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## **INSIDER, OUTSIDER, OR SOMEWHERE IN BETWEEN: THE IMPACT OF RESEARCHERS' IDENTITIES ON THE COMMUNITY-BASED RESEARCH PROCESS\***

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### ABSTRACT

Sociologists and qualitative researchers have engaged in an extensive debate about the merits of researchers being “outsiders” or “insiders” to the communities they study. Recent research has attempted to move beyond a strict outsider/insider dichotomy to emphasize the relative nature of researchers' identities, depending on the specific research context. Using the Institute for Community-Based Research in Mississippi as a case study, this article presents findings from qualitative interviews with academic researchers and community partners involved in four different research projects. These findings examine how researchers and community partners characterize researchers' identities and the impact that those identities have on the community-based research outcomes in different research contexts. The article also includes recommendations for researchers who are working in communities where they are likely to be considered outsiders.

Community-based researchers often enter communities as “outsiders,” whether by virtue of their affiliation with a university, level of formal education, research expertise, race, socioeconomic status, or other characteristics. Many of these traits – such as level of formal education and access to resources – also connote a more privileged and powerful status in the larger society (Wallerstein and Duran 2008), such that community-based researchers approach communities not simply as outsiders but as privileged ones.

Simultaneously, a primary goal of community-based research is to democratize research (Stringer 2007) – to dissolve the traditional boundaries between “researcher” and “subject” and to involve community members fully in the research process. As the boundaries between academic researchers, hereafter called “researchers,” and community members are broken down, the issue of trust emerges as critical to creating and sustaining successful partnerships. Building relationships of trust between researchers and community partners often means reaching across racial, ethnic, and economic divides, among others. Thus, as a first step, it is important for researchers to reflect upon the identities (Mercer 2007) and “status sets” (Merton 1972) that they bring to a research project, the ways in which those

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identities may affect the development of partnerships with community members, and how they may affect the research process and its outcomes (Wallerstein and Duran 2008).

Recent research has attempted to move beyond a strict outsider/insider dichotomy to emphasize the relative nature of researchers' identities and social positions, depending on the specific research context. Using four projects sponsored by the Institute for Community-Based Research in Mississippi as case studies, this article presents findings from qualitative interviews with researchers and community partners involved in those four projects. This analysis examines how researchers and community partners characterize researchers' status as insiders, outsiders, or some of both; and the impact that those statuses have on community-based research outcomes in different research contexts.

#### INSIDERS, OUTSIDERS, AND THE SPACE BETWEEN

Sociologists and qualitative researchers have engaged in an extensive debate about the benefits and drawbacks of researchers being from the communities they study. Robert Merton (1972), for example, summarized two opposing views as the Outsider Doctrine and the Insider Doctrine. The Outsider Doctrine values researchers who are not from the communities they study as neutral, detached observers. Similar to Simmel's (1950:405) portrayal of the stranger, outsider researchers are valued for their objectivity, "which permits the stranger to experience and treat even his close relationships as though from a bird's-eye view." The Outsider Doctrine challenges the ability of insider researchers to analyze clearly that of which they are a part. The Insider Doctrine, on the other hand, holds that outsider researchers will never truly understand a culture or situation if they have not experienced it. The Insider Doctrine further contends that insider researchers are uniquely positioned to understand the experiences of groups of which they are members.

Previous examinations of the effects of "insider" and "outsider" researchers have noted the particular challenges and benefits associated with each. Insider researchers are often able to engage research participants more easily and use their shared experiences to gather a richer set of data (Dwyer and Buckle 2009). However, they may find it difficult to separate their personal experiences from those of research participants (Kanuha 2000), confront questions about potential bias in their research (Serrant-Green 2002), and face issues of confidentiality when interviewing members of their community about sensitive subjects (Serrant-Green 2002, citing Kaufman 1994). Outsider researchers are frequently valued for their

objectivity and emotional distance from a situation, but may find it difficult to gain access to research participants (Chawla-Duggan 2007; Gasman and Payton-Stewart 2006).

However, there are very few cases, as scholars (Dwyer and Buckle 2009; Merriam et al. 2001; Merton 1972) have noted, in which someone can be characterized as a complete insider or a complete outsider. In practice, researchers' identities are often relative, and can sometimes even change, based on where and when the research is conducted, the personalities of the researcher and individual research participants, and the topic of the research (Mercer 2007). While some characteristics, like race and gender, likely will remain the same throughout researchers' lives, the significance of those characteristics can change, depending on the research situation (Mercer 2007).

For these reasons, many scholars (Mercer 2007; Merriam et al. 2001; Merton 1972; Serrant-Green 2002) have attempted to move past a strict "insider/outsider" dichotomy to emphasize what Dwyer and Buckle (2009) have called "the space between." According to the latter framework, all researchers fall somewhere within the space between complete insiders and complete outsiders. Researchers will likely occupy different spaces depending on the context of a specific research project. Researchers, then, assume a responsibility to understand where they are positioned within this space and to explore how their status may affect the research process and its outcomes (Serrant-Green 2002).

The "space between" is usually characterized as a multidimensional space, where researchers' identities, cultural backgrounds, and relationships to research participants influence how they are positioned within that space. Banks (1998) developed four categories of positionality – indigenous-insider, indigenous-outsider, external-insider, and external-outsider – that represent differences in researchers' knowledge and values based on their socialization within different ethnic, racial, and cultural communities. These categories are mediated by individuals' status characteristics (e.g., gender, class, religion, and age). Narayan (1993) also began from a cultural standpoint in defining insider or outsider status as a cultural identity that can be outweighed, at times, by factors such as education, gender, and sexual orientation. Serrant-Green (2002) and Dwyer and Buckle (2009) emphasized the relational and dynamic aspects of researchers' positionalities, noting that "the question of identity of the researcher in relation to the subject and group under study is constantly changing and not fixed" (Serrant-Green 2002:42). Dwyer and Buckle (2009) described a dialectical relationship between researchers and research

participants in which definitions of insiders and outsiders can only be made in relation to a particular person or context.

Smith (1999) described her own experience occupying the “space between” as a Maori researcher in New Zealand:

I was an insider as a Maori mother and an advocate of the language revitalization movement, and I shared in the activities of fund raising and organizing. Through my different tribal relationships I had close links to some of the mothers and to the woman who was the main organizer... When I began the discussions and negotiations over my research, however, I became much more aware of the things which made me an outsider. I was attending university as a graduate student; I had worked for several years as a teacher and had a professional income; I had a husband; and we owned a car which was second-hand but actually registered. As I became more involved in the project... these differences became much more marked. (pp. 137–8)

Smith (1999) beautifully illustrated the multidimensionality of the “space between,” drawing on her ethnicity, her previous community work, her education, and her income, among other characteristics, to problematize her position as a complete insider in relationship to her research participants. She also highlighted how her identity as a researcher led the women she interviewed to treat her differently than they might otherwise if she were visiting their house as a mother. Smith (1999) noted how the women’s practices – cleaning their homes, preparing food, sending children to bed early – were performed not only as signs of respect but also as strategies “to keep the outsider at bay, to prevent the outsider becoming the intruder” (Smith 1999:138). In Smith’s (1999) example, her identity as a researcher clearly outweighed other identities and relationships she shared with her research participants. However, this “outsider” status was also likely mediated by her ethnicity and shared experiences, allowing her access to a community that might not otherwise have been available to a researcher who did not share those characteristics in common. The next section discusses the implications of this multidimensional “space between” for the practice of community-based research.

#### COMMUNITY-BASED RESEARCH

Community-based research (CBR) projects provide a useful context to explore the impact of researchers’ social positions on the research process. Within CBR

projects, researchers are inside the context of a particular community and a particular population (Israel et al. 1998). CBR is characterized by a commitment to involving community partners in all aspects of the research process, from developing the research goals to communicating the findings (Israel et al. 1998; Viswanathan et al. 2004). Many CBR projects also share larger goals of social change and social justice, which can include amplifying the voices of community members and empowering residents to advocate for their needs (Israel et al. 1998; Stoecker 2002). Thus, CBR projects involve interactions between researchers and community members (research participants) as well as between researchers and community partners (research partners). These interactions provide a useful terrain for examining the positioning of researchers and community partners as insiders, outsiders, or occupants of the “space between.”

CBR literature has often characterized university researchers as relative “outsiders” and community partners as relative “insiders,” emphasizing the benefits that each can bring to a CBR project. For researchers who are unfamiliar with the communities in which they are working, community partners can provide insight into issues that the community is facing, access to research participants, and alternate interpretations for data collected. In return, researchers can provide data that communities can use to assess their needs, plan interventions, and apply for funding. For example, Minkler and Baden (2008) described how university researchers conducting a survey in a North Carolina community were aided by African American residents from a nearby community, who introduced them to potential research participants. The authors discussed how, in return, a university study was valued by community members because it provided an external, more objective view of a politically-sensitive topic (industrial hog operations) in their town.

CBR literature has also acknowledged that the benefits of “insiders” and “outsiders” working together are often won only after a successful negotiation of power relationships among researchers and community partners. While diverse research teams are considered “critical for cultural understanding” (Wallerstein et al. 2008:382), research has shown that “the more cultural diversity there is, the more likely it is that high levels of tension, lack of respect for group members, and inequality in turn-taking will exist” (Wallerstein et al. 2008:385). Much of what research partners and participants observe and experience may remain hidden until a certain level of trust is established. Scott (1985, cited in Chavez et al. 2008) drew a distinction between public transcripts – what is heard when members of a less powerful community interact with those in power – and hidden transcripts – the

interactions among members of a less powerful community, where members may feel comfortable to speak more freely and critically. Unacknowledged imbalances of power in partnerships between communities and universities can jeopardize the completion and usefulness of community-based research projects (Wallerstein and Duran 2008).

Increasingly, community-based researchers and funders have sought to document the outcomes of community-based research projects, from the impact of participation on the strength of community-university partnerships to the impact of community-based interventions on health outcomes (Wallerstein et al. 2008). An important contextual factor to determining the success of a community-based research project is the trust or mistrust between community partners and researchers (Wallerstein et al. 2008). By exploring perceptions of researchers' status and its impact on the research process, this study highlights some factors that influence successful partnerships and project outcomes.

## METHODS

This project examines the impact of self-described and attributed status (e.g., insider, outsider, some of both) on the community-based research process through the lens of four CBR projects sponsored by the Institute for Community-Based Research. The Institute is a multi-organizational collaborative association housed at the University of Mississippi that engages graduate students, staff, and faculty members from both inside and outside Mississippi to perform CBR projects. At the time of this research, the Institute was housed at Delta State University, under the guidance of the same research director.

The four CBR projects included in this study are: an evaluation of a maternal and child health program in the Mississippi Delta, a needs assessment and capacity-building project on the Mississippi Gulf Coast following Hurricane Katrina, a workforce development project for residents of a Mississippi Delta county, and an assessment of emergency room use in Mississippi Delta hospitals. Each of these projects involved graduate students and community partners (staff of community-based organizations) in each stage of the research process. Each project also included a face-to-face data collection component in which graduate students, Institute staff, and sometimes, faculty members administered surveys and/or conducted focus groups. These projects were selected for this study in consultation with the Institute's director. The author of this study served as an AmeriCorps\*VISTA member at the Institute for a year, and participated in the data

collection and analysis for the Gulf Coast project and data analysis for the maternal and child health program evaluation.

A list of 18 research project participants across the four projects (e.g., faculty members, graduate students, community partners) was obtained from the Institute's research director. Sixteen interviews were completed with community partners and researchers across the four projects; at least one community partner and one researcher were interviewed from each project. The interviews typically lasted between 30 minutes and an hour. Interview participants included six community partners, three university faculty or staff members, six former graduate students, and one funder. All of the community partners interviewed were staff members of community-based organizations. Twelve participants were female. Nine participants identified themselves as white, while seven identified their race as African American. All but one interview were completed via telephone; one interview took place in person.

Research participants were asked to describe their own identity as an insider, outsider, or some of both as well as the identities of other researchers working on the project. Participants were also asked to reflect on the effects of the researchers' status on each step of the research process and to discuss the advantages and disadvantages of working with insider and outsider researchers. Interview notes were coded in several iterations. The first coding identified the characteristics that interview participants used across the four projects to describe their status and the status of their research partners as insiders, outsiders, and some of both. A subsequent coding focused on the multidimensionality of the "space between" by focusing on how researchers combined particular characteristics as they classified themselves and others. Finally, interview participants' conceptions of status were applied to analyze questions related to the research process, to identify major themes associated with the impact of researchers' status (as insiders, outsiders, or some of both) on the CBR process.

#### DEFINING INSIDERS, OUTSIDERS, AND THOSE BETWEEN

In their definition of "communities of identity," Israel et al. (2008) noted that communities can be defined by geographical boundaries or by a collective characteristic such as race, ethnicity, or sexual orientation. Research participants in the current study used both geographical boundaries and collective characteristics to define their own identities and those of other researchers. Participants were asked to characterize themselves as an insider, an outsider, or some of both, in relation to the communities they hoped would benefit from their



research project, and to describe the status of other researchers who worked on their project.

While one researcher and two community partners had lived in the particular county or region where their project was located their entire lives, no participants characterized themselves as completely insiders. Four participants considered themselves outsiders, while the remaining twelve defined themselves as some of both. Most researchers and community partners also described the other researchers as some of both. These characterizations were based largely on the following themes: *geographic location, socioeconomic status and demographic characteristics, life experience, and multidimensional identities.*

### *Geographic Location*

Nearly all of the research participants mentioned their relationship to the geographic location where the research project was being held as evidence of their status as an outsider or insider. Participants who were born and raised in the region or town where the project was located or who had lived there for many years were more likely to describe this aspect of themselves as insiders. One community partner explained, "I was not born and reared here. I moved here, but I've been here long enough to be a member of the community." A researcher described herself as an insider because she "was from the Delta, and...lived in the Delta [her] entire life." Other researchers and community partners noted having family ties, living among residents, and working in the community as ways in which they were insiders.

Interview participants who lived outside the region where the research was being performed were more likely to characterize themselves as outsiders. Their relationship to the community was developed through a specific research project. One researcher described herself as "an outside researcher coming into the Gulf Coast because of a natural disaster." Another researcher explained her status by noting that she had lived in the Mississippi Delta for a few years before engaging in her research project, but that she was not born or raised in the region, adding that "I had a completely different perspective than I would have if I had grown up there." A third researcher, who described herself as both an insider and an outsider, characterized herself "probably more as an outsider but that's because my job, my income is in another state."

Researchers and community partners used many similar characteristics to classify their other research partners as insiders or outsiders. Whether someone lived in a specific community or region and how long they had lived there were used

to signify a certain level of understanding and to confer insider status. While no researchers identified themselves as total insiders, they were more willing to use this label to describe their research partners. One researcher noted that several of her fellow researchers “were from the region; [I] saw them as much more in-tuned.” A researcher from a different project explained that “[Other researchers] don’t typically live in any of the counties – their perspective is a little different. I’ve lived in more of the community for a length of time; I understand the cultural norms and values of the community.” A community partner from the same project concurred, drawing distinctions between two groups of researchers by saying that “there have been some that really don’t know the area, much less the people.”

There was not always agreement among participants whether a certain researcher or community partner was an insider or outsider. In one project, two community partners discussed the same two researchers but categorized them very differently. One community partner emphasized the researchers’ connections to the program and identified one as more of an insider because she had a stronger relationship to the staff and clients. The other community partner emphasized the length of time the researchers had lived in the Delta and instead identified the other researcher as more of an insider because of the length of time that person had lived in the region.

#### *Socioeconomic Status and Demographic Characteristics*

Researchers were more likely than community partners to use demographic or socioeconomic characteristics to describe themselves or other researchers as insiders or outsiders. Race, gender, age, income, public benefits use, and employment status were used to compare researchers and research participants. “Most participants were 16-22, [and] I was in that age range, so I felt like I could relate to them from that standpoint,” one researcher reported. Another researcher, who worked on the evaluation of the maternal and child health program, said that she felt like more of an insider as an African American mother, compared with other researchers who were white and had never had children (Most of the program participants were African American.).

One community partner contrasted her economic status with that of her project’s research participants, many of whom were low-income workers. Two researchers also highlighted their relatively higher incomes as examples of their outsider status. “Most of the participants were low-income, on WIC, food stamps, and welfare. I was living on a college stipend, but these women were living on less,” one researcher described.

### *Life Experience*

A few researchers mentioned life experiences, such as being a parent or experiencing a natural disaster, when they described their status as insiders or outsiders. Two researchers who worked with the evaluation of the maternal and child health program mentioned their experience – or lack of experience – with pregnancy and parenting. One researcher explained, “I don’t have any children and have never been pregnant – and neither have any of my close friends and family members. This major life event, I don’t have any experience with.” One researcher who worked with the assessment and capacity building project on the Mississippi Gulf Coast cited her personal experience with Hurricane Katrina when describing her insider status: “I had damage in my area. I had people in my area who lost their homes. The disaster experience is not as far from me as people in other institutions.”

### *Multidimensional Identities*

While one researcher and two community partners had lived in the same county or region where their project was located their entire lives, no participants labeled themselves as complete insiders. Four participants categorized themselves as outsiders, whereas twelve classified themselves as some of both. This suggests that the idea of a “space between” insider and outsider status is salient to most of the researchers and community partners who were interviewed.

For example, one researcher drew on her age, race, gender, professional background, and residence to describe her identity in relation to her research project. As a young white woman interacting with younger black women, the researcher felt that her age, her gender, her status as a Mississippi Delta resident, and her professional background working with youth helped her to be more of an insider – and helped her to overcome some disadvantages that her outsider status as a white person may have presented. Another researcher, who had lived in the Mississippi Delta all her life, considered herself an insider in terms of her residence but an outsider in terms of her race, socioeconomic status, and level of education. A community partner provided a similar response, classifying herself as both an insider by virtue of her residence in the Mississippi Delta and an outsider in terms of her socioeconomic status.

## IMPACTS OF RESEARCHERS’ STATUS ON THE RESEARCH PROCESS

Both researchers and community partners were asked how researchers’ status as insiders, outsiders, or some of both influenced the research process. Interviewees were asked to discuss how researchers’ status affected their ability to design

questionnaires, collect data, interpret the data, and communicate the research findings.

### *Developing Research Questions*

Several researchers described the benefits of involving community partners, whom they perceived as relative “insiders,” in the development of the research questions. One researcher from the emergency room assessment explained how involving the hospitals in the question development helped to build trust and allowed the researchers to gain access to hospital patients for the interviews. Another researcher who worked with the Gulf Coast project talked about the impact of working with community partners on the types of questions asked: “I think there were things that we might not be aware of had we not had the collaboration with [an insider researcher] and [the community partner]. We would have asked them in the wrong way, and I think there were some questions that we wouldn’t have asked.” A third researcher, who worked with the maternal and child health program evaluation, described how her own “insider” perspective as a Delta resident struggling to access healthcare made it easier for her to construct focus group questions that were relevant to her research participants.

Researchers and community partners also highlighted the benefit of more “outsider” researchers’ perspective and expertise. One community partner discussed how working with researchers from outside her region helped her to see some issues her community was facing “from a different perspective.” A researcher from the same project mentioned that the researchers’ extensive academic training allowed them to “develop questions and wording of questions to get information that is more specific and useable.”

### *Collecting Information*

Two community partners and two researchers across three projects said that they did not think that researchers’ status as insiders, outsiders, or some of both affected their ability to collect information for their project. Other research participants cited partnerships with community organizations, researchers’ race and relationship to the community, and researchers’ objectivity and efficiency as important factors that influenced the data collection process.

Several researchers and community partners highlighted the ways in which researchers’ race and their relationship with a community organization affected their ability to gain access to research participants. A researcher and community partner who worked on the same project mentioned the importance of sharing the

researchers' affiliation with a community organization with potential research participants. "I think if they hadn't gone out and let residents know that they were affiliated with [our organization], they wouldn't have been able to collect that data," a community partner explained. A researcher added that "having the local connection to the community-based organization and being able to demonstrate that and discuss it with respondents has been a great benefit. It allows us to have an insider connection, allowed us to facilitate data collection."

When asked about the effect of racial difference among researchers and research participants, researchers were more likely than community partners to believe that their race had an impact on the data collection process. Two community partners reported that they did not believe that race was an issue during the data collection for their projects, while a third said that it may have had a small effect. Researchers described the benefits and drawbacks of racial differences in different research contexts. One researcher discussed the impact of race on her research team's access to particular neighborhoods, noting that "there have been a few white researchers that had great access to people in white neighborhoods but in black neighborhoods got nowhere... The composition of research teams matters in terms of access." In contrast, a researcher from a different project explained how differences in race and age can help with access. As a young, white woman in a hospital emergency room where most of the patients and doctors were African American, she said that potential research participants were often curious about why she was there and willing to talk with her about their experiences.

Researchers also mentioned the impact of race in relation to the quality of data they could collect. An African-American researcher who worked mainly with African-American research participants said that when she interviewed participants about personal issues, "there's a comfort level when people look like you and come from a similar background." One of her research partners, who is white, concurred. "I really felt like an outsider at that point, but here comes [my research partner], even though she's from [outside the Delta]... she's African American, a mother. I would ask a question and she would follow up with an anecdote about how she had a sick child and was pregnant with another standing in line at a health center. Participants understood, and it would help them open up."

On the other hand, a researcher from the emergency room project described how her status as an outsider helped her collect a deeper level of information: "If you're different – you're an outsider – you can get more trust. People can tell you things that they won't tell people that are nearest and dearest to them." A similar theme was echoed when researchers and community partners were asked to

describe the benefits of working with researchers who were considered outsiders. One community partner explained, "They may have reacted differently based on who was asking the questions. A lot of that might have been a willingness to go beyond what was asked. [They] might have been more willing to talk to outsiders in some cases because you don't know my business."

The participation of staff members from the community-based organizations in the data collection process also helped establish an "insider" connection with research participants. Two researchers who worked with the maternal and child health program evaluation noted how helpful it was to have program staff assist with the facilitation of focus groups and attend in-person interviews. "In some of the focus groups, it really, really helped because the [program] participants are so close with their caseworkers... So, to have them help recruit participants and ask follow-up questions and even having them in the room helped put participants at ease," one researcher explained. Another researcher described how the presence of social workers at her interviews provided "a gateway into acceptance."

The notion of outsiders as objective, efficient researchers was also raised – and challenged – by research participants. Many researchers and community partners, when asked to describe the benefits of working with outsider researchers, mentioned researchers' objectivity, lack of preconceived notions, and fresh perspective as advantages. Some took this a step further and noted how a lack of personal and emotional connections could make outsider researchers more efficient. As one researcher explained, "being from the outside, we have far fewer personal or work-related connections so we're more objective, we're not emotionally involved... [It] allows us to do research objectively and efficiently."

However, this idea was challenged by one researcher from the emergency department assessment who described an interaction she had with a community member who was helping to gather data at a hospital. "She was sending me surveys every day, almost so fast that we questioned it. I asked her, and she said, 'People know me here. They know I'm not going to ask them anything that's going to hurt them, and I know how to talk to them.'... It's a really small town, and she was in the emergency room. There's that trust factor."

### *Interpreting Data*

Many researchers and community partners shared that they did not think researchers' status as insiders, outsiders, or some of both had an impact on data analysis. Several of these participants thought that good question development and

note-taking mattered more to interpreting data than differences in researchers' status.

A researcher and community partner from the Gulf Coast project discussed the value of bringing the data back to community partners to ask questions and gain more of an "insider" perspective on the data. The community partner felt that this mitigated any concerns she would have about researchers from outside her community interpreting the data.

The issue of bias was also raised by both researchers and community partners. One community partner thought that the presence of outside researchers was a benefit in terms of removing bias, while the researchers had a more ambivalent view. One researcher noted the benefits and drawbacks of researchers who were classified as "outsiders" interpreting data: "... it's a bit of objectivity. On the other hand, they're missing a lot of stuff from the analysis of the data. It's a combination...if you've never seen it or experienced it, you don't know how to look for it. You may not see the patterns in the data in the same way."

#### *Communicating Findings*

Community partners did not express any concerns with the effect of researchers' status on communicating the results of research projects. Community partners reported that the information they received was useful for preparing grant proposals and informing the design of their programs.

Whereas several researchers did not think that researchers' identities had an impact on communicating findings, others expressed concern with a lack of dissemination of research findings to the public. One researcher noted, "many of us have the ability to write to an academic audience. I'd like to see more of it written in layman's terms...so it can be used by CBOs [community-based organizations] and the wider community." Another researcher agreed, explaining that she was happy with how findings were shared with the community organization but wished "we could have done more dissemination to the general public to let them know that this is what we've done with what we asked you."

#### IMPACTS OF RESEARCHERS' STATUS ON RESEARCH OUTCOMES

While researchers and community partners described many advantages and drawbacks of partnering with insider or outsider researchers, few thought that researchers' status had a significant impact on research outcomes. Those who did generally discussed the positive impact of researchers whom they perceived as outsiders. For example, one researcher outlined the benefits of having a diverse

group of researchers and community partners involved in her project, while other researchers and community partners discussed the validity that outsiders bring to a research project. Beyond these specific responses, there are several other reasons why most participants may not have expressed concern regarding the impact of researchers' status on the projects' outcomes.

First, three of the four projects included in this study (the maternal and child health program evaluation, the Gulf Coast project, and the workforce development project) involved partnerships between community organizations and the Institute for Community-Based Research that had been ongoing for several years before the interviews for this project were completed. For the emergency department assessment project, the Institute had developed a portfolio of health-related research and relationships with community-based health providers before the project. Several community partners, across several projects, commented on the positive relationships they had with the Institute and especially with its director. Wallerstein et al. (2008:382) noted that "the principal investigator is a critical team member, and his or her ability to work across cultures with flexibility and grace is critical for the project's success."

On the other hand, Israel et al. (1998:183) identified a "lack of trust and perceived lack of respect" among researchers and community partners as one of the most significant challenges in conducting CBR projects. Trust was also mentioned by both community partners and researchers as an advantage to working with insider researchers and as a potential disadvantage of partnering with outsider researchers. At least two of the projects engaged researchers who were from outside the state of Mississippi and had demographic characteristics that were very different from the research participants. However, it appeared that the potential negative effects of individual "outsider" researchers were mitigated by the relationships that the Institute and its director had developed with the community partners.

Second, the presence of "outsider" researchers may have also been mitigated by the inclusion of "insider" researchers and community members in each project. Israel et al. (1998:187) considered the participation of community members in the research process to be "of paramount importance." Both the maternal and child health evaluation and the emergency department assessment used community members to help with data collection. For the evaluation, program staff members, who were residents of the communities, helped to facilitate focus groups and introduced researchers to interview participants. In the emergency room study, community members were recruited and trained to interview patients at several hospitals. One researcher involved in the workforce development project was from



the region where the project was being conducted, and several researchers working with the Gulf Coast project were from the state of Mississippi, including one who was born and raised on the Mississippi Gulf Coast. Although none of the interview participants defined themselves as insiders, their relationships with research participants and to the larger community were cited by other researchers as helpful during the question development and data collection processes.

Finally, each project achieved outcomes that researchers and community partners generally considered positive, perhaps lessening concerns about individual researchers' status. One community partner from the maternal and child health evaluation discussed how the research findings helped program staff members identify what they were doing well and what needed to be changed. The organizations involved in both the maternal and child health evaluation and the Gulf Coast assessment project have used the data collected from their projects to secure additional funding for their programs. The workforce development project used the data collected to produce a curriculum used to train unemployed and underemployed Delta residents. The emergency department assessment led to extended hours at some community health centers to address a major barrier identified by the research.

## CONCLUSION

Most research participants identified themselves and the researchers they worked with as both insiders and outsiders, recognizing that they and most of the people they worked with occupied a "space between" (Serrant-Green 2002). Moreover, most participants saw the diversity of the research teams as an advantage. Community partners valued researchers who understood their communities' language, culture, and values, but also valued the objectivity and legitimacy that "outsider" researchers brought to the data collection and analysis process. Researchers valued community partners' participation in setting the project's goals, developing questions, and helping recruit research participants, ensuring that the research remained relevant and representative. The participation of researchers who had lived in the community or region for some time, the trust that the community partners had developed with the Institute before the project, and the positive outcomes that researchers and community partners reported because of the research may all have played a role in the interviewees' positive classifications of researchers' status and their impact on the CBR process.

The findings presented here can be used to aid community-based researchers and practitioners as they develop research teams for future projects and reflect on

their own practice as researchers. Given that the four projects examined here largely represent long-standing partnerships between community organizations and a research center, future research should examine newly established CBR partnerships to determine whether, without a strong relationship of trust, community partners and researchers perceive a more significant impact of researchers' status on the research process and outcomes. Nonetheless, the present findings offer valuable insight into the impact of researchers' status in cases where those strong trust relationships are already present.

#### AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

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