Commentary on "Community Research: Partnership in Black Communities"

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Dr. Hatch et al. provide a useful, insightful overview of models of collaboration between communities and university-based or agency-based researchers. As they point out, communities and researchers can become engaged in the process of research in several ways. In three of the models they discuss, the community remains essentially a passive participant in the process. Their view of an "active involvement" of the community is clearly one in which the community is a *partner* in the definition of the problem to be investigated, as opposed to only a participant in providing research respondents or even advisors and employees. I sympathize with this perspective. I agree that models of community involvement in which the community complies with the requests of the researcher—no matter how skillfully those requests are provided through advisory boards or networks of community leaders—create the potential for intellectual exploitation that differs primarily in degree, although perhaps not in kind, from the more flagrant past examples of asymmetrical relationships. More active involvement of the community can avoid this manipulation.

At the same time, as Hatch et al. note, carrying out research that "involves and enables" the community provokes difficult issues both in the conduct of scientific research and in the development of collaborative relationships. Specifically, collaborative community research can produce tension between scientists and the society that is the object of their study. In this commentary, I discuss this issue further.

An anecdote can perhaps describe one dimension of this potential tension between the concerns of scientific research and the concerns of the community. My first experience as a researcher working in collaboration with a community-based institution occurred in a health research and advocacy organization in a small city in the northeastern United States. As part of my job, I taught a short course in social scientific research methods to persons working in the organization. During one course, a person hired as a community health advocate asked me to comment on a problem: What would we do if the results of a particular study we were working on did not end as we expected? How could we alter the analyses of the data to demonstrate what we already knew we wanted to show?

This question could charitably be described as ingenuous, or it could be described as motivated by intellectual dishonesty. I was not taken aback by the question, because I understood it to be motivated by a sincere belief that the knowledge required to alter the community for the better was already at hand; all the research could do was, perhaps, demonstrate more elegantly what was already known—icing on the cake, so to speak.

I suspect, however, that some researchers in the scientific community, including those who sit on the review panels that determine the viability of particular projects, believe that community research conducted according to the model of collaboration advocated by Hatch et al. can too easily become an exercise in "proving" what researchers and activists want to prove. Those researchers on panels of federal and private funding agencies want pristine scientific research designs and clear testing of hypotheses, and they perceive the collaborative process as a potential bias.

I think that this real tension stems in fact from a misunderstanding of the process of scientific research at both ends of the researcher-community continuum. That is, many researchers who hold to the model of "pristine science" fail to comprehend the *scientific* value of collaboration with the community, and many community activists fail to understand the *power* inherent in scientific theory and method.

Science is fundamentally a process of "weeding out" false statements about the world. Shorn of philosophical niceties, a scientific hypothesis is simply a guess about the relationship between two phenomena. We are guessing, for example, that psychosocial variables are related to an increased risk of preterm delivery. The logical canons of science are the best—not perfect, but simply the best available—method of determining if those guesses (Popper's conjectures) are true or not (Popper's refutations).[1] Our hypotheses about the world often appear true, but turn out false, because one phenomenon can masquerade as another. The very best examples derive from studies of ethnicity, which have determined that ethnic group membership

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often so completely overlaps with social class that one can be mistaken for the other. By sorting out that confounding much racist thinking about ethnicity has been effectively challenged (if not entirely laid to rest).[2,3]

Scientific researchers have, however, an unfortunate habit of thinking that, because their methods of evaluating hypotheses are relatively so powerful, they need pay attention only to their own concerns, especially their own ways of generating hypotheses. Serendipity does in fact loom large in all accounts of scientific experience, but, for the most part, hypotheses are derived from theory, that set of ideas that describes how the world (or, rather, some small part of it) works. Based on the accumulated insight of many bright people, and the combination of numerous empirical evaluations of that insight, statements describing what is known, not known, and surmised about phenomena can be assembled. This is theory. It is great because in combining the thoughts and observations of many, it challenges common sense and received wisdom.[4]

But we sometimes forget that theory can be incomplete, parochial, and unless stringently evaluated, just plain wrong. So-called "stress theory" is a blatant example. Our notions of what stress is and how it affects people are interesting, but they are also based on a peculiarly Western middle-class idea of personhood. Furthermore, much of stress theory ignores social and historical contexts of human behavior.[5] This deficiency does not vitiate its usefulness as guidance for scientific research, but it does require other ways—systematic ways—of generating hypotheses.

This reasoning is precisely why the researcher needs to collaborate with the community, in the active sense Hatch et al. advocate. People know their own communities, the way their communities work, the constraints and obstacles and resources that influence behavior. In defining the problems to be studied and in identifying the variables to be included in the examination of those problems, the community can help researchers overcome the weakness and parochial nature of their theory. Philosophers of science call this process "the context of discovery."[6] Anthropologists call it "ethnography."[7] Sociologists call it "grounded theory."[8] All of these labels describe a process in which the researcher moves beyond the narrow (but useful) confines of theory and previous research to discover new ways of understanding phenomena, informed by the lived experience of real people.

Collaboration in this sense will also benefit the community. If theory can be parochial, so can the community's understanding of a phenomenon. The researcher's theory and accumulated knowledge can greatly benefit the community's attempts to solve real and pressing problems with limited resources. More importantly, however, the strengths of scientific research in evaluating the truth of statements about the world can be of considerable value to the community. If the community wants to bring its resources to bear on an important problem, then it needs to marshal those resources in the most effective way. If the process has not been specified accurately, then the investment of resources is likely to be ineffective.

An example of a potentially ineffective investment of resources is suggested in my own work on stress and adaptation in the black community, which started with the reasonable notion that members of the extended family in the black community would be the main source of social support to individuals experiencing social stress. This support would, in turn, protect those persons from social stress, so they would be at a lower risk of hypertension or psychological depression. In initial ethnographic studies in the community, I found that many individuals, although strongly committed to their extended family, preferred to seek support from others in times of need. In analyzing data on depression, I discovered that extended kin support had no beneficial effect for the entire sample; however, in reformulating the hypothesis, I found that older persons were indeed protected from the effects of stress on the basis of their extended kin support. But for younger persons, nonfamily support was protective.[9] These findings were then replicated in an independent study of high blood pressure, using a different sample drawn from the same community.[10]

This example emphasizes the problem that could be encountered if careful scientific research were not used to evaluate claims to knowledge. The most sensitive and sophisticated analyses of the black community point to the extended family as a mechanism of personal and social adaptation, and these analyses are correct, in part. But these analyses fail to account for the degree of social change in the community and how that social change has altered community support systems, especially for younger persons. Reasonable investments in a program to strengthen systems of social support, and hence to enhance the health of the community, must take into account this diversity within the community.

In addition, careful scientific work can assist the community by providing power. In our society, knowledge very often translates directly into power. In the process of advocacy, knowledge can persuade those who hold political power that resources should be invested in a particular way. Bolstered by carefully evaluated research findings, a community seeking resources can make a virtually unassailable assertion that it "knows" what the problem is and how to best address it. Such knowledge does not, of course, ensure that a community will succeed in its advocacy. But it does seal off an escape route for those who wish to prevent the access of the community to certain kinds of resources. Put more bluntly, careful scientific research, carried out according to the active model of collaboration Hatch et al. advocate, can be the 2-by-4 to use on the mule of a bureaucracy.

I can summarize my argument about the value of collaborative research by returning to my anecdote. The concern of the community advocate who asked the question was very real, not to be dismissed as either naive or dishonest. But he could be reassured by the fact that careful research, informed by scientific theory and method and grounded in the community, is more likely than any other model for the generation and application of knowledge to arrive at a useful set of truths. His ultimate concern, which was to improve the health and well-being of the minority community, could best be served through this process. Collaboration with social scientific researchers who were also committed to such a process would not subvert that aim; rather, it would help to specify how best to achieve it.

To be sure, this fairly abstract (if not downright lofty) discussion of the value of collaboration between the scientific researcher and the community studied does not address many complicated pragmatic issues. Negotiating such a collaborative relationship can demand research skills, time, and patience perhaps notably lacking in some academic researchers. Similarly, the willingness of the community (and ignoring for the moment the complicated issue of just what "the community" is and how

you find it) to enter into the long-term pact required for high-quality research can oftentimes necessitate a difficult shift in values.

A thorough discussion of these issues is well beyond the scope of this short essay. But I will close with a few brief thoughts. First, not all researchers need to become experts in community work. Several academic disciplines (anthropology and sociology, for example) have made understanding communities their business, and members of a research team from these disciplines can help in the translation (in both directions) between the academy and the community. However, specialists in community research cannot be brought on board simply as academic public relations experts, their job being to sell the research—any research—to a community. Rather, community researchers, conversant in both cultures, can help to negotiate differences.

Second, assuming that all communities are naive about the research process would be a mistake. In fact, in many communities, members are quite knowledgeable about, and sympathetic to, the aims and aspirations of the academic researchers, including the constraints and obstacles they face. "The community" is spoken of as a single entity, but there are many different kinds of communities. In the future, empirical attention should consider the dimensions along which communities vary. This study could prove very helpful in future efforts to understand and to intervene in community health problems.

And third, simply thinking about these issues in a different way, or, perhaps, thinking about them at all, can practically assist the researcher. As Hatch et al. suggest, the researcher should consider how scientific work may both benefit the community in a direct sense and manifest the acumen of community members—a major step in a new direction for collaborative research.

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