

# Preparation for Community-Engaged Research

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Community-engaged research (CER) for environmental justice (EJ) requires researchers to redefine their traditional roles, which involves unlearning dominant ways of seeing and being as much as learning new knowledge, skills, and dispositions. Knowing oneself in relation to others is a necessary step in co-producing knowledge with communities. Participants need to prepare themselves by examining their own positioning in multiple structures of privilege and oppression. This self-examination is vital for developing the commitment and capacity to redress power imbalances between and among researchers and communities during the research process (Foronda et al. 2016; Tervalon and Murray-Garcia 1998). The goals of this inquiry are to liberate oneself and others from potential abuses of power, but also to move beyond cynicism about the ability of differently situated people to collaborate or paralyzing fear of doing harm, which can prevent researchers from engaging with EJ issues and communities altogether (Lockie 2018). Researchers' examination of themselves in relation to EJ communities is a continuous commitment, not a one-time task, because of the complexity of the work, and ongoing needs to respond to new circumstances and build new relationships.

This chapter lays out the groundwork researchers need to do before building a formal relationship with a community partner to engage in the research process. The chapter presents a framework that researchers can use to examine their positioning in multiple structures of power, including researchers' individual characteristics, disciplines, institutional affiliations, and project-related factors. Doing this groundwork is crucial for anticipating potential barriers between researchers and community partners, and preparing to bridge these obstacles to collaboration.

TABLE 3.1. Preparation for CER for EJ

Dimension of Justice	In Preparation for CER for EJ
<b>Distribution</b> <i>Who ought to get what?</i>	Developing an initial understanding of how community members view the root causes and remedies of environmental and social inequities in the community, and defining roles for researchers in helping to build communities' capacities for research
<b>Procedure</b> <i>Who ought to decide?</i>	Preparing to share power over the design and conduct of research with community partners, based on a thorough understanding of the community's and potential organizational partners' history, situation, strengths, concerns, and internal diversity
<b>Recognition</b> <i>Who ought to be respected and valued?</i>	Recognizing the complex and intersectional nature of privilege and oppression in research relationships  Engaging in anti-oppression training and reflection  Developing cultural competences and humility to value communities' knowledge  Assessing how one's discipline and institution respects or devalues community knowledge
<b>Transformation</b> <i>What ought to change, and how?</i>	Transforming researchers' training, traditional roles, disciplines, and institutional practices to prepare the ground for creating trusting and reciprocal relationships with EJ communities

Table 3.1 summarizes these aspects of self-preparation, showing how they relate to the four dimensions of justice common to CER and EJ.

Our approach is grounded in the epistemology of CER, which begins with the idea that what we know is influenced by where we stand and with whom we interact (Young 2000, 136). Intersectional theory draws attention to how an individual's position is crisscrossed by locations in multiple social groups, and how distinct forms of oppression and privilege can be compounded by these multiple identities (Crenshaw 1989). To be a Black woman, for example, is to contend with a mix of environmental racism and sexism that is different from the environmental oppression that Black men or white women experience (Ducre 2018). Yet our perspectives do not automatically determine our opinions, interests, or beliefs. A perspective consists, instead, "in a set of questions, kinds of experience, and assumptions with which reasoning begins, rather than the conclusion drawn" (Young 2000, 137). Residents of EJ communities have diverse perspectives, but they are often distinct from the vantage points of people situated elsewhere, including most credentialed researchers. Thus, community-engaged researchers must grapple with how to build bridges to and among the multiple perspectives within EJ communities.

Based on this epistemology, we present a framework and set of questions that can help guide researchers' inquiry into their positioning, issues of power, and necessary preparation for CER in an EJ community (summarized in table 3.2). We

TABLE 3.2. Researcher Positioning, Power, and Preparation

Positioning	Power Relations	Preparation for Researchers and Research Teams
<b>Individual</b>	<b>Individual</b>	<b>Individual</b>
<i>Ascribed Characteristics:</i> Race, ethnicity, class, Indigeneity, gender, nationality, citizenship status, sexual orientation, religion, physical or mental ability, etc.	Which of your identity characteristics are sources of privilege (dominance)?  Which are sources of oppression (subordination)?  How might your privileges and oppressions influence your interactions with community partners? With other community members?	What research and training in anti-oppression, cultural competences, cultural humility, and conflict management would be most necessary for you to work with your community partners?  How could you build empathy with community partners and earn their trust from the start?  Which kinds of identity characteristics would be most valuable for researchers who want to work with your community partners?  Which role(s) in the research process (“uses of self”) would be most appropriate for you?  How can you and your community partners benefit from a diversity of identities, skills, and viewpoints in the research?  Which roles for researchers do you most need to learn and unlearn to share power with your community partners?
<i>Achieved Characteristics:</i> Education, job, social position, languages, etc.		
Which ascribed and achieved characteristics do you share with members of the community with whom you want to collaborate?		
Which do you not share?		
Which are most important to how you perceive yourself?		
Which do you think will be most relevant to how community members will perceive you?		
<b>Disciplinary</b>	<b>Disciplinary</b>	<b>Disciplinary</b>
What is the historic relationship of your field to the community in which you aim to collaborate?	In what ways do theories and methodologies in your field reflect colonizing, dominant knowledge?	What research and training do you need to do on decolonizing, liberatory approaches to knowledge in your field?
What roles and actions have people in your field typically taken in this community?	In what ways does your field contribute to decolonizing, liberatory knowledge?	Are there additional disciplinary perspectives and research capabilities you/your team need, to work with your community partners?
How is the community likely to view you as a representative of your field?		

(Continued)

TABLE 3.2. (Continued)

Positioning	Power Relations	Preparation for Researchers and Research Teams
<p><b>Institutional</b></p> <p>How does your institution hinder or reward CER?</p> <p>What is the historic relationship of your institution to the community in which you aim to collaborate?</p> <p>What roles and actions have people in your institution typically taken in this community?</p> <p>How is the community likely to view you as a representative of your institution?</p>	<p><b>Institutional</b></p> <p>How is your institution organized to share power and resources with community partners, or not?</p> <p>How does your institution act as a source of domination or liberation in the community with which you want to work?</p> <p>Which of your institutions' programs or actions may be most important to your community partners?</p>	<p><b>Institutional</b></p> <p>Which interventions might you need to make in your institution to collaborate with your community partners (educating your IRB, getting approval to share resources, etc.)?</p> <p>Which role(s) in the research process ("uses of institution") would be most appropriate for your institution to play?</p>
<p><b>Project Related</b></p> <p>What are the initial topic, purpose, community benefits, time commitment, level of change, and model of change?</p> <p>Which of your plans are you willing or able to negotiate with community partners, and which are you not willing or able to change?</p> <p>What is your initial definition of the community and its boundaries (geographical, social, etc.)?</p>	<p><b>Project Related</b></p> <p>How might your plans align or conflict with your community partners' purposes, time frame, level of change, and model of change?</p> <p>How do your plans reflect dominating or liberatory understandings of these elements of the project?</p> <p>How do your assumptions about the community and its boundaries reflect dominant or liberatory understandings?</p>	<p><b>Project Related</b></p> <p>What do you need to learn about the community situation and context?</p> <p>How will you explore multiple ways of defining the community to avoid imposing your assumptions?</p> <p>How will you research the community's internal diversity and reflect it in the composition of your partners and/or perspectives?</p>

draw on insights and tools for considering how researchers' relationships to communities may be structured by the identities of individual researchers (Hyde 2017; Axner, n.d.), the research team (Garzón et al. 2013; Muhammad et al. 2015), and their institution (Collet 2008). We add ways of thinking about how researchers are positioned by their disciplines and by their initial plans for specific research projects, which need to be open to redefinition with community partners in CER.

## INDIVIDUAL POSITIONING

### *Examining Identities*

Researchers' identities are formed in part by the characteristics listed in table 3.2, which frequently position people in relations of domination and subordination. In EJ research, different *ascribed* characteristics may be especially relevant in different contexts. In the U.S., environmental injustices and EJ movements have been shaped especially by race, Indigeneity, and class (see chapter 1). Therefore, researchers in the U.S. must especially examine their own positioning within structures of white supremacy, settler colonialism, and racial capitalism. Researchers from the Global North doing transnational fieldwork in the Global South must consider how their positionality and power stems from their nationality and language, and their relation to specific histories of colonization, development, and cultural and economic globalization in the local context (Sultana 2017). All researchers need to consider how their *achieved* characteristics also shape their relationships and power in the relevant community. Education level, access to funding, status as credentialed experts, and exclusive scholarly languages privilege researchers in relation to most members of EJ communities, regardless of whether researchers share other attributes in common with community members.

To recognize privileges and prepare to build trust with community partners, researchers can begin by mapping characteristics they share and do not share with members of the community. Community members may perceive different aspects of researchers' identities as more relevant than researchers themselves do. In particular, people from dominant groups are socialized *not* to perceive themselves as defined by their whiteness, maleness, heterosexuality, and so on, while these may be the most important initial markers of their identity for EJ communities. The assumption that one's race, gender, or other characteristics are normal or unremarkable is a privilege of power. Considering how each of our attributes may be a source of oppression or dominance, and how they may influence relationships with community partners and other members of the community, is critical.

This reflection should be informed by anti-oppression study and training salient to the community with which researchers want to collaborate. Many universities and other institutions offer training in how to practice allyship and solidarity, informed by resources on antiracism (DiAngelo 2018; Kendi 2019), antisexism and sexual violence prevention (Crimmins 2019), decolonizing relations with

Indigenous peoples (McGuire-Adams 2021; Swiftwolfe 2019), creating safe spaces for LGBTQ+ people (Woodford et al. 2014) and undocumented immigrants (Sanchez and So 2015), and intergroup dialogue (Zúñiga, Lopez, and Ford 2014). CER researchers and community partners also provide guidance on how collaborations can address race and ethnicity (Environmental Justice and the Common Good Initiative 2020; Fernandez et al. 2017; Murphy et al. 2013), national origin and immigration status (Collet 2008; Vaughn and Jacquez 2017), and how these intersect with differences of class and expertise (Muhammad et al. 2015, 2017). Eng et al. (2017) and Yonas et al. (2013) specifically address antiracism training for CER.

The most valuable of these resources link the personal and the political. They help researchers examine how to unlearn oppressive language, assumptions, and actions; build relationships based on respect for others' differences; and intervene in everyday interactions to promote liberatory and respectful relations. At the same time, they teach allyship strategies that respect the leadership of people from subordinated groups, rather than attempting to speak for them. These resources also link the study of interpersonal and intergroup relations and communication with the history, laws, and policies that continue to influence domination and subordination. For example, working with a community threatened by deportation of undocumented members requires researchers to familiarize themselves with current immigration policy and work carefully to include undocumented people's participation, while shielding them from risk. The more that researchers take responsibility for learning and acting on histories and ongoing structures of domination, the less likely it is that researchers will impose upon community partners by asking them to provide an education they have little time and less responsibility to give.

Anti-oppression work can also help researchers from marginalized groups address the challenges they face in research institutions and communities. These researchers can draw support from mentoring relationships, study and affinity groups, professional associations, and social movements that address the challenges of operating within dominant institutions and provide alternative communities of practice (see box 3.1). A healing justice approach, which stems from community organizing, can also help researchers cope with stress and trauma from being treated as second-class outsiders within academia and the public sphere, overcome internalized oppression, and avoid horizontal hostility among subordinated groups who are often pitted against one another for resources and recognition (Axner, n.d.; Pyles 2021). This approach directs attention to preparing to heal personal, interpersonal, and institutional harm by caring for our and our partners' physical, mental, and emotional well-being while conducting CER and working for change. Healing justice practices of dialogue, mutual support, and mind-body care can take any form that feels culturally relevant to participants, from celebrations, feasts, and purification ceremonies to yoga, mural painting, storytelling, basketball games, and many other activities.

### BOX 3.1. MARINA PANDO SOCIAL JUSTICE RESEARCH COLLABORATIVE

When Kristie Valdez-Guillen and I (Floralma Boj Lopez) decided to start the Marina Pando Social Justice Research Collaborative, our goal as members of East Yard Communities for Environmental Justice (EYCEJ) who were also pursuing doctoral degrees was to create a space where young, first-generation college students who had been part of EJ youth organizing in Los Angeles could have a positive and welcoming experience while learning to do research. The research itself was not the priority, but rather an avenue through which we could continue fostering relationships to youth members who went off to college and were dealing with their own forms of alienation at universities.

The collaborative also pushed back on academic discourses that critique community efforts and instead used my own community knowledge and research skills in the service of movement building. As a first-generation student, I wrestled with how to connect the countless struggles of my multiple communities with what I was doing in my doctoral program. The collaborative became my humble contribution to blurring the boundaries between research and community. I assumed a facilitator rather than a principal investigator role, given that many of the issues raised by the youth were not what I was trained to research. With the expertise of the EYCEJ staff, my co-facilitator and I pooled our collective knowledge to support the youth to carry out these research projects. The EYCEJ staff were particularly excited because the program was coming from community members like myself with explicit goals for research that would benefit the participants, the organization, and the larger movement.

The collaborative's paid summer research fellowships also became an opportunity to support young people who had left the neighborhood for college to return home to apply their college-level skills to the issues they had already been organizing against as high school students. Students already had a deep knowledge of the issues and relationships with the EYCEJ staff; this would not have been the case had we recruited random college students who were unfamiliar with the community, environmental racism, and the organization. After an intensive week of full-day trainings on the nuts and bolts of collaborative research and data collection, we met with participants weekly to discuss research challenges and guided them through the writing of a research report, creating a research poster, and ultimately presenting their research to the community. While we confronted challenges like the need for more technical guidance, the time crunch of generating research during the summer, and the need to fundraise for stipends, the program produced interesting and accessible research. We culminated the program with student presentations of their research to the community members with whom the students had organized. While the students produced great projects on food apartheid, heavy metal contamination, industrial water runoff, and other issues, the real measure of our success was how many of these young people decided to remain members of the organization. Some have since joined the board of directors or staff of the organization, so the program also helped build new leadership.

*Cultural Competence, Humility, and Preparing for Conflict*

CER practitioners also need to familiarize themselves with their community partners' values, practices, languages, and other cultural characteristics. Organizations and researchers involved in CER prepare themselves by developing *cultural and linguistic competence*, which means they

- have a defined set of values and principles, and demonstrate behaviors, attitudes, policies, and structures that enable them to work effectively cross-culturally;
- have the capacity to (1) value diversity, (2) conduct self-assessment, (3) manage the dynamics of difference, (4) acquire and institutionalize cultural knowledge, and (5) adapt to diversity and the cultural contexts of the communities they serve;
- incorporate the above in all aspects of policy making, administration, practice, and service delivery and systematically involve consumers, key stakeholders, and communities (National Center for Cultural Competence, n.d.).

Researchers also need to be familiar with the environmental justice movement's values and culture. The "*Jemez Principles for Democratic Organizing*" ([www.ejnet.org/ej/jemez.pdf](http://www.ejnet.org/ej/jemez.pdf)) and the Second People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit's "*Principles of Working Together*" ([www.ejnet.org/ej/workingtogether.pdf](http://www.ejnet.org/ej/workingtogether.pdf)) provide foundational principles for forming partnerships with academic institutions and lawyers who recognize community expertise. Both documents help illuminate how movement organizations aim to build respectful relationships, address cultural differences, practice leadership that is accountable to the grassroots, resolve conflicts, and share resources fairly.

Scholars must also develop *cultural humility* that goes beyond acquiring cultural knowledge and communication skills, to respect community perspectives (Tervalon and Murray-Garcia 1998, 120). Humility requires ongoing commitment to personal and social transformation to redress power imbalances between dominant and subordinate groups, and between professional researchers and community members (Foronda et al. 2016). Sensitivity to the complex ways in which cultural power and privilege can affect research relationships is crucial for earning community members' trust, designing more respectful and effective studies, sharing the research appropriately within communities, and applying evidence from one setting to another (Fernandez et al. 2017; Vaughn and Jacquez 2017; Murphy et al. 2013). Researchers should prepare to address relevant issues of culture and power that can arise in partnerships with specific communities by consulting past research conducted with similar communities, such as case studies on doing research with people who are Asian American (Islam et al. 2017), LGBTQ+ (Kano,

Sawyer, and Willging 2017), deaf (Barnett et al. 2017), or HIV positive (Rhodes et al. 2017) and with members of faith-based groups (Kitzman-Ulrich and Holt 2017) and with youth (Arredondo et al. 2013; Mueller and Tippins 2015; Ozer, Piatt, and Willging 2017; Fernández 2021).

Humility also prepares researchers to recognize communities as sources of knowledge and to enact transformative justice for past abuses of power in the research process. Researchers must open themselves to how community partners conceptualize their environment and health, their visions of EJ, and their goals for research. For example, McGreavy et al. (2021) reflect on multiple projects on forest conservation, river restoration, and co-management of fisheries by an interdisciplinary team of Native and white settler scholars with the Penobscot Nation of the Wabanaki Tribal Nations in Maine. The partners faced fundamental tensions between academic and Penobscot researchers' conceptions of science, place, and time. They addressed these tensions by drawing on Wabanaki research methods and these nations' practices of diplomacy to negotiate differences; building trust over time while meeting academic needs to publish by including pilot studies, iterative engagement, and dialogue among partners; slowing the typical research process to adopt rhythms of collaborative work linked to the seasons and Wabanaki culture; and integrating Wabanaki students into leadership roles in the research team. Additional cases examine how humility has inspired researchers to grapple with issues of cultural power in projects on neighborhood health (Ellis and Walton 2012) and environmental indicators (Garzón et al. 2013; Shepard et al. 2013), and to translate CER principles themselves into culturally relevant and accessible language to ensure research participants can give fully informed consent to participate in projects (Burke et al. 2013).

CER practitioners can also prepare for conflict in research projects, which is normal in any relationship. In addition to drafting clear and specific agreements on roles, responsibilities, and resource sharing (see chapter 5), research partners can agree at the outset on procedures and techniques for addressing conflict that are culturally relevant to the community. The Maine research team, for example, learned to employ Wabanaki diplomacy, which involves frequent rounds of dialogue that incorporate multiple voices, not simply relying on leaders to execute a single memorandum of understanding at the project's outset (McGreavy et al. 2021).

Additional training in conflict resolution is helpful. Nonviolent communication techniques (Rosenberg 2015) can identify how conflict stems from participants not having their basic needs met, such as needs for resources, recognition, or fair treatment (Pyles 2021). Nonviolent communication engages people in identifying which needs are not being addressed, and aiming to devise solutions that can meet everyone's needs, making conflicts more tractable and reaffirming mutual respect. Restorative justice approaches can address harms in the research

relationship. Devised as an alternative to the criminal justice system's emphasis on punishment, restorative justice puts victims and offenders in dialogue so that they understand how the victims have been harmed, and so both can agree on ways to heal the breach in their relationship and the community (Capeheart and Milovanovic 2020). Transitional justice and conflict transformation approaches focus on reconciliation by investigating past harms, identifying responsible parties and offering reparations to victims, and designing measures to avoid repeated harms (Killean and Dempster 2021). Training in intergroup dialogue can help collaborators move beyond personal attacks and defensive responses to explore how their cultural differences influence their relationships, including their approaches to conflict, and how they can be reconciled (Zúñiga, Lopez, and Ford 2014). Even simple practices, such as agreeing to “call in” collaborators for private conversations about how to change norm-violating behaviors rather than calling out colleagues by publicly denouncing them, can address conflict effectively while preserving relationships (Pyles 2021). While no single approach will work in every situation, especially if there are unresolved power imbalances among participants, the more training researchers have in conflict resolution, the more durable and mutually beneficial a partnership is likely to be.

#### *Roles in Research Teams*

Because researchers need many kinds of preparation for CER, they often form research teams who can bring a broader range of experiences, skills, and identities to the work than any individual can—even before expanding the research team to include local partners. As researchers consider their roles, they can examine how their identities map collectively to the community's, and consider the best “use of self” by each team member to form authentic relationships that advance the research.

One set of questions revolves around who is an “insider” and an “outsider” in relation to the community. The CER paradigm rejects the assumption that researchers who study their own communities cannot discover truth because they lack objectivity. The notion that outsiders are more trustworthy stems from positivist assumptions that detached observers should conduct research *on* communities rather than *with* them (see chapter 2). In addition, dominant groups have deployed this idea to reinforce their power over knowledge by reframing a major limitation of outsider-led research—its inability to understand subordinated communities on their own terms—as a purported “strength.” At its worst, this distinction has reinforced racism and colonialism, as white scholars tried to discredit research on Black communities by Black scholars (Morris 2017) and attacked researchers of all backgrounds who developed strong empathy with Indigenous communities for “going native” (Kanuha 2000). Researchers from non-dominant groups still must contend with accusations of bias and lack of rigor when studying their own

communities, which researchers from dominant groups rarely face when studying their own or others' communities (Serrant-Green 2002).

In contrast, CER practitioners tend to view “insider” status as an asset for researchers, while also questioning the terms of the insider/outsider dichotomy itself. Researchers who share important attributes with community partners—such as race, gender, or tribal affiliation—are often better positioned to earn their trust; to draw on shared experiences of environmental injustices; to gain access to knowledge the community is reluctant to share with others; and to act as cultural knowledge brokers who can translate meanings between communities and research institutions, helping people rooted in each of these contexts to form common understandings (Davis and Ramírez-Andreotta 2021; Kerstetter 2012; Moore de Peralta, Smithwick, and Torres 2020). Thus, researchers who share identity characteristics with communities may be the most appropriate team members to work regularly with community partners, although all project leaders should also expect to make themselves available to demonstrate respect and accountability to community leaders (Muhammad et al. 2015). Researchers who live in EJ communities are especially valuable because they understand local systems of inequality and have more embodied and nuanced expertise. Because researchers and students from non-dominant groups are often made to feel that they are “outsiders within” research institutions, it is important for their colleagues to act in ways that honor these team members' uniquely valuable contributions.

As research teams expand to include community partners, the full team will need to define additional roles. Rivera and Erlich's (1998) thinking about role differentiation in community organizing offers guidance. They suggest that community residents who share multiple ties (e.g., of race, class, and neighborhood residency) are the most appropriate people to serve as grassroots organizers, working personally and intimately with their neighbors. Similarly, local residents can work most closely with other residents to gather data and disseminate findings (but ought not be restricted only to these roles). People who share ties of race or class with residents but do not live in their community may serve best as liaisons to the larger society. In CER projects, these people may be part of a team based in a research institution, who serve as principal investigators or project managers. Sympathetic outsiders who do not share any primary ties with the community can provide technical assistance and resources to build community members' capacities and leadership to do the work on the ground. In CER, these people may be other members of the institutional research team, from principal investigators who raise money, manage the team, and help root the study in prior research to other team members who train residents to design research instruments and analyze data.

However, because CER involves the co-production of knowledge, all members of research teams should be able to participate in designing studies and

interpreting data. For the same reasons, all researchers need to be wary of assuming privileged insight simply by virtue of sharing similar markers of identity or living in the community, or of assuming that others are incapable of shared understanding across differences (Lockie 2018). One way to create this kind of equitable research environment is to cultivate “up, down, and peer mentorship,” which recognizes that expertise is collective, and moves beyond status hierarchies among professional and community researchers to “create a circular democratic model where contributions from each unique position become the established norm” (Muhammad et al. 2015, 15).

### *Reframing Researchers’ Roles*

To develop respectful and reciprocal relations with EJ communities, professional researchers and students must *unlearn* their traditional roles. In an apologetic essay, Sherry Cable (2012) described how she asked the Yellow Creek Concerned Citizens of Bell County, Kentucky, for permission to study their campaign to protect themselves from toxic waste emitted by a local tannery. One member asked what Cable would get out of the study. “If I can pull it off, I’ll publish enough articles in academic journals to earn promotion and tenure, instead of losing my job,” she responded. Another member asked what the group would gain from her work. Caught unprepared, Cable admitted, “Nothing” (2012, 21). Fortunately for her, the group’s leader found her honesty refreshing and let her study the campaign. In her essay, Cable apologizes to him for acting in the traditional role of researcher as *parasite* and explains how the experience motivated her to develop a CER practice that prioritizes benefits for community collaborators.

Community-engaged researchers also need to avoid thinking of themselves as *saviors*, who assume that EJ communities depend on outsiders to improve their conditions rather than collaborating with residents to emancipate all people (including scholars) from relations of domination. Messianic researchers are likely to try to make decisions alone that ought to be made with community partners, disrespecting their knowledge and agency and failing to see that research is one small contribution to the success of complex, dynamic, and vibrant community-led movements. CER practitioners also avoid presenting themselves as *public intellectuals*, who engage in media punditry or explain EJ communities on their behalf without their approval. Nor should CER researchers be what Fine (1994) calls *ventriloquists*, who, without residents’ consent, present researchers’ own interpretations of a community in an objective third-person voice or selectively curate residents’ voices to illustrate the researchers’ own conclusions, rather than collaborating with EJ communities to co-create knowledge with them.

While much EJ research documents inequities and injustices, CER researchers should not consider themselves merely as *damage assessors*. Eve Tuck (2009) calls

for researchers to move away from framing communities exclusively as injured. As she writes, “[E]ven when communities are broken and conquered, they are so much more than that—so much more that this incomplete story is an act of aggression” (416). CER recognizes that residents survive and continue to create joy, fight back, and practice their own epistemologies. Researchers collaborate to design studies that begin from community strengths and concerns, and aim to co-produce something of value and benefit to community partners, not a catalog of victimhood (Wallerstein et al. 2019).

Instead, community-engaged researchers embrace a variety of other terms for the roles they play, which reflect careful consideration of how their roles depend on specific contexts and relationships to communities. Some researchers think of themselves as short-term *collaborators* on one-time projects. Other researchers identify as long-term *allies*, acknowledging their differences of power and privilege from many residents of EJ communities, while committing to work in solidarity by supporting community members’ leadership over multiple projects. This may involve acting as a *power shifter*, who uses power derived from one’s access to funding, academic or government positions, and other sources to transfer power and resources to community partners (Wallerstein et al. 2019). Some researchers call themselves *scholar activists*, who try to integrate their long-term professional and personal efforts for EJ by working with community organizations and movements on CER and in other capacities (Hale 2008; Montenegro de Wit et al. 2021).

Researchers also define their roles in relation to their ties to the community. Nina Wallerstein, a non-Indigenous researcher who has led many research teams from the University of New Mexico that have collaborated with Native communities, describes herself as a *guest* in tribal homelands. For Wallerstein, being a guest means recognizing that “the community owns and has authority over its own geographic and cultural territory,” that academics must ask permission to enter, and that they should bring “offerings or gifts as a symbol that one accepts guest status and conducts oneself accordingly by recognizing ‘house rules,’ or social norms of the community one has been invited into” (Muhammad et al. 2015, 9). EJ researchers with closer ties to communities find other ways to define themselves. Lorenda Belone manages her multiple identities as a member of the same University of New Mexico research team, a Native New Mexican, and a woman, by calling herself a *native researcher* (rather than an academic researcher), who reconciles clan and academic obligations in her work (Muhammad et al. 2015). Magdalena Avila, a Chicana member of the same team, sees herself as a *practitioner of a way of life*, in which CER embodies “the principles that guide my life” (8), including working hand in hand with communities in which she is both an insider and outsider, and deconstructing this distinction with her partners in the process.

## DISCIPLINARY POSITIONING

Researchers also need to anticipate how their disciplines position them in relation to the community with which they want to collaborate. For example, many Indigenous communities have experienced anthropologists as people who rob ancestors' graves, and educators as people who rob their children of their culture (Estes 2019). Researchers in these fields and others who win communities' trust have studied the historic relationship of their discipline to the community, including its harms and benefits. These researchers are prepared to acknowledge this history, to explain how their actions will differ from harmful predecessors, and to listen carefully to communities' conditions for collaboration. These researchers have learned, for example, which research protocols a potential Indigenous partner requires and are prepared to follow them before initiating contact. CER researchers have also thoroughly examined how theories and methodologies in their field continue to marginalize specific communities' knowledge, and any guidance the field provides on how to decolonize and liberate that knowledge.

## INSTITUTIONAL POSITIONING

Researchers' home institutions also position them in relation to communities, requiring researchers to examine their employer's culture of research and its reputation in the eyes of the community. Most academic institutions raise barriers to CER by valuing the number and prestige of publications rather than their value to communities, rewarding individual scholarship more than collaborative research, and failing to trust community members to observe research ethics and co-manage funding (see chapter 5). Public agencies often restrict government researchers from collaborating with partisan political groups. Researchers need to reconcile their institution's demands with obligations to community partners, while working to transform their institutions to be more supportive of CER (as discussed in chapter 5). In particular, academic researchers must plan to publish peer-reviewed research that meets disciplinary standards to maintain their positions if they want to keep doing CER. They also need to reach out early to their institutional review boards to understand how they apply their ethics requirements to community participants, and to institutional finance offices to understand their stipulations for paying out funds to community partners.

In addition, researchers should study their institutions' historical relationships with specific EJ communities to understand how potential collaborators are likely to view the institution. Is the institution valued as a source of community amenities and jobs, mistrusted as a driver of displacement and gentrification, resented as an occupier of Indigenous homelands? Does the institution operate particular programs that are especially respected—such as community-based learning centers, food pantries, museums, clinics and hospitals, or even athletic teams—that might

help researchers establish contacts in a community? Which of the institution's actions and programs are potential sources of emancipation in the community, and how might one ally with them to make the most appropriate "uses of institution" in one's CER?

## PROJECT-RELATED POSITIONING

### *Clarifying Initial Assumptions*

While CER involves co-designing research with community partners to meet their needs, researchers' interests and capacities may be limited. Before entering into discussions with community collaborators, researchers should estimate the scope of the commitment they expect to make to the project; initial topics, purposes, and anticipated community benefits of the research; the project's intended level of change (from local to global, individual to collective); and the model of change (as driven by grassroots community organizing, coalitions of established community leaders, social service providers, government agencies, etc.) (Barge 2016). Clarifying which of these initial assumptions are open to negotiation, and which are not, should guide researchers to find compatible community partners.

Researchers need to be ready to discuss which resources and how much time they can commit to the community. Will the research be a brief project or one that requires commitment to a longer-term relationship? What are potential levels of funding, and how much of it might be shared with partners? Does the researcher envision the project as limited to a specific location or case? An opening estimate of how much one can commit to a project helps manage partners' expectations and contributes clarity to discussions about collaborative work, building a foundation of transparency for the partnership. It also helps partners avoid diverting community energy to research that would be better spent on other change strategies, such as organized protest or mutual aid. Research partnerships need a clear view of how their joint work relates to enduring and structural injustices, and how their projects can build communities' capacities for change over the long haul.

At the same time, researchers need to be wary of defining issues as narrow problems that are amenable to study using researchers' own highly specific skill sets, while failing to address communities' priorities. EJ researchers especially need to appreciate how community members view the focus of the research in relation to larger patterns of oppression. In North Carolina, for example, academic researchers were able to partner more effectively with local Black-led EJ groups organizing against industrial hog farming than were white-led environmental groups, who saw this struggle narrowly in terms of controlling air and water pollution. In contrast, community leaders saw it as one aspect of a larger struggle against historic and institutionalized racism, which required research to guide and support many

kinds of actions. As one local organizer commented, “One of the things we learned in this whole process was that white people want to solve problems and black people want to solve issues” (quoted in Tajik 2012, 137). Highly responsive CER practitioners are willing to redefine their topic significantly to reflect community knowledge and bring in additional expertise if needed (Wallerstein et al. 2019).

Because drawing boundaries around a community is an act of power, researchers will need to collaborate with community partners to define the community—whether geographically or by social groups or shared characteristics (see chapter 4). The way the community is defined will determine which organizations will lead the research partnership, who the project will recruit as participants, and where to turn for funding.

The selection of research partners is often also a choice of a change model. In EJ movements, grassroots capacity building and organizing are the preferred strategies for social change, although this can take multiple forms and may involve strategic alliances with social service providers, government agencies, and small businesses. CER projects especially seek grassroots organizations that have a strong base in the community, or organizations that are directly accountable to such groups. Many successful research partnerships start among a small group of organizations that are accountable to constituencies who are directly affected by the research problem. These budding partnerships then enlist others who can represent additional facets of the community as co-investigators, advisors, and/or staff members, matching individuals with roles according to their availability, skills, resources, and influence in the community (Hancock and Minkler 2012).

### *Familiarization with the Community*

Researchers should also test their assumptions through preparatory study of the community’s historical context and contemporary situation, how residents experience place, and the community’s ecosystem of organizations and power relations. When studying the community’s history, researchers should seek out sources that represent it through the eyes of groups at the center of the proposed project, not simply academic or journalistic accounts. Street murals, oral histories, and community news media and celebrations are valuable windows into how members of the community understand their past and how it has shaped their present.

Because EJ is place-based work, building partnerships depends on a thorough understanding of the places in which community members live, work, and play. For example, persons conducting CER in South Los Angeles should have a sense of why the area is distinct from other areas of Los Angeles, including the impact of redlining, the Great Migration of Black Americans from the South in the 20th century, deindustrialization, and other environmental and social upheavals, organizing, and social movements. Researchers should examine place-based histories with an eye to how larger logics of white supremacy, colonialism, and

capitalism became operationalized through local policies that shape a community's spatial experience, and how places develop in relation to each other. Frontline and fenceline communities face environmental injustice because they have been selected as sacrifice zones to serve the needs of more environmentally privileged communities for energy, consumer goods, and other benefits, while enjoying protection from the pollution they generate. Tracing the threads of these relationships can point to important research questions about how to transform these relationships.

Understanding place goes beyond studying the current locations of people or of toxic sites to encompass communities' knowledge and experience of place. As Meyer (2008) writes, "Land is more than just a physical locale; it is a mental one that becomes water on the rock of our being" (219). Residents of EJ communities experience places in distinct ways. For example, as Ducre (2018) writes, "poor Black women create distinct cognitive spatial maps of their environments as a means to survive the structural violence and environmental degradation of their communities" (22). This is also distinct from how Indigenous people understand place collectively in relation to the very formation and survival of their nations (Simpson 2017). At the same time, researchers should seek to understand the intersectional sources of environmental inequities within communities, seeking to "more accurately, more relevantly reflect the differentiated needs and capabilities of individuals across and within multiply marginalized groups," so as to design research that can help them identify a range of solutions (Malin and Ryder 2018, 2).

This requires initial study of the community and its internal diversity. What are the community's assets—such as schools, libraries, churches, and other organizations—that are sources of resilience and might be good research partners? Which of these organizations are addressing EJ issues, even if these groups do not identify them as such? What are organizations' current and long-term priorities, and how could CER help advance them? What are their missions, leadership models, decision-making processes, and organizational capacities? For instance, working with an incorporated nonprofit that has full-time staff will be different from working with an unfunded grassroots collective. This difference can shape the organization's capacity to take on interns and whether shared funding is the form of reciprocity that the organization values. Researchers can become familiar with these organizations through their websites, and by following their social media accounts and any news coverage they have received. Volunteering in the community with local organizations can often be an important way to build relationships and demonstrate a commitment to residents that fosters trust and insight. Outsiders to the community should seek local contacts who can vouch for them and make introductions. Researchers should also ask whether established organizations adequately represent groups who are affected by EJ issues, or if researchers will need to include these groups by other means.

## CONCLUSION

CER requires careful preparation before embarking on collaborative study of EJ issues. Researchers can use the framework presented in this chapter to take inventory of the many ways they are positioned in relation to communities by individual characteristics, disciplinary training, institutional affiliation, and project-related factors. This groundwork is important for anticipating how power differences can distort healthy research relationships and for attaining a clear-eyed understanding of EJ communities, so that all participants in CER can develop reciprocal, respectful, and trusting partnerships.