

Shared Voices, Different Worlds: process and product in the Food Dignity action research project

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Acknowledgement: Food Dignity is supported by Agriculture and Food Research Initiative Competitive Grant no. 2011-68004-30074 from the USDA National Institute of Food and Agriculture (www.fooddignity.org)

Keywords: CBPR, food justice, equitable community-campus partnerships, food sovereignty, case study, action research

Abstract

Diversity of perspective makes for greater depth when painting a portrait of community life. But embracing the idea of representing true diversity in a formal research project is a whole lot easier than putting it into practice. The circa three-dozen members of the Food Dignity action research team, now entering the third year of a five-year project, are intimately familiar with the challenge. In this paper, four of the collaborators explore the intricacies of navigating what it means to bring together a genuine cross-section of community-based activists and academics in an effort to draw on each other's professional and personal strengths to collect and disseminate research findings that represent the truth of a community's experiences, and are ultimately disseminated in a way that brings tangible benefit to the heart and soul of that community. The authors include Food Dignity's principal investigator (Porter) and three community organizers in organizations that have partnered with Food Dignity. Two of the organizers (Herrera and Woodsum) also serve project-wide roles. These collaborators share their personal and professional hopes, struggles, concerns, successes and failures as participants in this cutting edge effort to equalize community and university partnerships in research.

Shared Voices, Different Worlds

La Via Campesina, the international peasant movement, declared that “the people hold thousands of solutions in their hands” for creating just, democratic and sustainable food systems (2010). Given peak oil, peak soil, and a tipping point for atmospheric carbon dioxide concentrations (Montgomery 2007, Bakhtiari 2004, Lemonick 2008), we are likely to need all of those solutions and thousands more in order to feed our seventh generation.

Nearly three dozen people from nine community and campus organizations are collaborating on a five-year US-based action research project called *Food Dignity* to identify, support and assess such solutions. We come from different worlds – personally, socioculturally, organizationally – but are sharing our stories, experiences, and expertise. In this paper, four of us outline our strategies, struggles and successes in our first two years of trying to share voices by bridging worlds in our work together for food dignity.

Our project, “Food Dignity: Action research on engaging food insecure communities and

universities in building sustainable community food systems,” was awarded \$5 million for five years from the USDA National Institute of Food and Agriculture, Agriculture and Food Research Initiative. We started in April 2011. Food Dignity builds on four premises:

- Three billion people (43% of the world’s population) suffer from malnutrition.
- The industrial food system is not sustainable.
- Community-based local and regional food systems offer ethical and practical solutions.
- We should invest in these community-based systems and learn from those leading and implementing these initiatives.

The five community organizations partnering with Food Dignity have been working on creating just and sustainable food systems for a collective 32 years. The joint food movement and social justice organizing experience of key leaders in those community efforts exceeds a century. Academic partners bring tools from their disciplines, including public health nutrition, anthropology, development sociology, education, economics, agroecology, medicine, and planning. However, the project’s knowledge foundations, research questions, and guiding values are mainly of, by and from the community partners. In that sense, this is not a trans-disciplinary project but a supra- or post-disciplinary one; and one that is radically axiological, i.e., using ethical frameworks to guide our paths to knowledge production (Pelletier et al. 2013, McDonald 2004, Wilson 2008). We envision a society where each community exercises significant control over its food system through democratic negotiation, action, and learning in ways that nurture all of our people and sustain our land for current and future generations. We are collaborating on research that will help find the ways to get there.

In other words, our primary objective is to identify, develop and evaluate scalable and equitable strategies for organizing sustainable community food systems for food security. Our approaches include:

- Developing, sharing and analyzing the case studies of the work being done by our five community partners
- Each community testing and co-evaluating a \$60,000/year “organizing support package,” including funding for a community organizer, community-led research, travel, and minigrants.

- Documenting practices, outcomes and impacts of selected actions and strategies, including minigrants and home and community food gardens.
- Conducting a sixth case study of the project collaboration itself to inform how academic partners can best support and learn from and with the community work.

This paper shares our personal experiences as part of this “sixth case study” of the Food Dignity action research collaboration. We each author a section below, written from our collaborative experience, to share and yet retain our voices about our work together for food dignity. As the Zapatistas wrote:

Dignity is a bridge.

It needs two sides that, being different, distinct and distant become one in the bridge

Without ceasing to be different and distinct, but ceasing already to be distant.

(Zapatista March of Dignity in Bühler 2002)

Feeling my way into the 6th case study (Hank)

From the very start of the Food Dignity project, community members have had what we can call “close encounters of the oppression kind” with academic partners.

After our start in April, 2011, we held our first Food Dignity face-to-face annual meeting in May. In planning this meeting, Christine and I talked about how to create a learning environment where community partners and academics could learn about each other and begin to build the collaborative, mutually supportive relationships that we would need as the energy to drive the project. As Christine put it in her opening presentation, the top two goals of the meeting were “(1) to care about telling our stories, individually and collectively and (2) to trust that we at least *might* be able to do it well together.” We knew that community residents and academics lived in different worlds. By the time we were planning this meeting, Christine and I had spent three years grappling, often heatedly, with those differences. We had three years of phone calls and several face-to-face meetings to talk, question, clarify and slowly and deliberately move toward understanding. Our meeting was only three days. Among people from different worlds, this was hardly enough for a slowly unfolding conversation that fosters mutual learning and respect,

especially in the face of entrenched sexism, racism, and classism and long-fraught town-gown relations. So many partners were coming from communities with long histories of trauma.

Historical trauma is the “cumulative trauma over both the life span and across generations that results from massive cataclysmic events,” such as enslavement, segregation, and physical and cultural genocide (Brave Heart 1999, 111). The term originated in relation to Native Americans but applies to African Americans, Latinos, Asian Americans, Pacific Islanders, indeed all groups oppressed by European colonial practices of domination, extermination and exclusion.

Community members—especially those born and raised in poverty and in communities of color—often suffer from the consequences of historical trauma, such as posttraumatic stress, depression, poor physical health, substance abuse and domestic violence.

Community members talking among themselves may share their personal stories but rarely if ever share those stories with academics, in particular white academics. How does one tell those stories? How do I talk about what it felt like to have the fourth grade teacher talk about my people as “digger Indians”? How do I talk about the cute 10th grader who told me I cannot walk her home because her university professor father doesn’t want her to go out with Mexicans? How do I tell the story of the old white woman who refused my visit—as a medical professor in a white coat on rounds with students in tow—because, in her words, “I don’t talk to no beaner”? How do I explain discovering as an adult that in fact I am not Mexican but Ohlone, a Native California tribe? That I didn’t know that because my father never told me, probably because like many Ohlone his parents became “Mexican” to protect our family from the California policy of exterminating Native people? [In 1851 and 1852, the California legislature authorized over one million dollars in payments to white men who could show they had murdered an Indian. The state was eventually reimbursed by the federal government (Lavery 2003).]

Every community member has her own stories, suffers from the personal and emotional impact of historical trauma, and may contain an explosive rage toward whomever appears in her world representing those forces that caused the pain.

And so we met in May, 2011; some of us on guard, wary, uncertain, insecure. Some of us with deep commitment to fighting for justice in our neighborhoods. Some of us knowing that life on our streets is hard, sometimes cold and extremely mean, where our young friends and co-workers

have buried their young friends and co-workers. Some of us knowing that every day is a struggle to keep on going in spite of not having enough of the resources we need to do the job. And others of us smiling, happy, polite, curious, eager, interested, and sharing their lovely stories of leisurely scholarship, trips to distant lands, meetings attended, papers presented, accomplishments, ideas, and of course knowledge, real knowledge, authentic knowledge, scientific knowledge, dominating knowledge, paramount knowledge—the reality-making knowledge that trumps anything we might know from the streets where we struggle.

We met in May, 2011, and in the collision of these dense and opposing worlds, the predictable happened: it all blew up. And just to make sure, we repeated the collision twice more within the year, in October, 2011 and May, 2012. Each time, it blew up.

Community members—mostly people of color and mostly poor—felt patronized by the academics. And in some cases, the academics displayed the most stereotypical patronizing condescension possible. Academics felt hurt and bruised by the hostility they felt from community members, all the more so if they had been expecting to be considered “the good guys.” And in some cases, community members said hurtful things.

The community members wanted to address issues of race, class, power and privilege. We brought in a facilitator to do anti-racism training. Some white people felt called out and distressed.

Community members reported that they had experienced all forms of oppression and unique forms of oppression at each community site: Structural racism; subtle expressions of racial prejudice; gender oppression; cultural insensitivity; assumptions of power and privilege. Over two years the catalogue has grown.

We have come to understand that our project requires us to confront the exertion and exercise of academic power and privilege. Our goal is to exert our own community power and privilege and to assert the absolute legitimacy of knowledge and wisdom that emerges from our daily life experience and the everyday learning that we need simply to survive. We now see this work as flipping relationships of power and privilege between community and campuses. Through our learning with the Community Campus Partnership for Health and the Community Network for

Research Equity and Impact we have established even more substantial guidelines and rules for engaging academic partners. We don't easily let in outside researchers. We don't let others tell our stories. We consider outsider narratives forms of extraction and expropriation of our knowledge and wisdom—community wealth that we will share at our discretion.

These elements of our project quickly became “the 6th case study.” The 6th case study research question is: how can and should universities support communities in building secure, sustainable and equitable food systems and in learning from that work? We are answering that question (and it's opposite, how *not* to do it) through documentation and evaluation of our work to collaborate in Food Dignity.

The 6th case study assumes the following:

- Experiential knowledge and contextual wisdom reside in communities. But communities lack resources, power and privilege.
- Academies have a concentration of resources, expertise, power and privilege
- Change will occur with a shift in resources, power and privilege through the Food Dignity support package for community organizing, community research, mini-grants and technical assistance.

We have already learned that the “support package” is needed but not enough to create equitable community-campus relationships in this project. We are now trying additional financial and leadership strategies to achieve this balance. The resource gaps in our communities are profound. From a public health perspective, social inequities lead to health disparities. The most extreme example within our project is the life expectancy on the Wind River Reservation: 49 years old (Williams 2012).

Through the 6th Case Study we hope to expand what counts in research, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Expanding what counts as knowledge generation (by Christine)

	Dominant Research Narrative	Research in Food Dignity
<i>Expertise</i>	Professionals, academics,	Also citizens, communities,

	institutions, study	associations, experience
<i>Ethics</i>	Last: used to apply knowledge gained about truth	First: used to decide what we want to know and how we will try to find it out
<i>Knowledge</i>	-Must be written -Generalizable -Scientific method	-Can also be oral, visual -Maybe transferrable -Stories

After two years in this five-year action research project, several themes have emerged from the 6th case study:

- Food Dignity is a project for academics, but this work is life and death for communities.
- Some academics doing this work report feeling “fringe” within the academy. But is “fringe” relative only to the highly privileged center. The academy and the academics within it are well protected compared to the life and death everyday struggles of the truly marginalized groups represented by our community partners.
- Community members’ radically varied locations and life courses, enmeshed in gross social inequities, create different lived realities. We are tackling the tall tasks of accounting for, acknowledging, and (as much as possible) bridging these realities in the struggle for the Food Dignity project and, more importantly, for living a reality of food dignity for our communities.

We are using following strategies to improve collaboration and equity between the community and academic partners:

- We push academics to work from heart and soul, not just head: “If research doesn’t change you as a person, then you aren’t doing it right” (Wilson, 2008), “Dignity is not something that one studies, it is something that one lives or dies. Something that doesn’t walk in the head, something that walks in the heart.” (Zapatista communications on dignity cited in Bühler 2002)
- We spend time together, at our annual Food Dignity meeting and at other conferences

where we make presentations. We talk face-to-face as much as possible.

- We write papers together, such as this one. We make presentations together. We design research together.
- We share financial resources, even if we cannot always make the shares equitable. Most recently, University of Wyoming and Cornell University reallocated \$200,000 from their budgets to support community-led action research and dissemination.
- We are working to share leadership of the project. Recent strategies for this included expanding the number of community-based partners who are paid members of the project-wide team and hiring an outside facilitator for our most recent annual team meeting.

East New York Farms! – by Daryl

East New York Farms! has been around from 1998. It was birthed out of community need for open space and activities for youth. Residents met with non-profits and Pratt institute to talk about what can be done. They realized vacant lots were left empty due to the city's financial problems of the 70's and white flight, redlining and crack epidemic, and this opened the door for East New York Farms! to start up urban gardens in our community's abandoned spaces.

East New York has been neglected based on its location, as well as the color of its population. This burden of blight can be a deterrent to hope, and cause people to believe nothing is going to change. Clearly that is not the motto of East New York Farms! staff and members.

Plans and preparation for unused land and talent created a place where food can be grown naturally and community youth, seniors, adults can work, learn and socialize together. These tangible things carried us along for over 15 years so far. It has not been without hardships and struggles. Pain caused through discriminatory practices and good ole statistics that say one is more likely to perish here than perhaps almost any other area of this great metropolis.

Some say statistics don't lie but they surely don't fully tell the story of 180,000 and counting. My community boasts a head count greater than some cities. Large groups of people in an overcrowded, publicly and privately disinvested area can be a cause for concern. Our bordering neighborhoods have not fared as well either.

Our allegiances with Food Dignity with our practices and collective goals have gelled well. It has given us space to share our story and be inspired by what is happening not only in urban settings but also rural as well. Monetarily we have been able to seize the creativity and resolve of our community and fund action in the form of mini-grants.

I have been personally moved by being able to help maneuver the vehicle known as the Food Dignity Research Project throughout the neighborhood of East New York Brooklyn, New York. The process has given me and our entire organization many opportunities: Tracking the yield of what our community grows is an empowering and a concrete way of showing ourselves and others we can grow food. Writing our own story as a “case study” reminds us of our humble beginnings and keeps us focused on sustainability. Having a national, and now international, platform to share our success and challenges helps keep us sharp and grateful for the opportunity. I would like to see and help create more opportunities for people of color to take a role in food justice work — because our lives directly feel the impact of food inequities.

Forging a community path for research that matters - by Gayle

Every community project operates within a context of history and experience. The historical reality of research for most communities, is that of an unmanageable beast that roars into town in the name of “it’s for your own good,” intruding on citizens’ time, good graces and vulnerabilities. Once valuable data has been extracted from the process using financial and other supportive resources the community has little or no access to, off fly the lessons learned to be turned into publishing opportunities for “scholars.”

I came into my work with the Food Dignity research project, angry and skeptical. As a long-time community organizer for social change, I was working with Feeding Laramie Valley (a new grassroots program addressing food sovereignty issues in southeastern Wyoming), when I was invited to provide input on the Food Dignity grant application, and to include FLV as one of the five participating community partners in the project. The design of the project, the inclusion of community input at the start, potential for real community voice and ownership of research, and the financial support package promised to my community, nudged my anger and skepticism over

all the abhorrent historic truths, just enough to get me to agree to sign on to this thing called the Food Dignity Research Project.

But history and skepticism are not easily overcome. This work, the work of trying to achieve authentic partnerships between community and academia, is incredibly difficult. Feeding Laramie Valley is passionately dedicated to and protective of community-led self-determination and control when it comes to doing a better job of feeding ourselves and each other in a way that is equitable, just and sustainable. We know there are questions to be asked, answered and analyzed if we are to make positive change. We also know that we as a community must be in charge of the process to ensure true, long-term benefit to all our citizens. These are not always concepts easily grasped by the academic machine that survives and thrives on being in control of this kind of work.

As the Food Dignity Project team members began to work together, the community partners (including those of us at Feeding Laramie Valley), challenged the academic status quo, demanded power behind our loud voices, took part in difficult conversations with the academic and administrative components of the project we'd signed on to.

As glorious as the potential for something different seemed to be, I couldn't shake the old pain of past wounds incurred in the name of community research, nor the fresh pain caused by insensitive comments and resource inequities that popped up as the academic and community threads of the Food Dignity Project tried to find a way to blend into a meaningful, cohesive effort.

For nearly two years, the core premise kept me hanging on when the day-to-day practice of this community-university partnership faltered. More specifically, it was the willingness of the academic core as led by Christine Porter, to hear community challenges without turning away or digging in (at least not completely or permanently), that kept me hanging on. The core premise of theory that guides the project, which I gradually recognized as being genuinely aligned with my own and that of my community, did not waiver. That core premise held up to our struggles: the answer to food security and dignity lies in sovereign community control of our food systems. Food dignity as a premise, and Food Dignity as a research project are both steeped in

recognizing that community people hold the knowledge and ability to ask the right questions and find the right answers to their own needs.

Little by little, as all the project team members continued to struggle but did not turn away from each other, I began to see metaphor in the food sovereignty work of Wyoming (harsh weather, geographic isolation, short growing season) and this unusual grant I'd attached us to.

From a technical view, I have found radical practice possible in the fact that we have five long years of grant-supported project time, and flexibility within the project design to make changes essential to authentic partnership work (such as making language changes to reflect community activist language rather than language of the academy, and the ability to shift grant funds provided to the community between budget lines).

From a social justice view, I have found hope and inspiration in unexpected resources that connect five disparate communities across land and culture boundaries often enough and long enough to create relationships that teach, support and guide us toward a different kind of future.

Reclaiming rigor with dirty hands and open heart - by Christine

My first memory is of a ferry journey to Newfoundland to visit my great grandmother about 40 years ago. From the boat, the water beckoned as the biggest swimming pool I'd ever seen. I must have shared this with my father, because he warned me that the water was full of jellyfish (his story) or sharks (my story). Either way, for me the moral of this story was that the water went from being beautiful to terrifying, and I've been afraid of natural bodies of water ever since. Thus, a cliff jump into such water feels scary and dangerous. However, when I was a Peace Corps volunteer in Fiji in the 1990s, I learned to follow the leaping lead of local youth. I found that cliff jumping turns out to be fun and exciting.

That said, my next felt-daring-for-me leap came only in 2006, when I gave up the control and predictability of doing an armchair dissertation at Cornell University and, instead, threw myself into a new community-based health project. I didn't know what the research would be, but hoped that if I kept showing up and helping out, the research questions – and answers – would eventually emerge. It felt like jumping off a cliff. But it landed me with an amazing set of

mentors and friends, and the framework for the Food Dignity project. Through that work I met Jemila Sequeira, my first organizing and anti-racism mentor, and organizer of the Whole Community Project for food justice that was born out of that community-based health effort. Whole Community Project is now one of the 5 community partners in Food Dignity.

Until my last year as a PhD student at Cornell, I had proclaimed that I would never become an academic. However, in the end, I decided that as an activist academic, rather than an academically-minded activist, I could bring more money to social justice work and help to amplify the wise voices of people doing that work to a wider and a powerful audience. (Plus, I was a mediocre activist apprentice to Jemila, at best.)

However, I never once thought I would have the luxury, and the burden, of having five million dollars over five years to further that mission. I was terrified and excited at our first team meeting of Food Dignity partners two years ago. My learning curve was almost vertical and I spent a lot of time being afraid.

Today I am, by necessity, a new kind of brave, because I have spent the past year battling stage 3 breast cancer. With this new benchmark for risk, I ask myself, what have I been so afraid of?

One lesson I've learned is that the worst possible place for leadership and good decision-making is one of reactive fear. I had lots of reactive fears. I was afraid of USDA discontinuing our funding. I was afraid of academic partners – especially at Cornell – of thinking this project was too ambiguous, too slow, too hard, and not enough like research. I had a nightmare that David Brooks – the *New York Times* columnist – told the president of a foundation I was working with that what I do is *not* research, it is storytelling. [Funnily enough, this year Brooks wrote a column about the importance of storytelling in creating and understanding knowledge (2013).]

Most of all, I was afraid that I'd disappoint community partners and mentors, especially by being too racist, too blindly arrogant, and not radical enough to do this work. I was afraid that I, and this project, would repeat the usual crimes in community-campus research – including co-opting wisdom, knowledge, credit and funding. I have also been afraid that we will get the stories of the community food work wrong.

In discussions about a new action research pilot effort that we call Growing Resilience, Gayle and I discussed whether the word “rigor” in research was reclaimable. Gayle said she felt it was used to bash her, and other community partners in research, over the head. I argued that our Food Dignity collaboration is working to illuminate how false this dichotomy of rigor vs. participation is; that for research involving communities, rigor *requires* participation, or we’ll get the story wrong. (This truth argument is in addition to the ethical one for participatory research; without it, the process will be wrong.)

For example, the day before we had been reviewing and rewriting survey questions together for Growing Resilience and a potential community partner revealed that when she isn’t comfortable with wording in surveys she administers, she rewords the question. Eliminating the co-design step of those surveys endangered the rigor of that research.

Recently, a participatory research paper reinforced Gayle’s case, stating that their “aim was to maintain rigorous research, to follow a ‘clean mind’ approach to research, but maintain principles of community participation which necessitate ‘a dirty hand’” (Makhoul et al. 2013). Firstly, minds are never “clean”; they are filled with our life experience and research rigor requires that we account for, not ignore, our worldviews (Harding 2000). Secondly, for research relating to community concerns, the “dirt” is part of the story. Sanitizing hands means destroying key data. Thirdly, what about the heart?

What about the heart. According to the story I tell above, Gayle felt; I argued. How stereotypical of me, as an academic. I did at least admit, above, to feeling fear.

I owe Hank a lot of credit for holding me back from making important project decisions from that dangerous hole of reactive fear until I finally (mostly) found a better way. With help of time, study, and friends (including those on the Food Dignity team), I have been climbing out of that hole – embracing these fears along the way.

I have discovered that acting with courage is so much easier than acting out of fear and, with some irony, makes my fears much less likely to be realized. I now know that when I most want to turn my back, I need to pry open my heart. When I most wish to squeeze my eyes shut, I must

force myself to witness. Instead of defending, I should listen and learn. And never, ever, suppress my red flags.

Just as examples, here are two flags I should not have ignored.

In my very first memo to the Food Dignity team I defended the indirect costs the universities take: “12% might sound high to community people, but it is well below the circa 50% that is a standard university rate, and the 28% allowed by USDA.” Share and discuss – yes – but why defend? I was so deep in my reactive fear hole that I was being proactively defensive, and about something I had no wish to defend.

About a year later, in our first collaborative Food Dignity conference presentation, I submitted all the names of the team members who were participating. The conference organizers came back and said we could list only two. After one weak attempt at getting an exception, I ignored a red flag that I felt and listed myself and Hank, as the leads in the project. As the conference drew near, the flag became more like a fire alarm and I wanted to run – even though I couldn’t articulate why. At the conference, Jemila and Gayle went from being warm with me to giving me a cold shoulder, after having seen the program, which did not list all the coauthors. They each tried to help me understand; and now I can glimpse how my behavior represented one of the big risks in Food Dignity – that academic partners will appropriate and colonize and take credit for the work and wisdom of community partners.

In of a poster that some of us did for a Community Campus Partnerships for Health conference, we finally named some ways that Food Dignity perpetuates inequity (for example, all the academic partners are white and receive much better fringe benefits) (Woodsum et al. 2012). This was so much easier than defending them.

I still have a long way to go, as my coauthors could tell you. But I am not alone among the Food Dignity academics, I think, in learning to do this work with courage, working from an open-hearted place of love and hope instead of acting in fear and feigned detachment. I am also learning that coming to the research from this more “true” place means that community partners are more interested in working with us to identify and share “true” answers in our research

collaborations. In other words, working from the heart, with love and courage, leads to research that is not only more ethically “right” (and way more fun), but also is more rigorous.

Love, hope and courage have been my talismans on this journey of learning how to do social justice action research in community-academic collaborations. I have also learned that all of these feelings flourish when I work from a place of gratitude.

I am grateful to Hank for teaching me to work from the heart before the head; to Gayle for her mentorship in leadership and in working with gratitude; and to Daryl whose wisdom, tenacity and courage teach me hope.

Most of all, I am grateful to every one of the over three dozen people working together in this project who are struggling through the collision and collaboration of voices and worlds for food dignity.

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