Creating Change Agents: Teaching HBCU Undergraduates to Use Community-Based Research to Resist Racism

Leslie V. Collins[1], LaTia Glasgow[1], Emily Tyra[1], Stephanie Wade[1], Makayla Summerow[1], MyKaila N. Jones[1]

Author Biographies: *Leslie V. Collins*, PhD is an assistant professor in psychology at Fisk University in the Department of Behavioral Sciences. She is constantly striving to be a good scholar, community member, neighbor, friend, daughter, sister, and aunt. For over 22 years, Leslie has been working—professionally or as a volunteer-- with small, community-based organizations in various capacities. As the Director of Programs and Services for the Alzheimer's Association Mid-South Chapter; and an education coordinator and therapist for the Rape and Sexual Abuse Center (RSAC). As an Assistant Professor at Fisk University, Dr. Collins is commented to mentoring and advising students from underrepresented students in the academy, encouraging them to pursue post baccalaureate degrees. Leslie's research includes examining the effects of social inequality on individual and community well-being. As a neighbor and advocate for social equity and justice, Leslie has served as a Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA) for children, member of the NAACP, AARP, member of Cayce United (a project for equitable housing), National Organization for Women, the Human Rights Campaign. She has also volunteered for the Urban Epicenter, Jobs with Justice, Nashville Economic Justice Alliance, Nashville Community Oversight Board, the

[1] Behavioral Sciences Department Fisk University, USA

homeless power project and the Tennessee Immigrants and Refugees Center. *Emily Tyra,* a Health Education Specialist for the IAM! project at Fisk University. She graduated with a BA in psychology from Fisk in May 2020. She has done work revolving around quantitative and qualitative research. This includes developing and coding questionnaires. She is interested in racial and ethnic identity, as well as sexual health and orientation. Finally Emily is the proud mother of a two-year old daughter, Nova.

MyKaila Jones, is a native of Nashville, Tennessee, and first-generation graduate of Fisk University with a Bachelor of Arts in Psychology in December 2020. MyKaila Jones has gained research and data collection experience through both the NIH MARC U-Star biomedical research program and Fisk-Meharry HBCU Wellness Project. Using this knowledge, MyKaila assisted in the development of focus group discussion questions, procedures, and data collection and analysis for other community groups. Currently, MyKaila is attending seminary at American Baptist College in Nashville, TN.

Corresponding Author: Leslie Collins, School of Humanities and Social Sciences, Fisk University, Nashville, TN 37203-5721. Email: lecollins@fisk.edu. Phone: 615-579-5291

Creating Change Agents: Teaching HBCU Undergraduates to Use Community-Based Research to Resist Racism

The rise of a "*colorblind*" vernacular among young adults' limits how they understand race and racism in ways that allow white supremacists ideologies to thrive. In the United States, for example, immigration policies, policies and practices regarding criminal justice and policing, health and housing are often framed using Black and Brown people as a cautionary tale for failing policies or to squelch policies that promote redress from historical oppression—conflating issues with race. Additionally, young Black and Latinx adults understand race and racism within this conflation—often to their communities' detriment. Liberatory research methodologies offer opportunities for young adults, specifically undergraduates at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU) to catalyze and expand their efforts for community change and social justice. This descriptive study explores the process of using problem-based learning to teach undergraduates liberatory methodology and qualitative research methods to affect community change and social justice. Short surveys with student researchers, their personal reflections and classroom observations illustrate how student researchers' use qualitative research methods to examine how racism and sexism manifest in contemporary social problems. Additionally, the data describe how student researchers perceive their ability to use skills to resist oppression and make social change and continue anti-racist work

Since the Civil Rights era, discussions of race have become truncated and coded (West, 2001; Bonilla-Silva 2001, 2017). Specifically, Bonilla-Silva (2017) describes this kind of language as a mechanism of *color-blind racism*. He argues that a consequence of the post-civil rights actions was to stop speaking overtly about individuals in terms of their racial make-up; for fear of being perceived as prejudiced. Thus, racial identity has become encoded in languages regarding social problems such as crime, poverty, health and educational disparities (Bonilla-Silva, 2017). The rise of a colorblind vernacular limits how individuals (specifically young adults) understand race and racism, which allows White Supremacy to thrive. Consequently, in the United States, for example, immigration policies, policies and practices regarding criminal justice and policing, health and housing are often framed using Black and Brown people as a cautionary tale for failing

policies or to squelch policies that promote redress from historical oppression. Because

of colorblind racism, many of the formerly mentioned social issues are conflated with race. Additionally, young adults, including Black and Brown, have learned to understand race and racism within this conflation—often to their communities' detriment. Thus, antiracist work with young people may involve civic engagement or efforts to redress conflated social and racial issues.

Social justice and anti-racist scholars criticize traditional research because, although claiming neutrality and objectivity, such research processes and practices are often exclusive (expert-driven), privilege perspectives of members' dominant culture (White, male, wealthy), and use a deficits-based approach when considering communities of color. This research process's hegemonic ideas regarding how communities

of color permeate and inform how they can participate in society and limit access to societal resources (tangible and intangible). Consequently, traditional researchers link social ills such as poverty, crime, poor health to communities based on race.

Scholars concerned with liberatory research and practice offer guidance regarding integrating inclusivity, democracy, action, and justice as principles for research. For example, action research (AR), participatory action research (PAR), and community based participatory research (CBPR) promote including stakeholders to create strategies and actions that promote health and positive community change. Other participatory-based methodologies such as critical participatory action research, anti-racist research, and empowerment praxis specifically engage liberatory theories such as critical race and feminist theories as well as theories regarding power to understand how structural forces inform research processes and products (McMillan, B., Florin, P., Stevenson, J., Kerman, & Mitchell,1995; Cahill, 2007; Thurber, Collins, Greer, McKnight, & Thompson, 2018). Moreover, these researchers' approaches engage in processes towards achieving social justice and liberation. Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) are prime environments for liberatory research methodologies because of their histories of fostering civic engagement and social justice (Jean-Marie, 2006; Sydnor, Hawkins & Edwards, 2010; Lomax, 2015; Bowles, Hopps & Clayton, 2016; Mobley, 2017; Nelson & Williams, 2017). Teaching liberatory research methodologies undergraduates at HBCUs offer opportunities them to catalyze and expand their efforts for community change and social justice (Das Gupta, 2003; Commarota, J. & Fine, M., 2008; Zuber-Skerritt, Wood, L. & Kearney, 2020).

Oppression and liberation happen at multiple levels—personal, collective, institutional,

cultural, and societal (Prilleltensky, 2008). Therefore, efforts aimed at ending the former and achieving the latter must include multileveled, multilayered strategies to action, research, teaching and knowledge generation (scholarship). Thus, much literature has focused on how researchers can initiate research methodologies that empower marginalized communities to social justice and anti-racist efforts; they tend to target community members and stakeholders. They outline ways to build collaborative relationships within historically oppressed communities, the benefits, and outcomes (i.e., consciousness raising and activism) as well as how to engage community members' research design, data collection and use of findings. Teaching community-based participatory methodologies helps students attend to the multiple voices and experiences that are often excluded or ignored—such as their own. Furthermore, when undergraduates learn community-based participatory methodologies as well as qualitative research methods, it can help them build skills to attend to excluded voices—such as their own; promote student activism and resistance efforts; publish research that changes narrative about marginalized communities; and, disrupt color-blind racist ideologies (Bonilla-Silva, 2001, Das Gupta, 2003; Fine & Torre, 2004; Cammarota & Fine, 2008; Wilson, 2008).

The research regarding how to engage community members (especially historically marginalized groups) in research for redress to social injustice and oppression is continually growing. Yet, there is little scholarship regarding how to train potential researchers and scholars in educational institutions. In addition, there is a dearth of community-based and qualitative research methods course information for undergraduates. Yet, teaching students to conduct these kinds of research could be a way to immerse them in racial justice

practice. This descriptive study explores the process of using problem-based learning (Nilson, 2016) to teach undergraduates liberatory methodology and qualitative research methods to affect community change and social justice (Das Gupta, 2003; Fine & Torre, 2004; Wilson, 2008). Short surveys with student researchers, their personal reflections and classroom observations illustrate how student researchers use qualitative research methods to examine how racism and sexism manifest in contemporary social problems. Additionally, the data describe how student researchers perceive their ability to use skills to resist oppression and make social change and continue anti-racist work.

Research, Liberation and Social Change

Community based research approaches are rooted in the belief that those directly affected by social problems play a central role in framing, investigation, and intervention efforts (Stringer, 1999). For example, community-based research methodologies such as action research (AR), participatory action research (PAR), and community based participatory research methods (CBPR), empowerment evaluation, and participatory practice (in social work) emphasize engaging stakeholders (specifically those directly affected) in research and planning processes to construct more relevant, inclusive practices. Specifically, action research and community-based research privilege marginalized community members' voices, experiences, and knowledge.

However, socio-cultural and political power differentials among community members such as access to resources and social location/identity (i.e., race, class, gender, citizenship status, sexual orientation, etc.) can manifest as imbalances in who participates and how, whose knowledge is validated, and who speaks for community (Cahill, 2007; Chaskin, Khare, & Joseph, 2012; Thurber, et al

2018). Thus, participatory based research practice without reflection or attention to internal and external power differential and dynamics can inadvertently yield oppressive outcomes. Furthermore, research teams must be cognizant of who benefits from research efforts and what they gain. Liberatory research efforts emphasize using research results to benefit community members individually and collectively over the interests of the academy.

Consequently, research methods and educational curricula that attend to systems of power and internal power dynamics to ensure valuing and privileging all contributions have emerged. For example, critical participatory action research and anti-racist research curricula (Das Gupta, 2003; Cammarotta & Fine, 2008; Zuber-Skerritt, et al, 2020) require attending to how social systems of oppression (i.e., race, gender, class, nationality, etc.) either overtly or covertly privilege certain voices within these processes. Specifically, researchers who participate in such liberatory research efforts must attend to how social forces such as race, class gender, nationalism, sexual orientation have become interwoven into all research processes (Das Gupta, 2003; Cahill, 2007; Wilson, 2008;). Wilson (2008) and Tuhiwai-Smith (2012), argue that researchers do not work in a vacuum. Thus, researchers' critical introspection of how their social identities inform how they maintain oppressive systems and structures (i.e., racism, sexism, classism) without intention.

Specifically, researchers' social identities and location can inform our approach methodology, research questions, what we consider data (vital information), data interpretation/analysis, and reporting (the story we tell and how we tell it). Thus, introspection about our social identities become vital to the process of using research for social justice. Moreover, because research and data inform policy and practices

involving those who may have limited access can facilitate researcher introspection and yield richer more accurate information. When we collaborate with members of marginalized communities, they may be more inclined to participate in research efforts that will answer questions and seek solutions for social change within their communities.

Qualitative Methods and Social Justice

Community-based research methodologies provide opportunities for researchers and/or potential researchers to root their work in a liberatory philosophy. Scholars such as Fine and Torre, 2004; Lyons, Bike, Ojeda, Johnson, Rosales, and Flores, 2013 contend that qualitative data collection can be used to promote equity, access participation and social change in communities. They contend that qualitative data collection practice and social justice principles converge at multiple points including: Areas of convergence include emphasizing: (a) context, culture, and environment (b) true collaborative researcher community relationships, (c) emergent, inductive understanding of experiences, concepts and samples/communities. Moreover, and most poignant, the data are collected and used to implement actions that benefit oppressed communities and forward societal change.

Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) as Training Sites for Liberatory Researchers

HBCU students are uniquely positioned to learn and practice liberatory research methods in marginalized communities for three reasons. First, HBCUs were developed specifically to provide those, who had been barred from other educational spaces because of race, access to training and education for financial and social mobility—though their target audience were Africans enslaved and their descendants. From their inceptions, most have had five primary goals:

1. access to education to freed African Americans and their progeny; 2. provide supportive environment in which students could learn and grow (this environment centered on the experiences, values and culture of many in the Black community); 3. promote racial uplift; 4. provide and promote community service and civic engagement; and, 5. cultivate community and global leaders who will affect societal change and social justice (Jean-Marie, 2006; Lomax, 2015; Mobley, 2017; Nelson& Williams, 2017). Essentially, HBCU's have been designed deliberately or unintentionally for anti-racist and social justice practice. They have been spaces in which community members, faculty, and students wrestle with the plight of the Black community and race relations from 1854, when the first institution was started, to the civil rights era to the present as many communities marginalized continue to face violence and deprivation.

Scholars who study HBCUs chronicle that their rich history is working to promote holistic wellbeing in the black community by producing highly educated persons who have led efforts towards racial equity and justice. These are settings in which faculty and students have and continue to work to secure equal rights and opportunities for women as well as people of color (Sydnor, Hawkins, & Edwards, 2010; Bowles, Hopps & Clayton, 2016; Mobley, 2017; Nelson& Williams, 2017). Sydnor, Hawkins, and Edwards (2010) contend that HBCUs are positioned to take leadership in probably a better choice of words. and implementing community based and participatory based research in communities because the core values of each are complementary if not similar— partnership, community engagement, empowerment equity, and social justice. Furthermore, they argue some HBCUs histories and relationships within community spaces provide opportunities for access and collaboration in marginalized communities.

Specifically, research and work at HBCUs have laid the groundwork for academic institutions to continue to grow participatory based forms of research. However, they indicate some challenges that HBCUs may face that may impede efforts to take the helm in these areas of research. For example, most HBCUs have limited financial and human resources—faculties have heavy teaching loads—to take on such projects. Yet incorporating courses into the curriculum may facilitate researchers at HBCUs taking the lead in liberatory research efforts. Teaching students these research methods at the undergraduate level can address human resource concerns because they can work as research assistants. These applied courses could pique their interest in research and develop potential community researchers and scholars as well as better position them to be competitive candidates in graduate programs.

Second, according to the United Negro College Fund, of the 300,000 to 500,000 students who attend HBCUs, 80% are African American and 70 to 80 percent of them qualify for federal Pell grants and pay for college with student loans. Most students are members of communities that are most deeply affected by oppressive social policies and practices such as police misconduct, strained community/police relations, health disparities, and the constant inflation of housing prices pushing them out of their neighborhoods. Das Gupta (2003) found that most students who participated in their certificate program were from communities marginalized who endeavored to investigate issues and inform practices to redress deleterious effects of oppression within them. Moreover, undergraduate students tend to engage in learning when concepts and theories are attached to contemporary social issues to which they can be applied. Using community-based participatory methodologies as well as qualitative research methods can help students attend to the multiple voices and experiences that are often

excluded or ignored—such as their own. Teaching undergraduates to conduct qualitative research using social problems as a context fosters theoretical and empirical insights and enriches their learning with meaningful experiences in and beyond the classroom.

Finally, HBCUs educate students from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds. Those who attend HBCUs tend to choose them because of their history in social racial? justice; thus, they often express a desire to promote social change and resistance. Therefore, knowing and conducting action research in these spaces contextualizes patterns around policing and community development in broader structural conditions. Additionally, the class can promote civic engagement and social activism among students—around issues that they find relevant and significant. Conducting and publishing this research disrupts white supremacy by producing knowledge that is representative of voices that have been historically subjugated and disentangling race from social policy to produce effective policies for just change.

The current exploratory study discusses the process of teaching undergraduates participatory based research methods, the impact on students and how their efforts affect community change. The course is designed to train students at a historically black college/university (HBCU) to use qualitative research methods to examine how systems of power (e.g.., race, class, and gender) materialize in contemporary social issues; the potential for student researchers to develop skills to make social change; and begin to instill anti-racist and critical race theory into their practice. The courses integrate problem and project-based learning (Nilson, 2016; Niehaus, 2017); training undergraduate students to use qualitative research methods in action research projects regarding community policing, police accountability, and gentrification.

Methods

Context: Qualitative Research Methods and Methodologies Course

This course was the first time that the University offered The Introduction to Qualitative Methods to students in psychology. Currently, social science majors are required to take a basic research methods and statistics course and psychology students take an experimental design course. But the University does not have any research courses focused specifically on qualitative methods or participatory research methods. Two events informed the development and timing of this qualitative research class. First, in 2017 a local civil rights organization filed a lawsuit against its local southeastern metropolitan law enforcement (Southeast Sheriff[2]) for violating established consent decrees and community activists' privacy. The court ruled against the Southeast Sheriff's Department. Moreover, the court ordered them to make several organizational changes and established an oversight committee to monitor reforms—including conducting focus groups with all community stakeholders to assess attitudes about community/law enforcement interactions, evaluate community members' understanding of local consent decrees; and garner recommendations to inform changes in policy and practice. The oversight committee contacted the University's psychology department to design and implement stakeholder focus groups as well as analyze data and report to court. The head of psychology invited me to collaborate with her on the project. As we began to think through the planning process, we decided to develop a qualitative methods class to offer students opportunities to gain knowledge and experiences beyond our introductory courses. Second, in 2016 I co-taught a Critical Participatory Research and Action Theory in Practice (CPARTP) seminar, with a colleague from Guilford University, regarding her work in justice with students with reference to undocumented youth. I designed this course to model CPARTP.

The purpose of the course was to teach undergraduate students to apply qualitative research methods to community-based issues (i.e. gentrification and community/police relations), which could inform healthy and just community change. We designed the course using principles of problem-based learning; issues of social change and justice became the context "problem" for learning. The principles include working collaboratively to solve a specific problem or completing a task instead of centering materials, applying course content to real world issues, including research and information literacy, and facilitating student directed learning. Although we used two primary texts to teach the course, the primary goal was to provide spaces for students to apply concepts from readings and lectures for the purpose of learning the research process through practice.

The instructors constructed a problem-based learning setting in which students learned about action research and qualitative methodologies concepts. Students then applied the concepts by first designing a focus group process for the "southeast Sheriff's"[3] (Nilson, 2016; Niehaus, 2017) first. Then, they designed focus groups for local organizations regarding police/community engagement and gentrification. The class met twice a week on Tuesday and Thursday for 16 weeks. The class met twice a week (every Tuesday and Thursday) for 16 weeks.

---

[2] Pseudonyms are used to ensure anonymity and confidentiality.

[3] The course was designed to teach principles of qualitative research methodology (specifically action research).

Specifically, this semester's course will use focus groups as a context.

Tuesdays' classes tended to focus on lecture/discussion for instructors to introduce concepts. Thursdays were designed in a workshop format in which students designed focus groups, constructed data collection materials; designed focus group processes, constructed and implemented recruitment plans, and assisted with "day of" logistics for focus groups. For example, in initial courses we discussed how to engage with community members or clients to ensure that everyone was on the same page while discussing how data collection and analysis in action research projects was emergent throughout the project. On Thursday, students learned manifest and latent coding techniques to analyze sheriff's responses to the initial expectations survey. Student researchers used the information to clarify purpose and design initial research questions that later informed data collection materials, sampling, recruiting and analysis. Student researchers participated as observers, recorders, and greeters in approximately 20 southeast sheriff's focus groups.

Their participation in the former project provided knowledge for their final class project. Two community groups approached the class to design and conduct focus groups regarding civilian oversight of police and gentrification[4]. After hearing presentations from both groups, student researchers selected their preferred interests. Student researchers used experiences garnered from the sheriff's project to inform their efforts. Although students designed the focus group plans, data collection materials, and analytic plans, the effects of COVID-19—nationwide/statewide quarantines and the University's switch to strictly virtual campus—prohibited them from completing their projects. Instructors emphasized

student researcher experiences observing and participating in the process to inform teaching, and to find teachable moments. Additionally, students discussed shared experiences at focus groups to inform how they would develop their research projects.

Participants: Student Researchers

Eighteen students participated in the course—17 females and 1 male. All students identified their race partly or all Black/African American and 15 were undergraduate, psychology majors. Undergraduates attended class twice a week, participated in focus group recruitment and sampling; group implementation as greeters, recorders, and observers; and/or, data analysts[5]. Three graduate students in the Clinical Psychology Master's program volunteered to assist with southeast sheriff's focus groups. During the process they functioned as greeters only because undergraduates were obligated to set up, record and observe as class assignments. Thus, their perceptions and observations were also captured. All students were required to have taken an introductory research methods course. Most student researchers had taken courses regarding race, gender, social psychology, and social problems.

Instructors invited specific students, who had excelled in research methods courses and expressed an interest in research, social change, and community work from previous courses, to join the class. Additionally, instructors announced the course in their classes to recruit potential students. Graduate students were invited to work as student researchers by their instructor and advisor. They volunteered for the focus groups and submitted personal observations.

---

[4] The course instructors had done volunteer work and developed research regarding these two topics. Many students in the course assisted with these previous projects and expressed an interest in taking the class the semester before it was developed. In a future course, the instructors would

expand topics to solicit potential topics from students to facilitate their agency the kind of data they collect and with whom they partner.
[5] Some students were limited in their ability to implement focus groups because of travel restrictions.

The Data[6]

The purpose of this study was to understand and describe how a problem based learning curriculum could enrich students' class experience; gain student researchers perspectives regarding racism, structural oppression and how it manifest in current community issues; and, the potential for student researchers to develop skills to make social change and engage in anti-racist practices. Thus**,** data collection included the following:

Instructor Observations

Instructors' field observations during class sessions and workgroups. Classes met twice a week and lasted approximately 120 minutes. Classes were recorded when I taught and reviewed, and I took notes when a colleague taught. Specific observations were made regarding how students were understanding and applying concepts from the text, as well as how and whether they incorporated information regarding social oppression into their discussions or planning decisions.

Personal Reflections

Students who participated in the Southeast Sheriff's focus group implementation were required to write personal reflections each night after focus groups were completed. Personal reflections included their overall reactions to the day's events, any new learnings or perspectives, changes in perspectives, challenges (things that they would change), affirmations (things that went well), surprises (unexpected outcomes) and confirmations (expected outcomes). Seven student researchers responded.

Student post experience surveys

Undergraduate student researchers were emailed 5 open-ended questions to which they could respond in a word document or email response. Questions included: Why did you take the course? What did you learn that you can apply to social change and social justice efforts? How so? and, do you plan to continue doing research? Why or why not? Four student researchers responded.

Findings

Data was entered into ATLAS TI a qualitative analytic software used to store, manage and code documents, audio and video files. The data analysis subgroup[7] used content analysis to code data and identify a pattern of persistent themes from observations and personal narratives. The assigned instructor removed identifying information and assigned personal narratives to ensure anonymity. Content analysis was a two-step process: 1. coding the data using a manifest coding process--identifying the most frequently used words within documents to detect patterns; and, 2. constructing themes in the data—latent coding. To ensure consistency in the analytic process, analysis team members met regularly to discuss process and findings (LeCompte and Schensul, 1999).

The following 4 themes emerged: **Skill building** refers to student researchers' discussions regarding developing abilities regarding research design, data collection or data analysis; **Sampling and Power** tended to relate to skill building and included student researchers' perspectives about how recruitment, sampling and group composition could compromise some respondents' safety

---

[6]The original data plan included using recordings from student led focus groups as well as post course interviews with some students. However, because of COVID-19 pandemic the University shifted to a virtual platform, residential halls closed, and students were sent home which limited access to them for

interviews. Additionally, social distancing mandates precluded conducting face-to-face focus groups.

[7] The data analysis subgroup comprised instructor/author and 2 student researchers.

and thus create inaccurate narratives; **Self-Reflection (Race/Police)** refers to student researchers deconstructing their own assumptions (positive or negative) regarding the following: 1. **police/community interaction** which includes observations regarding the monitoring team who commissioned the focus groups with the university; and, 2. **race and racism** which involves how student researchers challenge their own biases regarding race and racism, how they regard oppressed persons and how systems of oppression manifest. Although student researchers were not asked directly about race or issues of oppression, such themes seemed to be persistent within their responses.

Skill Building

Generally, student researchers reported feeling confident in the skills that they've learned by participating in the course. After participating in the sheriff's focus groups, student researchers reported feeling confident in the amount of information they learned and that they are getting "*hands on*" experience. Josie, a junior psychology major observed that she felt more confident applying the skills about which she had read. Josie wrote *"I went in thinking I was just observing and ended up learning how to recruit participants, greeting participants and really understanding how much it takes to do research."* Josie's observations tended to resonate with her classmates. Students tended to express more interest and confidence in their capabilities. Students also tended to learn more when they could engage with the concepts and materials in an applied setting. (Nilson, 2016).

Moreover, the students applied their newly developed skills in designing focus group projects and reported their intentions to apply their newly developed skills. For example, Lisa, a senior psychology major wrote in her personal reflections, "*We have*

the final project and being here [sheriff's focus groups] has shown me many things that we should do in our focus group project. We have a lot to talk about." The purpose of utilizing a problem-based learning format was to reinforce student learning. Reflections indicate that the format may have the intended effect—student engagement and skill application. (Nilson, 2016 & Barrows, 2013).

Sampling and Power

Beyond learning, honing their research method skills and building their confidence, student researchers illustrated that they understood how external forces such as race, sex, social class can inform how their broader decisions about the research process (i.e., constructing research questions, methodology decisions, epistemological frameworks, and analysis). However, personal reflection notes indicate that student researchers also observed how the formerly discussed power dynamics tend to inform logistical processes as well—especially when collecting qualitative data.

Group dynamics greatly influence the quality of stories researchers receive through focus groups. Thus, group composition becomes vital (Krueger, & Casey, 2015; Merriam, & Tisdale, 2016). To ensure that all participants feel safe to share their experiences, researchers must consider how societal forces inform power and group dynamics and adjust accordingly. In their personal observations, students noticed how race, gender and class dynamics within the focus groups can often facilitate diversity in narratives or silence them.

Potential participants included multiple community stakeholders such as activists, community organizers, community organizations, residents, and law enforcement. The research team recruited participants using electronic flyers.

Individuals who wanted to participate in focus groups could choose the day and time to participate. However, individuals were not group based on stakeholder affiliation. On day two of focus groups, student researchers learned how individuals' affiliations with groups and systems of power can impact the focus group process. An employee from the sheriff's department was scheduled to participate in a group of activists who had been targeted. Another group member demanded she leave and not participate in the session. The police department employee agreed to leave the session. We extended our apologies; however, she would not continue in the process.

Student researchers' initial responses to the incident varied. The responses of participants who wanted the sheriff rep to not participate in the focus group were negative. Katrina, a graduate student volunteer wrote, *"I can't believe they were so rude and left her out."* She thought that the woman should have been allowed to stay and we require the "rude" participant to leave. Other student researchers questioned why the facilitators (class instructors) would allow it. The debriefing session which followed became a teachable moment regarding sampling, safety, and recruitment). Even though only one group member spoke up, other members expressed concerns about her participation and relief that she was asked to leave. Focus group participants expressed concerns that their stories could be weaponized against them, as their social media accounts were. They also believed that the sheriff's employee could report their stories and would leave them in peril. One respondent reported being an immigrant and was concerned about possible implications for her immigration status because of her activist work.

Wilson (2008) and Lyle, et al (2012) contend that engaging participants in qualitative data requires that they feel safe to accurately give their stories. Because police officers are agents of the state, non-law enforcement employees may also be perceived as such and respondents could be at risk of being arrested, fired from their jobs, or deported based on what they share in the group. Interviewing persons from law enforcement and activists who had been violated together may create a space where one or more members feel endangered. Although the approach was inappropriate, his concerns were valid, and her presence would have affected accuracy. When we debriefed with the entire class, student researchers reflected on the incident and then began to discuss other instances in which they believed power imbalances could compromise participants' safety and data accuracy (Lyle, et al, 2012; Krueger, & Casey, 2015; Merriam, & Tisdale, 2016).

After more focus groups student researchers heard more about the extent to which the Sheriff's Office had violated activists' spaces, they understood why the Southeast Sheriffs may not have been productive to the groups and may have been problematic for some members. The sampling concerns and power dynamics became more glaring when a city council member (a White male) attended a focus group on day three. He was in a group with four women and he tried consistently to shift the conversation away from community interactions with police to community crime and violence specifically black on black violence. Student researchers tended to question his motives for participating. Specifically, Sienna, a junior psychology major, reported the following:

> *"It was interesting to see when we had a public figure be a participant in one of the sessions. When the question came about how the participants would rate their feelings towards their safety as it relates to the police, it looked like the public figure did not*

respond. I think he wanted to participate in the group because he could be more like a "fly on the wall" within the conversation, but he did provide some input into the conversation. He presented positive interactions from the police and dismissed others when they talked about their experiences—especially connections to black neighborhoods. Yet it was only to change others' perspectives about policing. He kept talking about violent neighborhoods. When he left the meeting, the group could refocus on the questions."

Similar to other student researchers, she observed how the council person attributed the constant attempts to shift the conversation to his white male privilege. There were similar reflections when student researchers raised concerns about other White males in other groups. Jasmine, a senior psychology major observing wrote, *"An interview conducted by another White man was very intriguing because at first I was confused why he kept flaunting his whiteness during the entire interview."* Several student researchers expressed similar observations and irritation about how "White privilege" permeated some of the focus groups.

Yet, although student researchers could identify instances when White men exercised their privilege, students ignored instances when Black men dominated group conversations, which precluded women participants from sharing their experiences. Ruth, the senior psychologist noticed during class that men in some of the focus groups tended to dominate the conversations while the women were silent. She observed that the facilitators often had to invite women back into conversations, or *"make space for women*

to talk about their experiences". She noted in her reflection notes that the distinctions in "*their experiences were subtle but there.*" As student researchers participate in the process, they can see how oppressive structures such as race and gender can shift narratives; thereby, shifting how individuals and communities' efforts toward social change and justice.

Additionally, student researchers can observe how at times race can mask gender privilege for Black and Brown men--as in the formerly discussed example. Understanding how men of color can intentionally or unintentionally silence women can also contribute to dismantling racist structure and systems by empowering all women to share their stories and providing a space to value them (McMillan, et al, 1995; Fine and Torre, 2004; Dei, alone, Lyons, et al, 2013; Zuber-Skerritt, Wood & Kearney, 2020).

Student researchers discussed their observations during class discussion and instructors encouraged them to problem solve how to prevent participants from manipulating conversations during facilitation. Student researchers considered power dynamics when considering sampling, recruitment, and scheduling for their individual projects. For example, during a working session, gentrification workgroup planned meetings and recruitment based on their specific targeted participants (business owners, old residents, new residents, members of the church who requested the data) the social demographics of these groups are distinctive, and perspectives will be diverse. Student/researchers were intentional about their attention to providing safe environments, and power dynamics regarding (race, age, perceived socioeconomic status, and even length of engagement in the neighborhood). The instructor facilitated a conversation about this by introducing the questions. Similar discussions were had in the civilian oversight

research team regarding potential participants' gender, educational attainment. For example, participants deliberated whether meetings should be co-ed or single gender.

Although student researchers have not attributed intention to the participants, their observations illuminate how they perceive social identities and assignments such as race and gender can inform how stories are told as well as whose stories are told inadvertently. They also discussed how this kind of limitation can inadvertently silence historically marginalized groups and perpetuate oppressive structures, systems, and practices (Lorde, 1984; hooks, 1984, 1991; Fine & Torre, 2004; Dei, et al, 2005; Collins, 2015).

Self-Reflection

Police/Community Relations

Student researchers observed that there tended to be a general mistrust of us as a research team. Thus, transparency was more important. They noticed that some respondents wanted access to the data and have followed up with me since the class ended to determine resolution.

Student researchers tended to identify as members of the Black community. They tended to have negative impressions of community/law enforcement interactions. Moreover, instructors required student researchers to do extensive research about the activist organization's lawsuit against Southeast Sheriffs to prepare focus groups. Thus, students tended to report extremely negative attitudes regarding the police, and they assumed that members of marginalized communities would express hostility towards law enforcement and want them gone. Students' previous experiences tended to hear only aspects of the stories with which they identified.

During one of our earlier debriefs regarding previous night's focus groups, Dr. Paulse challenged students to remember all the information and think about respondents in more complicated ways. Some of the more striking interviews happened early in the day with activists who had participated in the lawsuit. Thus, these experiences colored the other stories for students. Dr. Paulse asked them to consider that this may be the case and they were not hearing/attending to responses from others who want more police presence or those who might be conflicted. Some of the researchers, some students and an instructor (Dr. Collins)'s assumptions were initially informed by reports about general police misconduct as well as the lawsuit, which was the cause of the focus groups. Thus, they were assuming that the police were unwanted. However, many respondents discussed needing and wanting more police presence (for protection). Additionally, during the debriefing, Tiana, a junior psychology major observed that focus group respondents' expressed ambivalence because more police in some communities could mean more danger. The debriefing sessions as well as reflection notes challenged students to consider more dimensional understandings of the responses so that when that they could incorporate nuance into their analysis to insure a more complete, accurate narrative.

Communities can be complex, and complicated combinations of spaces, people, processes, and interactions between the three. Thus, doing research with community members and within these communities require that researchers must be mindful of this. Otherwise they risk treating community members monolithically. In this course, student researchers begin to understand how participating in the process can yield a multiplicity and complexity of shared stories and community narratives. This is important when analyzing data and making meaning of these stories. Additionally, in the field,

student researchers could apply theory and principles that they have read about and studied. They could also observe how theories and practices can possibly unintentionally marginalize them which require them to adjust as they engage with community members. This process allows them to think critically about their practices. Moreover, student researchers must critically reflect because how they understand those telling the stories, can influence how one hears the stories as well as how accurately the stories are told and how they treat community members. For example, at times in their reflections and research notes, student researchers referred to activists who participated in focus groups as victims. We then processed this as a class: "what does it mean to be victimized and how this viewing could possibly' inform analysis and conclusions"?

Scholars who study community-based research methods as well as social justice theorists contend that any efforts towards resistance, social change or justice require self-reflection (Das Gupta, 2003, Wilson, 2008, Cammarota & Fine, 2008, Lyle, et al 2012; Morris, Ida, Migliaccio, Tsukada, & Baker, 2020). Individuals must understand how their preconceived attitudes, biases, and beliefs unconsciously construct the lenses through which they make meaning of our work and how they decide to act. Therefore, critical reflection in which researchers examine one's beliefs, values, identities, social identities, experiences (both direct and indirect) and how they inform our approaches to work (hooks, 1991; Gonzalez-Sobrino & Goss, 2019; Kendi, 2019). During the course, instructors attempted to create spaces in which students could/had to investigate their assumptions and motivations about race relations, police interactions and gentrification. Course instructors challenged students to observe and investigate these assumptions through debriefing questions after focus group

meetings; and by asking questions during classes and research team meetings to spark conversations. There were times in class where instructors very briefly reflected upon some decisions and discussed how we may have deferred to the monitoring group or the majority participants at the expense of others. However, we missed the opportunity to examine how these decisions were informed by bias and our own social assumptions. If allowed to teach the course again, the instructor would definitely and intentionally create that space and use it to model behaviors for student researchers. The lack of intentional reflection by instructors is a limitation of this process. Investigating how these assumptions can become a lens through which we can analyze data and tell stories is vital to accurately telling groups' that have been oppressed, stories and shifting societal narratives, thereby furthering efforts for antiracist practice.

Systemic and Structural Race and Racism

Participating in focus group data collection and analysis also provided opportunities for students to be introspective about how they understand race and racism. Student researchers could identify instances in which they believed that focus group. Initially, student researchers assumed that the police harassment impacted only Black and Brown communities. However, as they participated in the focus groups by participating in data collection or analysis, students realized that the Southeast Sheriff implemented practices to systematically squelch resistance to structural oppression. For example, Patrice, a junior psychology major observed in the focus groups, "*Coming here I knew nothing about how far [law enforcement] would go to stop people and the horrible effects*". Patrice's observations resonated with student researchers' data analysis team. During the analysis team meeting, student researchers observed that although   the activists being surveilled varied based on race, their efforts

concerned issues highly connected with race (Black and Brown concerns). For example, "*oppressive policing can also happen to those who actively resist oppression. The police seem to be harassing people regardless of their race/ethnicity), but they are focusing on activist groups that help black and poor people*. Students researchers observed that the activist's connection to efforts for racial, immigrant, criminal and economic justice made them surveillance targets. Most of these efforts have been racialized and concern marginalized, disenfranchised persons. Hence, race/racism become conflated with other social problems (Bonilla- Silva, 2001, 2017; Gonzalez Sobrino, 2019).

Hearing the stories and lived experiences of community members who have been marginalized or violated helps student researchers to understand the importance of the research process. However, it forces them to broaden their own understandings of oppression and oppressive systems. This becomes vitally important for student researchers who are members of historically marginalized groups (i.e., non-white, working poor/poor, women, men) (Das Gupta, T. 2003; Dei, et al 2005; Collins, 2013; Kendi, 2019). They must critically engage with all their social identities and see how they construct the lens through which they view oppression for several reasons. First and most important, this lens informs how they do the work of research, who they include in the process, and how they make meaning of the data and the story they tell (Palmer, et al 2019; Fine & Torre, 2004; Tuhiwai Smith, 2012). Second, they must broaden their ideas about who are victims of oppression as well as how and why they are victimized. When considering race and racism in the United States, tend to be informed by the black/white binary racial paradigm (Perea, 2019, Brooks and Widner, 2019). This conceptualization can be problematic for a couple of reasons. First, the black/white binary understanding of race and racial

oppression tends to exclude the experiences of racial and ethnic groups who do not fit into the prescribed binary (i.e., black people are oppressed, and white people are the oppressors)—rendering them invisible. Second, this thinking may leave us continually thinking about oppression as an individualized process (perpetuates) instead of a systemically embedded process that must be addressed at multiple levels simultaneously.

Liberation and Social Change

Student researchers reported a multitude of reasons for enrolling in the course primarily to learn "how to do qualitative research". However, they indicated that as the course proceeded, their reasons shifted. After participating in the applied course students understood that social change is necessary, and they acquired skills to make this social change. For example, when asked why she enrolled Tatiana, a senior psychology major stated,

> *I took this course for the rare opportunity as an undergraduate student to participate hands-on in the planning, conduction, and data collection of a qualitative research study. I learned through our interactions with and first-hand accounts of our participants the direct impact of injustice and the necessity of political and social change in government and community relations. Through the focus groups, I gained profound respect and perspective into the lives and experiences of underprivileged community members, people of color, and grassroots activists. This course sparked within me a love and appreciation for qualitative research methods and the potential they have to impact social change and policy.*

Tatiana's interactions refer to her participation in the focus group processes. For her, the experience helped her to identify systemic oppression within communities. Her response is consistent with other students and they indicate that although her initial purpose was to skill build, they connect oppressive systems and practices and how they manifest in behavior.

Jonda, a senior psychology major enrolled in the course for similar reasons. However, she already had an idea that she wanted to participate in research regarding law enforcement. Yet, once she started the process and began analyzing focus group data, she began to challenge her assumptions about law enforcement—she believed that they were unwanted and unnecessary. *"I joined the class because I love data! And I also want to do something about policing…. After taking the course I see that it is complicated … more complicated than I thought. That's why we need to hear and tell all the stories."* Although she developed skills by learning to analyze data, her participation in the class has offered Jonda the ability to reflect and critically engage with her personal understanding how law enforcement practices can be invasive and oppressive. In her observation, she wrote:

> *Before this course I had never heard of the [consent decrees] nor did I realize the major role it played in social justice. I had known that police surveyed communities of color more than white communities, but I didn't realize the extent they would go to. Speaking out against social injustice and racism can have effects on one's everyday life. From their daily routine to their mental health. I would love to continue to do research. I feel there is much more to discover regarding the effects of social injustice and racism. We have only just scratched the surface.*

After analyzing focus group data, Jonda now understands that communities of color may have more nuanced attitudes about police. Jonda learned the importance of hearing multiple narratives to gaining a fuller understanding of the community to make effective and efficient change (Wilson, 2008; Tuhiwai-Smith, 2012). However, Jonda's reflection reveals a realization for most of the students in the course. Furthermore, working on the project catalyzed student researchers to act.

Wilson, (2008) and Tuhiwai-Smith, (2012) argue that sharing stories is vital to research specifically with indigenous people. They maintain that stories allow tellers as well as listeners to gain their own perspectives and draw their own conclusions about communities and individuals. When marginalized groups create and control the narratives about their lives, they can become aware of how systems of oppression are maintained and perpetuated to their harm (consciousness). This knowledge can inform actions for change (action). Although Jonda and Tatiana live in different regions, they are both young Black women whose communities are deeply impacted by racism and sexism. Thus, both believe that qualitative research can be a tool for ensuring that stories about marginalized communities are accurately told; thus, leading to change.

Discussion

Teaching community-based research methods at the undergraduate level provides students with mechanisms for deconstructing the maneuverings of color-blind racism. Moreover, the research that they produce can enhance academic perspectives with voices and experiences that are often excluded, which gives oppressed persons the ability to promote accurate narratives about

themselves as well as inform social policy and practice that greatly impact their lives (Palmer, G., Ferńandez, J.S., Thomas, D., Lee, G., Masud, H., Bernai, I., 2019). Thus, these teachings are inherently liberatory.

The above findings suggest that undergraduate students at Historically Black Colleges and Universities could be uniquely positioned to become liberatory researchers. Consistent with Das Gupta (2003), the students from the Qualitative Methods course believe that they have a vested interest in redressing oppression and working for justice in historically oppressed communities because these communities are their home. Anti-racist researchers and practitioners analyze and provide processes to engage in ending racism as well as intersecting oppression. Researchers are trained to research design and methods; prioritize building networks and collaboration in their work; utilize findings to benefits marginalized communities and integrate anti-racist theories and/critical race theories. Student researchers expressed strong desires to learn and utilized skills to change conditions in their communities. Additionally, they have connections with community members because they are "insiders". Moreover, they express a vested interest in actions to dismantle societal oppression because thereby ending their own oppression.

Hooks (1991) argues that when generating theory about oppression, hearing the lived experiences of the oppressed is vital and that current theory neglects to account for that. She writes, "the definition and critical analysis of oppression has left out the complexity, voices and lived experiences of individuals who have been severely impacted by injustice and oppression…" (p.4). Liberatory research methodologies and qualitative practice can capture voices of individuals and offer opportunities to inform actions towards sustainable, just change in oppressed communities. However, findings

indicate that even student researchers from oppressed communities must be careful. Because without critical reflection about their burgeoning roles as researchers and their shifting class locations, they can inadvertently perpetuate the oppressive systems they are trying to end–similar to experienced researchers who act without reflection. Thus, all researchers must attend to how societal factors, predisposed understandings and attitudes regarding research and practice can inform the research team's internal power dynamics (Collins, 2015). Moreover, researchers and practitioners must attend to skill and education differences that could compromise stakeholders' agency within the process (residents, clients, students) to ensure that all talents and skills are leveraged for change (Fine and Torre, 2004; Tuhiwai Smith, 2012).

References

Bonilla-Silva, E. (2017). *Racism without racists: Color-blind racism and the persistence of racial inequality in America.* Rowan and Littlefield.

Bonilla-Silva, E. (2001). *White Supremacy and Racism in a Post-Civil Rights era*. Lynne Reinner Publishers.

Bowles, D. D., Hopps, J. G., & Clayton, O. (2016). The impact and influence of HBCUs on the social work profession. Journal of Social Work Education, 52(1), 118-132. DOI: 10.1080/10437797.2016.1112650.

Cahill, C. (2007). Repositioning ethical commitments: Participatory action research as a relational praxis of social change. *ACME: An International E-Journal for Critical Geographies*, 6(3), 360–373.

Commarota, J. & Fine, M., (2008). Youth participatory action research: A pedagogy for transformational resistance. In Revolutionizing Education: Participatory Action Research in Motion, Routledge Publications, J. Commarota and M. Fine editors, 1-14.

Collins, L.V. (2015). Examining intragroup racism and racial battle fatigue in historically black colleges and universities. In *Racial Battle Fatigue in Higher Education: Exposing the Myth of Post Racial America*, Rowman & Littlefield Publications, K. Fasching-Varner, K. Albert, R. Mitchell and C. Allen editors, 91-102.

Collins, P.H. (2013). *On intellectual activism*. Temple University Press.

Das Gupta, T. (2003). Teaching anti-racist research in the academy. *Teaching Sociology*. 31, 456-468. http://about.jstor.org/terms

Dei, G. J. S., Karumanchery, L. L., & Karumanchery-Luik, N. (2005). *Playing the Race Card: Exposing White Power and Privilege*. Peter Lang Publications.

Fine, M. & Torre, M. (2004). Re-Membering exclusion: Participatory action research in public institutions. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 1, 15-37.

Gonzalez-Sobrino & Goss, D.R., (2019) Exploring the mechanisms of racialization beyond the black–white binary. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 42(4), 505-510.

Heinzen, T. & Goodfriend, W. (2019). *Social Psychology*. Sage Publications.

Hooks, b., (1991). Theory as liberatory practice, *Yale Journal of Law and Feminism*. 4(1), 1-12.

Hooks, b., (1984). *Feminist theory: From margin to center*. South End Press.

Israel, B. A., Schulz, A. J., Parker, E. A. & Becker, A. B. (1998). Review of community-based research: assessing partnership approaches to improve public health. Annual Review of Public Health, 19(1), 173–202.

Jean-Marie, G. (2006). Welcoming the unwelcome: A social justice imperative of African-American female leaders at historically black colleges and universities. *Educational Foundations* (Winter/Spring), 85-104.

Kendi, I.X. (2019). *How to be an antiracist*. One World Publications.

Krueger, R.A., & Casey, M.A. (2015). *Focus groups: A practical guide for applied research*. (5th edition). Sage Publications.

LeCompte, M.D. & Schensul, J.J. (1999) *Analyzing and interpreting ethnographic data: Ethnographer's Toolkit* (volume 5). Rowman and Littlefield.

Lorde, A. (1984). *Sister outsider: Essays and speeches by Audre Lorde*. Crossing Press.

Lomax, M.L. (2015). Six reasons HBCUs are more important than ever. United Negro College Fund Website. www.UNCF.org

Lyons, H.Z., Bike, D.H., Ojeda, L., Johnson, A., Rosales, R., & Flores, L.Y., (2013). Qualitative research as social justice practice with culturally diverse populations, *Journal for Social Action in Counseling and Psychology.* 5(7), 10-25.

McMillan, B., Florin, P., Stevenson, J., Kerman, & Mitchell, R.E. (1995). Empowerment praxis in community coalitions. *American Journal of Community Psychology.* *23*(5), 699-727.

Merriam, S. B. & Tisdale, G. (2016). *Qualitative research: A guide to design and implementation*. (4th edition). Jossey Bass Publishers.

Mobley, S.D., (2017). Seeking sanctuary: (re)claiming the power of historically Black colleges and universities as places of Black refuge. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, (30)10, 1036-1041, DOI: 10.1080/09518398.2017.1312593.

Morris P., Ida, A.K., Migliaccio T., Tsukada, Y., & Baker, D. (2020). Collaborative Learning in sociology research methods courses: Does race matter?. *Teaching Sociology*, 0(0), 1-13.

Nelson, S. & Williams, M (2017). Tell Them We Are Rising: The Story of Historically Black Colleges and Universities. [Film]. Independent Lens Films.

Niehaus, E. (2017). Building momentum in student engagement: Alternative breaks and students' social justice and diversity orientation. *Journal of College Student Development*, 58(1), 53-70.

Nilson, L.B. (2016). *Teaching at its best: A research-based resource for college instructors* (4th edition). Wiley Publications.

Palmer, G., Ferńandez, J.S., Thomas, D., Lee, G., Masud, H., & Bernai, I... (2019). Oppression and power. In L.A. Jason, O. Glantsman, J. F. O'Brien, & K. N. Ramian (Eds.), *Introduction to community psychology: Becoming an agent of change*. Rebus Press. Retrieved from https://press.rebus.community/introductiontocommunitypsychology/chapter/oppression-and-power/

Prilleltensky, I. (2008). The role of power in wellness, oppression, and liberation: The promise of psychopolitical validity. *Journal of Community Psychology*, 36(2), 116-136.

Sydnor, K. D., Hawkins, A.S. & Edwards, L.V. (2010). Expanding research opportunities: Making the argument for Fit between HBCUs and community-based participatory Research. *Journal of Negro Education,* (79)1, 79-86.

Thurber, A., Collins, L., Greer, M., McKnight, D., & Thompson, D. (2018). Resident experts: The potential of critical Participatory Action Research to inform public housing research and practice. *Action Research*, 0(0) 1-19. https://doi.org/10.1177/1476750317725799

Tuhiwai Smith, L. (2012). Decolonizing methodologies: Research and indigenous peoples (2nd edition). Zed Books.

West, C. (2001). *Race Matters*. Vintage Books: A Division of Random House, Inc. Wilson, S. (2008). *Research is ceremony: Indigenous research methods.* Fernwood Publishing.

Zuber-Skerritt, O., Wood, L. & Kearney, J. (2020) The transformative potential of action learning in community-based research for social action. *Action Learning: Research and Practice*, 17(1), 34-47. DOI: 10.1080/14767333.2020.1712840