivity is an integral part of the research process. Because the qualitative researcher is also the instrument and is responsible for building rapport with participants, conducting interviews so as to elicit participants' distinct experiences and narratives, and making interpretations from data, researchers need to be reflexive at all stages of the research process. Lois Weis and Michelle Fine (2000) have referred to the act of thorough self-reflexivity as "flexing our reflexivities" and have stated that it helps researchers avoid hiding "behind the alleged cloak of neutrality" (p. 34). Others have referred to this process as "disciplined subjectivity" or "the practice of rigorous self-reflection about one's own preferences, prejudices, hopes, and concerns" (Erickson, 1986; LeCompte, Schensul, Weeks, & Singer, 1999, p. 66). Such reflexivity is especially important in community-based research, where the goal is for academic researchers to work collaboratively with community members and build reciprocal research relationships. Strategies for encouraging self-reflexivity throughout the project include creating checklists of assumptions and hunches and maintaining reflective logs and journals (LeCompte et al., 1999).

Our understandings related to background, education, and work are often taken-for-granted beliefs that have remained unchallenged throughout our lifetimes, especially if one has lived and worked in a relatively homogenous and monolithic environment, where family members, peers, and colleagues share many of our beliefs and values. When students and novice researchers prepare to conduct research in an unfamiliar environment, or one that does not "look like" where they live and work, they often experience anxiety and unease. For example, the initial few years that I offered my summer research course in Humboldt Park—an area located on the near northwest side of Chicago and inhabited mostly by Puerto Ricans/Latinos and African Americans—prior to the start of class, many students who hailed from suburban and rural areas sent me e-mails inquiring about their safety. Their perspective on the area was often informed by negative media images and portrayals of Humboldt Park as dangerous and gang infested. One student, a Caucasian woman in her 50s from a rural town who had never taken public transportation, arranged for her husband to drive her on the first day. Another student, Diana, who lived in a more affluent Chicago neighborhood, organized a carpool for fellow students who lived in the suburbs. In the following excerpt, a student discussed her initial fears about the community and about how the perspectives of family members informed some of her views:

So I grew up in . . . a nearby suburb, and as a family we would come into the city a lot but more downtown and touristy kinds of things and museums. I live in the West Loop so I don't live too far from Humboldt Park. And I've actually spent a lot of time in the Wicker Park area just east of Western and had lots of people who were either looking for apartments or just making recommendations about the area say, "well it's safe up until Western. You don't want to go west of Western." That's just something that you hear a lot. . . . So again, it's like there's just in my mind a geographical boundary where, I guess I kind of felt comfortable because people made a statement like, this is an appropriate place for someone like you to be. No one actually said that but that's the message I got. . . . But probably one of the biggest things for me was my husband's family, so both my husband's mother and father grew up in Humboldt Park. They both lived on Division Street . . . their experience was that the area was very safe at one point when it was mostly European immigrants and then their perception is that the neighborhood became very unsafe and dangerous and that their properties were worth less money as more people from Puerto Rico came into the area. And so I knew mostly about Humboldt Park through, frankly, some of their prejudices.

Another student, a reading specialist, shared her expectation for the research class, that she would teach "underprivileged" children to read:

I prepared myself for my journey into the "foreign neighborhood" as many would . . . reflecting on all the things that the people there did NOT have that my family and I were fortunate enough to enjoy daily.

One year, two students in the course one year were nurses interested in community health issues, who entered the community with the intention of conducting a needs assessment; initially, this orientation toward assessment and deficiencies kept them from exploring some of the existing initiatives in the area of community health and wellness.

Reflecting on our experiences and their relationship to our research settings and participants does not mean merely focusing on differences. Although, as mentioned, there may be many areas of divergence between academic researchers and participants in community-based research projects, there are often as many similarities and points of connection. In taking stock of one's background, researchers should be wary of the danger of "**otherizing**" and focusing solely on differences (Abu-Lughod, 1993; Fine, 1994). In addition to explicitly identifying the ways that your experiences might set you apart from potential research partners, it is as important to reflect on possible intersections with your experiences and viewpoints, related to characteristics such as gender, life experience, family status, religion, and sexual orientation, so that "we may be better able to perceive similarities in all of our lives" (Abu-Lughod, 1993, p. 27). Several students who have enrolled in summer research classes I have instructed grew up in the community, or in similar communities in Chicago, and were thus interested in taking the course to integrate their formative experiences in the community with their new roles as graduate students and academic scholars; some have

explicitly stated a desire to “give back” to their respective communities and acquire ideas and models that can inform their community work. Other students have discovered unexpected and surprising connections to their autobiographies and identities. For example, one student, Nicole, realized that her new husband had grown up in the area where she was now conducting research. She reflected on this realization and the insight it provided her on her husband’s experiences: “That was a big part of him that I didn’t know. And so . . . just having this recognition in this community of someone I’m now sharing my life with that before, I just wasn’t aware of some of those things.” Another student, a Puerto Rican male who had grown up in the neighborhood, shared some of the pejorative and pessimistic messages related to his chances for success that he received as a student at the local high school. Now enrolled in a master’s program at the university where I teach, he enrolled in the class as a chance not only to fulfill elective requirements for graduation but also to do something for his community.

Another student, an African American woman who had grown up on the south side of Chicago, described how the Puerto Rican parade reminded her of an event in her neighborhood:

During the Puerto Rican People’s Parade the atmosphere along Division Street was electric. I was quickly reminded of summers I spent as a child in on Chicago’s South Side at the *Bud Billiken Back to School Parades* held each year in the African American community. It was evident that the residents of the Humboldt Park community were anticipating something special and I was eager to witness the parade. Before the parade I strolled down Division Street, this time on foot, and had the opportunity to mingle with the residents of the community. I met Juan, a Puerto Rican man who made me laugh heartily with his quick wit and comparisons of James Brown dance techniques and traditional Puerto Rican salsa. Juan “schooled” me about the connections between the African-American and Puerto Rican communities. His lesson was about not only dance technique but of historical solidarity and bloodlines. I met members of an Afro-Caribbean dance studio who were warm and eager to share their knowledge of Afro-Caribbean music and dance and invited me to enjoy the parade from the front of their shop. Additionally, they gave me a quick run-down of the events of the day and the best places to eat traditional Puerto Rican food. Humboldt Park felt like home to me . . . I met people I would have never met had I come back to Chicago and travelled to my familiar South side and West side neighborhoods.

This student’s reflections demonstrate how she was able to forge links with members of the community; although she initially assumed she would have nothing in common with community residents, during the parade, she discovered points of connection with various aspects of her identity—in addition to discovering ties to her ethnic identity, she took photos of Puerto Rican youth with Gay Pride flags that resonated with her identity as a lesbian. Her experiences illustrate the many roles and identities we take with us into a community-based research project and how we can be both an insider and an outsider relative to our research topics, settings, and participants. **Insiders** are those that have a preexisting relationship with the community or



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Participants in the Puerto Rican People's Parade, Chicago, Illinois.

institution in which they are conducting research, or that share significant commonalities with research participants. On account of this insider status, these individuals often possess “local knowledge” or **emic** understandings of the setting and relevant issues (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1992; Geertz, 1973; LeCompte et al., 1999). In contrast, **outsiders** are not familiar with the setting prior to conducting the research and have little to nothing in common with the participants; outsider perspectives have often been referred to as **etic**. However, instead of viewing the insider/outsider role as a dichotomous binary, many researchers have instead advocated for viewing our role as situated along a series of insider–outsider continua (Hellawell, 2006). In other words, rather than labeling the researcher as either insider or outsider, it is more instructive to reflect on the ways we are both insiders and outsiders relative to our settings, a view that acknowledges the multifaceted nature of our identities and the varied textures and characteristics of the communities within and with which we do research. As David Hellawell (2006) points out, this insider–outsider continuum is fluid and dynamic, and “the same researcher can slide along more than one insider-outsider continuum, and in both directions, during the research process” (p. 489).

In the following excerpt, an international student from Taiwan reflected on her multiple layers of identity at different points of her study:

“Where are you going?” The taxi driver, a man with black-grey hair and wrinkled face, asked me in an Asian accent. “Please drive me to Division and California, the Puerto

Rican Cultural Center,” I said. “Do you speak Spanish, Miss?” “No!” I laughed. The taxi driver: “So why do you go there?” I answered him: “There is a festival today.” This was June 13, 2008, Friday afternoon on the West Side of Chicago: An outsider of Puerto Rican community (me) being challenged by another outsider (the taxi driver). There are indeed assumptions of linking the language with culture, race and territory. My research experience with *Bomba* musicians has led me to rethink the relationships among language, ethnicity, community and identity.

As a Taiwanese student in the United States for a few years, I have traveled through several cities and states but have never been in this area of the Chicago. Both the native Puerto Rican community and Humboldt Park/Puerto Rican community seemed remote to my native culture. Was I a sensitive tourist/outsider who was curious and interested in everything, an eager student wanting to learn the music of *Bomba*, or a researcher who took on a mission to make sense of cultural practice in this community? Being a mixture of all these roles during this research project pushed me out of my comfort zone. Not only because I had to filter through several cultural layers to understand the context of Chicago’s Humboldt Park Community, but also to change my habit from passive observation to active participation.

This student’s reflection illustrates how researchers conducting community-based research studies often initially grapple with their sense of belonging within a community, as well as how they might have to contend with others’ narrow and limited



Musicians at a Bombazo or Afro-Caribbean music event/performance.

understandings of a particular community (for example, that one needs to speak Spanish to have a reason to visit). Part of the challenges this student also faced involved examining her purposes for conducting research and interrogating her orientation toward the setting. These are important reflective processes for all community-based researchers to engage in throughout their research projects.

### **“Check Your Privilege”: Being Mindful of Race, Class, Gender, and Other Advantages**

As prospective community-based researchers reflect on their backgrounds and assumptions, it is vital to be critical of how our backgrounds and experiences are related to larger social and economic conditions and systems that often privilege some characteristics and backgrounds at the expense of others. For example, the legacy of slavery and long history of racism in the United States has disadvantaged African Americans, while affording certain advantages to Whites, what Peggy McIntosh (1998) has referred to as an “invisible package of unearned assets” (p. 188). Throughout U.S. history, various groups of immigrants have also been discriminated against and systematically exploited in ways that have advantaged others. In her seminal piece on White privilege, McIntosh (1998) reflects that she “had been taught about racism as something which puts others at a disadvantage, but had been taught not to see one of its corollary aspects, white privilege” (p. 188) and how it put her at an advantage. She encourages other Whites to reflect on a list of conditions and factors that purvey advantages in their daily lives, such as being able to be sure that people of their race are represented positively in the media and that curricular materials reflect their race.

Although **White skin privilege** has been the focus of much of the writing about privilege, there are many other forms of privilege and advantages that researchers may possess, and they are often much less visible than Whiteness, including, but not limited to, gender, class, educational level, sexual orientation, language, and religion. Many community members whom I have worked with as part of the summer research class I instruct in Humboldt Park have been clear that when outside researchers and college students enter the community to do work or conduct research, they become conscious of their privilege, what they refer to as “checking your privilege.” **Checking privilege** is akin to the aforementioned idea of examining what might be in our “backpack” of advantages. Community members who have interacted with college students and researchers have recommended that any sense of superiority or feelings of expertise on the part of the student or researcher be left behind or “checked” at the outset of entering the community and then constantly revisited throughout the project. One community member, who works closely with youth, drew on her experiences as a community resident who has had to confront stereotypes of Latinos/as and youth as she proffered advice for outsiders for working respectfully in the community:

Understand that we are educated and are able to understand the issues with our community . . . we [as Latino/a youth] have an opportunity to learn things differently

because we understand things differently and [for researchers] to understand that it is not the same for everybody.

Checking privilege requires the researcher to respect and value all voices and opinions and to acknowledge the privilege that may come with his or her skin color. One community member described it this way:

Just be willing to, like, check your privilege . . . and realize that there are people here that don't have what you have. You can be a part of it if you want. Just be open to what we have to offer.

Some have also described White students and researchers entering a low-income community of color with “White knight” syndrome or the belief that they will swoop in to “save” the downtrodden. This sort of missionary standpoint assumes that there are no existing resources in the community or that residents need—or even want—the help and assistance of outsiders. Community members suggest an alternative to the “White knight” that involves being aware of extant community resources, ideologies, and interests, as well as being conscious of your purposes for conducting research in the community and being amenable to others questioning or challenging you about your role. As one community member stated, “[Y]ou have to be able and open to have discussions about your participation. What you want to do here. What you want to get out of it.”

Checking one's privilege also means supporting the daily work and life of the community, often in small ways. One community member exhorted those interested in conducting research in the community also to “lend a hand” and engage in small, everyday tasks that might be considered “menial” and not directly related to the research task at hand. For example, students in my summer research class have helped with cleanup at a community festival and distributed community papers with youth. This sort of work should never be viewed as “beneath” the academic researcher but as part and parcel of any community-based research project. First and foremost, participating in everyday community work helps an academic researcher gain insight into community life, as well as to build relationships with residents. It also communicates to community members that the researcher values and respects the community beyond just how it might serve as a site for research. And, especially important in a collaborative research project, engaging in everyday work and tasks alongside community members helps break down any existing power relationships between academic researchers and community residents, and it promotes more equitable and reciprocal partnerships. I encourage students in my summer research classes to attend various community events, in addition to those that are part of class, and frequent area restaurants and businesses (in fact, going out for lunch at local cafes is a mandatory part of fieldwork). This involvement also helps researchers identify issues and concerns of importance to the community. One community member articulated her expectations for those interested in working on the community:

To be involved with what the community does. Because I have seen a lot of people who come here to do work and have agendas, but they are not willing to engage in the small things that we do here. So if you are here in the community to do research here. Go to events. Talk to people . . . and just be willing, to like, give your time. That's really what I expect. It's giving of your time, to be active in the community. Lend a hand. That's really what I expect.

### Characteristics of Community-Based Qualitative Researchers

Although anyone can conduct community-based research, it is certainly not for everyone. To undertake such a project, and implement it genuinely and successfully, the best-suited researchers have certain recommended traits and characteristics. A group of students who completed my summer community-based research course led focus groups with other students who had enrolled in the course, in which they shared some of their experiences in the course, and discussed the qualities of community-based researchers. One of the most prominent characteristics mentioned was the need to be *open-minded*. Students and researchers who enter a community with fixed and intransigent notions of community, research, and learning will have a difficult time taking in new ideas and information. To build successful and productive relationships with community members and institutions, one must be willing to step out of one's existing comfort zone and be open to new experiences and ways of viewing the world. Furthermore, particularly as related to the design and implementation of research projects, researchers must be prepared to confront "unknowns" as there is often not a clear path for these sorts of projects. Thus, the research process can be riddled with anxiety for some, especially those who are used to research that begins with a hypothesis and follows a predetermined and unwavering plan for data collection and analysis. In courses that use a community-based research model, students who are used to prescriptive assignments or rigid rubrics might feel uncomfortable not being given a distinct direction for research and allowing topics and issues to emerge from participation in a community setting or through dialogue with community members. One student in my summer research class discussed her experiences in the course with other students:

I think the biggest thing for me is to have students be open to the experience. . . . that first day, you know you don't really know exactly what it is that you're going to, you know what your research interests are, but you really don't know how you're going to incorporate that or what you're going to do, but I think that being open to the experience is really key. I hear so many people talking about, just in this group about the challenges or the apprehension that you had coming in to the class but the fact that you were open to the experience I think really led to success in the class and so that would be my major point of advice from the beginning is just to be open to what, what the class can bring, to be willing to experience it, even though you don't really know what the outcome is.

Because of the emergent nature of community-based qualitative research (CBQR) projects, it is also advantageous if researchers are *flexible*. Many times, an initial idea for a research project might emerge and then need to be changed due to shifting participant interests or priorities. Or maybe an initial line of inquiry does not pan out and another topic materializes as more salient or timely. Furthermore, since community-based research does not always adhere to conventional norms of research, a certain amount of *creativity* is useful, especially as it relates to developing innovative methods for recruitment, data collection, and dissemination. For example, researchers might need to identify participants and co-researchers at parks, local stores, or salons, or through social media, rather than at traditional educational institutions. To engage youth in projects, forms of popular culture and expression, such as hip-hop and spoken word, and social media might be used to collect data and to share research findings. Related to the notion of being aware of one's positionality and checking one's privilege discussed in previous sections, it is also important that community-based researchers employ *nonjudgmental* attitudes and a *humble* demeanor.

In the area of nursing and health education, there has been attention called to the need to develop **cultural competence** among those individuals preparing to provide care to an "increasingly multilingual and multicultural U.S. population" (Mendias & Guevara, 2001, p. 256). Some researchers have also applied this notion of cultural competence to research and scholarship in the area of health and medicine, and they have developed criteria for evaluating research as culturally competent (Meleis, 1996), as well as for measuring cultural competence among practitioners (Geron, 2002). Aspects of cultural competence that are instructive for community-based qualitative researchers include an "awareness of identity and power differentials" and a sensitivity to context and divergent communication styles (Meleis, 1996; Mendias & Guevara, 2001, p. 256). Those in the field of teacher education have articulated the notion of culturally responsive teaching and pedagogy, which is defined as "using the cultural characteristics, experiences, and perspectives of ethnically diverse students as conduits for teaching them more effectively" (Gay, 2002, p. 106). In this sense, being culturally responsive means possessing rich and expansive cultural knowledge and being able to engage in appropriate cross-cultural communication (Gay, 2002). Although these traits and characteristics were developed to help promote culturally competent care and teaching, these can certainly also be employed to foster culturally competent community-based researchers.

## Researcher Ethics and Responsibilities

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This section reviews and discusses ethical issues entailed in conducting CBQR with a focus on the ethical responsibilities of the community-based researcher and how those engaging in this type of research can address and negotiate institutional requirements for research. The section ends with a description and discussion of various roles and stances that community-based researchers might adopt within the research project.

## Institutional Review Boards and Informed Consent

As novice and seasoned academic researchers, we are accustomed to discussions of research ethics, usually related to institutional review board (IRB) approval and informed consent procedures. **Institutional review boards** are groups at colleges and universities and other institutions where research is conducted (such as school districts and prisons) tasked with reviewed research protocols to ensure that they follow ethical research procedures, in particular, those related to treatment of human subjects. **Informed consent** is the process whereby researchers obtain approval from individuals, often referred to as “subjects,” to participate in the study. Basic elements of informed consent include a statement of research purposes and goals, what participants will be expected to do (such as participate in an interview), any potential risks and/or benefits to participants, and a disclosure that participation is voluntary and participants might withdraw at any time. These procedures were enacted largely in response to egregious treatment of vulnerable populations by researchers, most notably and infamously, the Tuskegee Syphilis Study, an experiment that took place from 1932 to 1972 in the United States, under the auspices of the U.S. Public Health Service, in which African American men living in the rural South were uninformed that they had the disease, and not treated for it, even though penicillin was developed during the study period (Heller, 1972). As a result of the lack of treatment, many of the study’s subjects died, and men transmitted the disease to their partners, many of whom gave birth to children with congenital syphilis. In 1979, the Belmont Report was created to offer direction for researchers on “ethical principles and guidelines for the protection of human subjects of research.” These guidelines pay special attention to the treatment of vulnerable populations within research and were accompanied by the Common Rule, which established consistent federal policies and regulations for agencies and institutions.

### Representational Issues:

#### Ethical Injunctions and Responsibilities

Although IRBs provide important ethical oversight to academic researchers, many scholars have spotlighted other, more informal, ethical responsibilities of the researcher, what some have referred to as “good manners” (LeCompte et al., 1999, pp. 64–65). Weis and Fine (2000) have referred to the ethical challenges as “speed bumps”:

Our bumps range from finding our political investments and identities nestled too intimately inside the narratives of men and women whom we have interviewed, to the troubles of gaining ethics approval from committees seemingly more concerned with institutional liability than the work at hand to the struggle of (co)constructing narratives that challenge—rather than reproduce—dominant discourses. (pp. 67–68)

These responsibilities include being respectful of those who participate in our research and being mindful of the ways that they represent the communities and

settings in which they do research, as well as the participants and organizations with which they are working (LeCompte et al., 1999; Weis & Fine, 2000). Weis and Fine (2000) have described this set of responsibilities as “ethical injunctions” (p. 62) and have eloquently articulated the ethical dilemmas that they continually grapple with as they conduct research:

We continue to struggle with how to best represent the stories that may do more harm than good, depending on who consumes or exploits them: stories that reveal the adult consequences of child physical and sexual abuse; stories that suggest that it is almost impossible to live exclusively on welfare payments, encouraging many to lie about their incomes so that they self-define as “welfare cheats”; stories in which white respondents, in particular, portray people of color in gross and dehumanizing ways. . . . To what extent are we responsible to list “Warning! Misuse of data can be hazardous to our collective national health”? (pp. 47–48)

This concern for representation is especially important given the negative and damaging ways that many low-income communities and people of color have been depicted in the media. For those who believe that research should be used to improve conditions and inform, and transform, policies and practices, a heightened concern exists to the ways that research findings might be misused or result in damaging and detrimental perspectives of particular communities and people.



Community meeting space.

This attention to misrepresentation does not mean that one should romanticize all attributes of a community or leave out negative or destructive features and elements of particular beliefs and experiences. Rather, this sort of ethical work demands that researchers be acutely aware of how these portrayals might contribute to stereotypes and, thus, be vigilant to contextualize experiences and behaviors, as well as able to turn the spotlight on oneself to examine personal circumstances, beliefs, and behaviors. When conducting research in close contact with community members and institutions, “good” and “bad” stories will certainly emerge and tensions regarding the use of these various narratives will arise (Weis & Fine, 2000). It is incumbent on the research team to make sure that such information is used for productive ends and to enhance understanding rather than just titillate, provoke, or critique for critique’s sake. Within our analysis process, this means looking for examples of the mundane and for everyday tasks, rather than focusing solely on the most salacious and scandalous bits and excerpts (Weis & Fine, 2000). It also requires that we interrogate our reasons for sharing particular vignettes: Do they advance an analytical argument? Do they shed light on a specific process? Do they provide a more nuanced explanation of a process? Do they offer multiple viewpoints on a particular event?

Because community-based research studies involve collaboration at all stages, one would assume that these representational issues would not arise as community members—in their roles as co-researchers—would have the opportunity to critique and provide feedback on how their community is being portrayed. However, the collaborative and collective nature of CBQR projects makes such vigilance related to representation even more paramount as the research team needs to ensure that all voices are being heard and that multiple perspectives and experiences are incorporated at all stages of the project. Because knowledge is co-constructed within these projects, academic researchers need to be careful that one voice does not dominate discussions and silence divergent perspectives. And academic researchers must carefully inspect their role in the dialogue process and how they might be inadvertently replicating unequal power relationships within discussions and project activities. For example, Kysa Nygreen (2013) provided a frank and thoughtful reflection on her role in a participatory action research (PAR) study with youth. After reviewing her transcripts, field notes, and memos, she realized “the extent of . . . [her] privilege in the group and its harmful effects on . . . [the] work”: “What I saw was that, in many ways, my own actions contributed to the reproduction of power inequalities, the silencing of youth voices, the perpetuation of my own agenda, and the confirmation of my own sense of entitlement” (Nygreen, 2013, p. 17). Although it is unfortunate that such a revelation occurred after the research had culminated, with some distance, Nygreen (2013) was able to subject her own role and participation in the group “to the same type of critical analysis to which [she] . . . subjected the words of the youth” (p. 17). The painful lessons she shares about her experience offer instructive reminders for other researchers interested in engaging in collaborative and participatory research with communities and youth. Some strategies to avoid such missteps and oversights include deliberately incorporating an explicit and ongoing critique of processes and an evaluation of power sharing as part of the project design. In addition, maintaining

a reflective journal related to one's role as a researcher can assist in spotlighting areas where inequities are being reproduced.

### **Institutional Review Boards and Community-Based Qualitative Research Projects**

Educational institutions assert that ethical procedures and protocols exist to protect human subjects within research. This is certainly a goal of IRBs and other ethical bodies, but some also point out how these boards are in place to protect the institution, as well as to safeguard their legal interests, sometimes at the expense of the genuine research interests of a community and academic freedom (Hessler, Donald-Watson, & Galliher, 2011; Tierney & Corwin, 2007). For some vulnerable populations, such as marginalized youth—those whose voices are largely not part of academic scholarship—the IRB process can end up as “obscuring, silencing, and not protective” (Weis & Fine, 2000, p. 80). The processes can be particularly problematic and obstructionist for those conducting practitioner research and for participatory research teams (Boser, 2007; Pritchard, 2002). Susan Boser (2007) has highlighted how the processes of obtaining informed consent and ensuring confidentiality puts all responsibility and power in the hands of the researcher “with a limited view of the potential for human agency among participants in the study” (p. 1063). This sort of top-down power is at odds with participatory and community-based research studies, where shared power is a central and essential feature and that often take place in a “unique, complex, and evolving milieu” (Boser, 2007, p. 1065).

In CBQR studies, research purposes and activities are developed collaboratively and constantly negotiated throughout the project within collective and reciprocal processes not easily accommodated by IRB protocols, which usually require that research procedures be determined at the outset of a project. Furthermore, because those who would traditionally be considered research “subjects,” or participants, are also co-researchers, the process of informed consent can be complicated. Many IRBs require that all members of a research team complete human subjects training, which can involve attending an all-day workshop or completing a lengthy online course. This can be burdensome for some community members and youth, whose schedules might not allow for a training on campus or who do not have access to a computer. Moreover, as the trainings are aimed at academic researchers and graduate students, some of the language used in the materials can be technical and esoteric and pose problems for high-school students and adults with limited formal education. An oral history project that I was involved in as a graduate student—which trained young Latina mothers in oral history methodology to conduct interviews with their female forebears on the experiences of migration, work, and motherhood—ran into a roadblock when the academic institution sponsoring the research required that the young Latina mothers complete an online training so that they could appropriately obtain informed consent from their female relatives. This requirement was an impediment as most of the women had no access to computers and some had very low reading levels in English, and because the course took nearly 5 hours to complete, it would have

been onerous for many of the single mothers to fit into their already busy schedules. Fortunately, we were able to negotiate with the institution to waive this requirement; many institutions have since exempted oral history projects from IRB review. However, this example is telling regarding the ways that regulations and protocols purported to protect research participants can pose obstacles to research and knowledge generation; it was also puzzling given that we believed that the young women could provide a more authentic explanation of the purposes of the research, while ensuring that their relatives would not be exploited or misused within the research project.

Although we cannot dismiss with IRBs and the attendant mandated procedures, we can educate boards at our institutions about the work that we do and about the dynamic and emergent processes entailed in conducting CBQR. Research questions and initial protocols should be drafted collaboratively with research partners; although this can mean a lag in the startup of the project, it helps one comply with the IRB requirements and ensures that the initial design is representative of community interests and concerns. Many IRBs will allow you to submit interview guides after the project has commenced and to submit revisions and amendments as interview guides are developed and when changes are needed. The human subjects training requirement for co-researchers is harder to negotiate and can be problematic. In my work with teachers at an alternative high school, this mandate proved difficult for some to finish in a timely fashion as they were already overloaded with the demands of an intense workplace. A suggestion for expediting the training is to offer supports and incentives for individuals to complete training. This should be accompanied by a petitioning for the loosening of certain IRB requirements to facilitate participation by some key stakeholders.

### **Roles and Stances of the Community-Based Qualitative Researcher**

Within a CBQR study, the academic researcher can assume many roles. First and foremost, the researcher is a co-researcher investigating, teaching, and learning alongside research participants. Initially, academic researchers might spend a considerable amount of time observing and listening to key stakeholders to identify key issues. As the project develops, one might take on a more active role in relation to the community and its concerns; these roles can continue after the project has ended. This section discusses a few of these roles and provide examples from prominent studies that take a community-based or participatory approach. It should be noted that these categories of roles are not mutually exclusive and contain many overlapping elements. Furthermore, researchers can inhabit shifting roles throughout the course of a project or serve in multiple roles simultaneously.

#### ***Teachers and Facilitators***

Community-based qualitative researchers often begin their projects as teachers. Sometimes academic researchers arrange to teach a class at a local high school or

community center as a way of gaining access to and building relationships with youth to initiate a research project. A notable example is Jason Irizarry's (2011) work with students at a high school nearby his university; his regular instruction of a research course became the context for a PAR project examining the educational conditions and experiences of Latinos/as. Other times, existing classroom teachers—often attending graduate school in addition to teaching—might develop a research project with their students. Within CBQR projects, academic researchers are typically serving as teachers and trainers, instructing co-researchers in particular methodologies and approaches.

### ***Ambassadors and Allies***

Many graduate students and academic researchers make such powerful connections with communities in which they conduct research that they carry with them to other settings. Often their experiences in a particular community challenge preconceptions about this community and transform negative notions into positive ones. Students who have enrolled in my summer class have had specific interactions with community residents and youth that have resonated with them in myriad ways. After the class has ended, they often take it upon themselves to serve in the role of **community ambassadors**, disseminating information about the community in a variety of other external contexts, such as workplaces, college courses, and civic organizations. This role can help spread the word about community efforts and successes, as well as work to dispel myths and misconceptions about particular communities as dangerous and unwelcoming. They might present their experiences to colleagues or bring their own classes for a tour of the community. This is especially important for those who work in settings where individuals might have limited knowledge of certain areas; for example, many students enrolled in my classes work in suburban and rural areas and are unfamiliar with many urban communities. Individuals can also function as **allies**, which involves offering solidarity and support for the life and work of the community. This might include frequenting local businesses, attending and volunteering at community events, or providing monetary support for particular initiatives. Students who have been enrolled in my courses have purchased children's books in Spanish for their literacy and reading courses at a local bookstore; others have purchased needed books and other resources or provided information on available grants for local organizations and educational programs. Students who had previously been wary of venturing into the area went out of their way to have brunch at a local restaurant or attend the annual Puerto Rican parade. Although these may seem like small and insignificant gestures, the support of ambassadors and allies can play an important role in "spreading the word" and expanding the reach of the work of a community.

### ***Advocates and Activists***

Often, as a result of being involved in a research project, academic researchers take a more active role on behalf of community programs and issues. Because of their

participation conducting research alongside community members and their intense involvement in community efforts, they become especially invested in certain causes and issues. Their involvement leads them to continue with the work after the official research has ended, often marshaling together various resources toward the benefit of community programs and efforts. For example, a researcher might use research findings to work on achieving additional changes and enacting legislation or help in the establishment of new programs by writing grants for funding. This role of “researcher as mediator or broker” (Dyrness, 2011, p. 202) can be useful in extending the research into other arenas; some community-based projects often explicitly include advocacy efforts as part of their dissemination plan, and thus, these take place in collaboration with community co-researchers.

In other cases, academic researchers take on more activist stances possibly mobilizing for and speaking out at demonstrations and protests related to certain causes. This is especially the case within PAR studies, which are often focused on promoting activism as part of the design of the project. Some academic researchers are activists prior to the initiation of a project, and this role provides the impetus for the study. Some notable examples of academic researchers serving in an activist role include David Stovall’s (2006) work with youth and parent-led educational grassroots movements. In his work, Stovall positions himself as both “participant researcher” and “concerned community member” and identifies his research as deeply rooted in his experience as a community organizer (2006, p. 97). Alongside conducting research, Nolan Cabrera (2011) played a pivotal role in demonstrations and civil disobedience to protest Arizona’s dismantling of ethnic studies programs.

Andrea Dyrness (2011) has differentiated between “activist research” and “participatory research,” and she has elaborated a “policy-oriented activist research model,” in which “researchers lend their research products and expertise to the service of marginalized groups seeking specific, winnable policy changes” (p. 201). This model aligns with the advocacy role described earlier. On the other hand, Dyrness (2011) articulates her view of participatory research—and this is the approach she uses in her research—as that which seeks to transform research relationships and “expand the capacity of participants to make change in their own lives and communities” (p. 201) rather than through the sole efforts of an individual researcher. Within CBQR projects, researchers can take on policy-oriented advocacy roles, as well as function as more radical, community-based activists and in participatory ways that promote empowerment and transformation from within. Although there might be occasions for solitary advocacy work on the part of the researcher, or where researchers might serve as a liaison or broker between the community and external entities, the primary goal in CBQR is to foster collaborative efforts toward community changes and transformation.

### **Researcher Autobiographies and Vulnerabilities**

Within community-based research projects, academic researchers are obviously inhabiting multiple roles, interacting with community residents in various ways, and acquiring multiple experiences within the setting. This chapter has discussed at length

the distinct histories and backgrounds that individuals carry with them into a setting and project, as well as how these inform researchers' lenses and perspectives. As they are amassing new experiences and being exposed to different ideas and perspectives, researchers' existing notions are being challenged and, in many cases, transformed. Students in the summer research classes that I have instructed have often been confronted with community narratives, experiences, and perspectives that cause them to reflect on and rethink their own experiences and question some of their previous practices and beliefs. Sometimes, their interactions with particular community members bring into focus their role in destructive processes impacting the community. For example, after interviewing a community activist about her antigentrification work, one Caucasian female student became more aware of, and subsequently questioned, her previous view of gentrification as a positive and somewhat benign process. The young Puerto Rican woman's recounting of how her family's displacement due to urban renewal and rising rents, and the threat that gentrification posed to the stability of the Puerto Rican community, had such an impact on the student during the interview that she broke down in tears.

Noted anthropologist Ruth Behar (1996) has written about how acts of bearing witness within the immersive sort of fieldwork required in ethnography can intersect with aspects of the researcher's autobiography and provoke vulnerabilities and emotional responses on the part of the researcher. She is critical of the sort of objectivity and



New condominium development in Humboldt Park, Chicago.

detachment called for in much research and advocates for a more vulnerable and reflective role that acknowledges the “emotional and intellectual baggage” that researchers inevitably bring with them into research settings (Behar, 1996, p. 8). Within CBQR studies, dialogue about these sorts of vulnerabilities and autobiographical intersections should be part of the project, and research teams should not shy away from discussions about intersections and tensions, points of connection and areas of divergence, or differing perspectives and understandings of particular phenomena. Rather than detract from the research, these discussions can highlight key elements of community issues and experiences and can help the research team better understand the broader conditions and contexts influencing community issues and concerns.

Many times academic researchers’ experiences within a community resonate with them in such a way that they reexamine some of their previous experiences and practices. For example, one student in a research class, a Caucasian mother who lived in a far-flung suburb, described the impact of her experience with a group of young Latinas through her fieldwork at a summer enrichment program:

The words that I use to describe the inner sense of these girls and their community connection are *loyal, committed, dedicated* and *empowered*. I would use none of these words to adequately describe my own sons’ community connection. Even though we as a family take part in many community events, volunteer at numerous community agencies, and have lived and attended school in the same community all of our lives, the ownership these girls had of their Humboldt Park neighborhood was unmatched. . . . I questioned these girls about this: Where had I failed my own children? Why didn’t they have the love of community that these girls emanated on a daily basis? . . . At the end of eight weeks I was not only inspired by the girls and their inherent defense and love of their neighborhood, but sorry that my boys had not been brought up to have these same instincts.

Ultimately what I thought I was going to bring to this experience—inspiration for the downtrodden people I expected to meet—became what I brought away from the experience. I was so inspired by the protective nature and pride these girls displayed toward their community and specifically toward the people they work with at the Teen Club called the *Batey Urbano*. . . . I was transformed—I learned a lot about research, yes, but I believe more importantly I learned more about my own beliefs about me. I learned about being a better mom and I learned that five teenage girls from Humboldt Park have changed the world for this middle aged, blonde, suburban woman in a most positive way.

This student attested to the transformative effects of her involvement in the community and with this particular group of young women on her role as a mother. Other students were also transformed: A student began biking more often after completing a project at a community biking initiative; another student’s experience with an Afro-Caribbean music organization caused her to reevaluate her previous beliefs about the teaching, learning, and performance of music. These revelations are a few examples of how CBQR can yield not only programmatic changes but also transformations in researchers and their practices.



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Chairs festooned with flags in preparation for an alternative high-school graduation.

## Chapter Summary

From this chapter, we have learned the important and myriad roles and responsibilities of academic researchers within CBQR projects. Researchers need to be cognizant of their backgrounds, privileges, assumptions, and biases prior to entering a research setting, as well as of how they are both insiders and outsiders in relation to topic, setting, and participants. It is essential that throughout a community-based research project, members of the research team engage in dialogue with co-researchers regarding their changing beliefs, as well as to share tensions and differences of opinion.

Ethical requirements imposed by institutions can provide important safeguards and protections for certain populations of research participants, but they can also pose challenges for collaborative and community-based research, where the conventional distinction between “researcher” and “subject” does not usually apply. Thus, research teams often need to grapple with how to meet these requirements and still be true to the collaborative and participatory nature of CBQR projects. Finally, we learned that academic researchers can assume multiple stances and roles within a research project, including teacher, ally, and activist.

## Key Terms

Allies 56	Informed consent 51	Positionality 41
Checking privilege 47	Insiders 44	Reflexivity 42
Community ambassadors 56	Institutional review boards 51	Stakeholders 40
Cultural competence 50	Otherizing 43	White skin privilege 47
Emic 45	Outsiders 45	
Etic 45		

## ● Activities for Reflection and Discussion

- 1) Educational autobiography: Write a reflection on your educational experiences, including elementary through postsecondary experiences, and nonformal educational experiences. Respond to the following prompts/questions: What events/experiences stand out? What are your strongest educational memories/experiences, positive or negative? How have your experiences informed your views of teaching and learning or your worldview? In class or a research setting, share your educational autobiography with a partner (either a classmate or another member of the research team). What are similarities and differences between your educational experiences?
- 2) Before initial experience in the community setting, respond to the following writing prompts:
  - a) What are your goals for research within the community? What skills/knowledge do you hope to gain? What do you hope to accomplish?
  - b) What are you excited about in relation to this course?
  - c) What challenges do you anticipate? What might you be anxious about?
  - d) What existing knowledge/information do you possess about this community? Where did you obtain this knowledge?
- 3) Select a particular topic and issue of interest to you (for example, reading instruction, youth civic engagement, health education, and adult learning). Make a list of your relevant experiences, assumptions,

and biases related to this topic. Share these experiences, assumptions, and biases with a partner or research team.

- 4) Examine your backpack of privileges imparted by your background and characteristics. How might an awareness of these privileges help inform and facilitate the implementation of your research project?
- 5) Of the researcher roles and stances that are described in this chapter, which ones do you foresee taking on as part of your research project? Are there roles you would feel comfortable inhabiting? Are there roles you would feel uncomfortable with? Are there other roles that you expect to assume as part of your project?

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