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Community Empowerment through an Academic Product: Implications for the Social-justice Oriented Scholar

Tamara G. J. Leech · Edrose Potts Jr.

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Abstract Often, African American community organizations are distanced from government institutional practices. In response, they may approach local academics to help bridge the divide. This think piece explores lessons that one academic scholar learned during the process of writing and distributing an applied report that ultimately helped a community organization to gain access to the governmental decision making process. In exploring the project, we first focus on the process and value of shifting from a charity orientation to a social justice orientation. Second, we use the report itself to provide examples of essential, concrete aspects of social justice-oriented products. In the end, we argue that academic scholars can contribute to community empowerment if (1) an asset rather than deficit orientation is employed and (2) scholars are viewed as community assets rather than institutional resources.

Keywords Asset based community development · Community empowerment · Community scholars · Community engagement · Engaged scholarship

Due to structural barriers, urban African American neighborhoods are often distanced from government decision making processes (Coaffee and Healey 2003; Mesch and Schwirian 1996; Portney and Berry 2001; Taylor 2007) and, therefore, institutional services (Carr and Kolluri 2001; Gee 2002; Holzer 1991; Orfield et al. 2005; Zenk, et al. 2005). To help bridge this divide, neighborhood organizations

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may consult with academic scholars who can serve as translational researchers—i.e. mediating agents between institutions and local communities (Danley et al. 2009). In this role, academic scholars need to be careful not to simply provide resources to “underprivileged” communities—grant proposals, applied research reports, etc.—that simultaneously address neighborhoods’ immediate needs and reinforce existing power hierarchies (Lewis 2004; Morton 1995). These types of products do not strengthen community empowerment or cultivate the social capital necessary for community development. To address the issues of structural distance and access to services, scholars’ products must actively incorporate the knowledge and expertise of the community organization (Cornwall and Jewkes 1995; Macaulay et al. 1999; Minkler 2000). To do so, the scholar must break with academia’s established practice of labeling community work as service or charity, and instead take a social justice orientation to these scholarly products.

This paper details lessons learned from applying an asset-based orientation to a systematic literature review that was produced for a coalition of neighborhood associations. The coalition—MidNorth Public Safety Committee (MPSC)—has been active for 5 years and is concerned with public health and safety issues within seven urban neighborhoods. When the local police department asked them to actively support Community Oriented Policing (COP) efforts, MPSC requested a review of the literature from an academic scholar with whom the committee had a long-standing relationship. The result was an applied research report that has circulated the neighborhoods, city government and police department. In turn, this paper has had a significant effect on the local decision-making process that directly affects the quality of life in MPSC neighborhoods. The primary aim of this paper is to explore lessons that one academic scholar learned during this process.

As such, the discussion is directed toward other academics who are interested in working with marginalized communities to address structural impediments to community development. The paper relates lessons at two levels: the ideological and the concrete. At the ideological level we use the experience to model a shift from a charity orientation to a social justice orientation. At the concrete level, we use the report itself to provide examples of essential aspects of social justice-oriented products. In the end, it is argued that academic scholars can best contribute to community empowerment when they see themselves and, in turn, are perceived as another community asset rather than an external, institutional resource.

Origins of the MidNorth Public Safety Committee

The MidNorth Public Safety Committee (MPSC) was officially established in 2005, but coalition building began 2 years earlier as a response to certain problems—e.g. housing violations, incivilities, and drug-related issues—that were becoming increasingly difficult for individual neighborhood associations to resolve. Association members believed that the difficulty was due to a lack of follow-up by agencies within the city government, as well as a lack of continued communication with local residents. Frustrations were heightened because, although these were diverse neighborhoods, follow-up and communication seemed to be of greatest concern within the geographic areas that were predominately African American.

Thus, from the beginning, MPSC recognized and focused on the structural issues that affect community development and resident quality of life. The insight about structures emerged from lived experience. Previously, members presented zoning issues to the city's zoning committee, they presented crime issues to the police department, and they contacted Health and Hospital's inspection department about housing issues. Furthermore, each neighborhood association contacted the agency as an individual agent. Through this process, members found that the problem was never completely resolved because the issues had a portion of each agency's mission intertwined within them. Therefore, in order to adequately address a problem, the neighborhood association—not the agency where the complaint originated—had to walk it through other agencies. At best, the process prolonged the problem and at worst, the problems were never resolved.

In this way, neighborhood residents learned that the various city agencies were not working together, largely because each agency had a different computer system thereby preventing them from seeing the entire impact of a given problem. City enforcement agencies were not communicating with each other nor pooling their departmental resources in order to address the various problems within the neighborhoods. Hence, one neighborhood association decided to obtain reports generated from each local enforcement agency (fire, health and police) and compile them into one database. They intended to use the database such that complaints would be based on quantitative statistics that the agencies documented themselves, rather than the rich, qualitative evidence that residents had previously brought to the attention of city agents. Instead of continuing to dismiss their anecdotal evidence neighborhoods expected city agencies to respect their statistical knowledge. Instead of being overwhelmed by their slang residents hoped that agencies would listen to their jargon.

In the beginning, only one neighborhood association tried to use the database as a tool. This association represents an official neighborhood area with the largest residential population in the city. The neighborhood residents are also economically and racially diverse, but extremely geographically segregated: low-income African Americans predominate in the south end and upper-income White residents predominate in the north end. Due to the formal social networks of the northern region, the informal social networks in the southern region, as well as the political clout of such a large voter base, neighborhood leaders expected to be able to force city agency stakeholders to come to the table to discuss the issues (largely concentrated in the southern region) documented by the statistical database. However, the association soon realized that the city would not sustain a response to only one neighborhood. Therefore, the association decided to collaborate with the six surrounding neighborhoods (again, economically and racially diverse but highly segregated) that together comprise one district within the local police department.

Thus, MPSC came to be a coalition of neighborhood associations addressing the political and social problems faced by various neighborhoods, including several African American neighborhood associations. The foundations make it clear that the committee never views or addresses these problems as African Americans' problems. African American communities bear the brunt of the effects of the issues, and more acutely experience the structural impediments to addressing the problems. However, MPSC takes the stance that the problems themselves are not African

American problems, but rather issues that are owned by the general community. Therefore, they are the responsibility of the overall—residential and institutional—community.

Integration of a Social Justice-Oriented Scholar

By 2006, MPSC had managed to develop a working relationship with the various public agencies located in the city—i.e. the police department, courts, housing and various state agencies—however the committee's inroads and input were being received begrudgingly by various governmental agencies. At this point, Midnorth Public Safety Committee met Dr. Tamara Leech as a result of her outreach—specifically her attempts to place service learning students—to various neighborhood associations located in the northern part of Indianapolis.

MPSC presented their dilemma to Dr. Leech in hopes of gaining some insight into their slow progression of influence on the various city agencies. Dr. Leech suggested that the committee was indeed attacking the problems, but was not communicating in the method nor the manner in which the agencies were accustomed. She presented the idea that city agencies are not bilingual: they are limited to one working language and the neighborhoods/organizations that speak the language fluently will receive the best service. To be effective, MPSC needed to understand city agencies' methods of operation, limitations, enforcement policies, cross agency interaction, mission and responsibility to the public through the agencies' eyes and language. To fully understand agencies' cultures, the committee also had to understand the underpinnings of their agents' education, training and best practices.

Once they grasped this unique culture, the committee was able to develop an organizational flow and communication process that integrated—but did not completely conform to—the city's communication and problem resolution process. Both the committee and Dr. Leech problematized the need for this restructuring on several fronts. First, the need to restructure implies (or acknowledges) that the onus for “efficient” communication and cross-cultural understanding lies completely within the neighborhood organizations (Weber et al. 1978). Second, restructuring to completely mirror the institutional agencies would have replicated some of the structural obstacles that MPSC intended to address, namely it could have isolated the neighborhood organizations from the residents themselves (Coaffee and Healey 2003). Third, the committee recognized an inherent problem with the city agencies' nearly complete reliance on quantitative statistics. The high value placed on statistical data and theory can inherently reify bias against African American and other marginalized communities (Zuberi 2001). Nonetheless, MPSC recognized the need to conform to some of the agencies' practices in order to address important social problems within the neighborhood.

In the end, MPSC implemented the various recommendations in a balanced way and subsequently began to achieve the results that the committee sought. The restructuring was effective to the point that, in 2008, the Indianapolis Police Department asked MPSC to actively support their Community Oriented Policing (COP) program. In line with typical operating practices, MidNorth wanted to research and fully understand the program and its implications—with particular

concern toward the lower-income and African American residents and communities—prior to lending support. Hence, MPSC asked Dr. Leech to produce a systematic review of COP programs and their implications for MPSC. She produced a 13-page document that had implications beyond the committee's or Dr. Leech's expectations. As a result of publishing and distributing the COP report, MPSC is beginning to be viewed as a legitimate public safety organization. According to the MPSC board members, the report has empowered the organization in the following ways:

- The report has increased the influence of MPSC.
- City agencies now accept analyses distributed by MPSC.
- MPSC now receives public safety and enforcement information that was previously unattainable.
- The majority of city agency department heads have requested to be on MPSC's distribution list.
- Many city agency representatives now attend our monthly meetings.
- MPSC is sought out to support various city and community organizations.
- Some MPSC committee members have been appointed to various public safety related government boards, including the Law Enforcement Advisory Board for the county.
- MPSC has become the first non-law enforcement organization to participate in the interview and hiring process of the Police Commander for their district.
- MPSC serves as a sounding board to the Director of Public Safety on many new initiatives put forth by the Department of Public Safety.
- MPSC research on a given issue is now accepted as viable input by the various public agencies.
- MPSC is now included in much of the Community Development Corporation planning taking place within the northern segment of Marion County.
- MPSC has obtained interest our program from various higher education institutions beyond the state of Indiana.

How Did an Academic Report Lead to Community Empowerment?

Thus, the applied research report provided to MPSC served to empower the community (or at least the community organization). The document itself revealed that African American and other marginalized communities concerned with community empowerment within their boundaries should support Community Oriented Policing (COP) programs only *if* :

- direct involvement of multiple organizations within a community, including churches and neighborhood groups, is a focus (Ford 2007; Forman 2004);
- media campaigns to inform the public about the program, including door-to-door campaigns, are included (Skogan 2000);
- established informal community leaders, such as ministers in African American communities, are mobilized (Goldstein and Hill 1990);
- meetings are located in diverse locations including minority, renter, and higher crime areas (Liederbach et al. 2008);
- citizen satisfaction is integrated into police evaluations (Ford 2007);

- the measurement of employee behaviors rather than traits is emphasized in police agencies' performance evaluations (Lilley and Hinduja 2006);
- annual or biannual concurrent surveys of officers and citizens' priorities are implemented to ensure consensus (Liederbach et al. 2008); and
- a Key Informant Network (KIN) model and/or qualitative measures are used to inform the decision-making process at all levels of program development (including when setting public safety standards) (Fielding and Innes 2006; Xu et al. 2005).

These very specific recommendations were helpful to the MidNorth Public Safety Committee, and may also be useful for other community organizations. However, the greatest impact of the report resulted from (1) an orientation that allowed both government programs and community organizations to be depicted as mutually beneficial assets and (2) specific, structural components of the report and subsequent interactions that implicitly challenged typical hierarchical relationships.

The Ideological/Analytical Frame of the Report The applied research report reflected an asset-based orientation to the issue of Community Oriented Policing (COP). In other words, the scholar began the analysis with the assumption that both the police department and the local community (particularly MPSC) contained mutually beneficial assets. Typically, the assumption is that government agencies—including police departments—possess assets that can be used to address deficits within communities. This type of orientation tends to (1) dismiss resources in the community that could be employed to address problems and (2) overlook deficits within government agencies that pose barriers to addressing these same problems.

Part of the benefit of asset rather than deficit based analysis is that it inherently challenges the power hierarchies that confront marginalized communities. The potential impact of this type of ideological shift is evident in the broad literature on resilience among youth (Garmezzy 1991; Rutter 1985). Several decades ago, academic scholars interested in urban youth began to emphasize the fact that over half of children living in disadvantaged conditions do not live in these communities as adults, yet the experience of this majority was not represented in the scholarly literature (Garmezzy 1974; Rutter 1979; Werner and Smith 1981). The subsequent research on the assets and positive aspects of these resilient youth has beneficially influenced the theoretical frameworks and intervention programs emerging from the social work, health and education fields (Glantz and Johnson 1999; Howard et al. 1999; C. Smith and Carlson 1997; Werner 1990).

This shift in ideological frame has been especially important to the research on African American youth. The resilience paradigm has served to highlight biases inherent to traditional research questions that focused on explaining African American youth failures (Miller 1999; Spencer 1995). Instead, researchers began to study African American youth successes, especially in the educational realm (Floyd 1996; Swanson et al. 2003). As a result, the asset-based resilience paradigm has begun to challenge academic and common negative stereotypes about African American youth. The paradigm has also served as the basis for various successful educational programs aimed at African American youth such as Project ACHIEVE (Knoff and Batsche 1995), Positive Adolescent Choices Training (Cirillo et al. 1998) and (Frey et al. 2000).

The shift from a deficit to asset orientation in the community development literature parallels the initial rise of resilience in the youth literature, with one important distinction: the shift in orientation began in the applied fields, and has not yet fully penetrated the work emerging from associated academic disciplines. Therefore, the asset based community development orientation has not attained the same degree of influence as the resilient youth paradigm. The process of Asset Based Community Development (ABCD) includes recognizing, identifying and building upon communities' existing social capital (Kretzmann and McKnight 1993). Instead of developing programs according to a needs assessment (i.e. focusing on and addressing deficiencies), ABCD identifies and documents the existing capacities, skills and assets of the community, and then builds policies and activities around them (Mathie and Cunningham 2003a).

The ideas and processes associated with ABCD have been applied to varying issues such as the technological divide (Mathie and Cunningham 2003b), health promotion (N. Smith et al. 2001), and arts-based economic development (Phillips 2004), all showing some success. However, scholars working with communities have been remiss in placing themselves within this analytic frame—i.e. identifying themselves as community assets. Instead, they seem to continue to view themselves as exclusively part of the institution of higher education, a resource that ABCD recognizes as located within the community but largely controlled by outsiders (McKnight and Kretzmann 1990). The failure to self-identify as a community asset reinforces a power hierarchy that locates the academic as property of the educational institution rather than an active member of a local community.

The core ideas and concepts behind ABCD informed the academic critique of the Community Oriented Policing literature. This asset-based orientation to the report ultimately had two impacts on community empowerment within MPSC neighborhoods. First, it increased collective efficacy beliefs—confidence in a group's conjoint ability to plan and execute activities that will lead to a desired outcome (Bandura 1995; Goddard et al. 2004; Zaccaro et al. 1995)—among the members of the MidNorth Public Safety Committee. Beyond the concrete information in the report (e.g. MPSC members state that they have used the report to enhance their understanding of the COP concept), MPSC members assert that:

the report validated the work that MPSC has done up to this point. The report also instilled a sense of pride in the membership. Most of the members of the committee believed that we were on the right path but were not sure because we are the only organization doing what we are doing. MPSC members have copied the report and distributed [it] to residents and friends throughout the city and state.

Second, the asset-based orientation—toward both MPSC and the police department—allowed for wider readership and circulation, increased public discussion and ultimately encouraged more cooperation between MPSC and government agencies. Specifically, the report did not serve to inflame the police department. Due to MPSC's distribution efforts, the report has circulated (via email, photocopies, and meeting handouts) among:

- The police command staff (from the chief of police to district commanders, captains, and lieutenants)

- The director of public safety
- The city attorney
- The city mayor
- City county council members
- Sherriff department command
- The governor's office has requested a copy of the report

Furthermore, the document was discussed at meetings with all of these government agents. As a result of these discussions, MPSC has experienced increasingly favorable receptions of the information that they provide to government agencies and expedited responses to their own requests for information. Furthermore, additional neighborhoods have requested membership in MPSC, the Committee's endorsement of various programs has been sought, and State congressional offices have requested MPSC information. Finally, and most importantly, for the first time in the Committee's history, six members were invited to interview candidates for the North District command post, and the new commander has explicitly used the report as a reference when setting goals within the district.

Concrete Components of the Report According to MPSC board members, the most important and powerful statement in the full document was, "In sum, the existing literature suggests that the MPSC should continue its enthusiasm about the COP program on a conditional basis. . .and IMPD'S COP program will be more likely to succeed if MPSC'S assets are recognized and fully integrated into agency efforts." This type of statement *explicitly* conveys the asset-based orientation present throughout the literature review.

In addition, the report *implicitly* establishes the community's capacity and expertise. For example, after critiquing the clarity of academic and governmental definitions of community empowerment, the report states that, "the MidNorth Public Safety Committee (MPSC), on the other hand, has clearly defined two aspects of community empowerment within their stated organizational goals." This acknowledgement indirectly establishes the community organization's competence. When these types of statements are paired with specific findings about the importance of community involvement to Community Oriented Policing successes [the prior two sections in the full report detailed COP successes in reducing crime rates and fear of crime], (a) community organizations and (b) government agencies are portrayed as cooperative and reciprocal components of one community. They begin to represent mutual assets rather than (a) a special, needy population dependent on (b) an outside supplier of resources (Kretzmann and McKnight 1993).

Other, additional concrete strategies were employed as part of the production of the COP paper, and these strategies helped to establish the author as a community asset rather than institutional resource. First, the community organization—not the academic institution or the academic scholar—circulated, publicized and disseminated the document. Second, the product had an academic format with citations and a works cited page instead of the paternalistic, encyclopedia-style writing common to pamphlets. The community organization subsequently and spontaneously identified the works cited pages as an important and informative resource. Third, the author has declined to attend initial meetings between the MPSC board members

and government representatives until the other members of the committee and neighborhood organizations (beyond the leaders) are integrated into the discussions. The author has had various, individual discussions with stakeholders, but has recused herself from the decision-making table. In these ways, the academic scholar has attempted to become an asset at the same level of any other community member (e.g. those who contribute their time and expertise developing a website, filing documents, staffing tables, or securing a venue for an event).

In sum, according to the MPSC's own definition of community empowerment, the report has helped the committee address some obstacles to promoting partnerships and has also helped them to attain a voice in setting standards. Part of this influence seems to be due to the report's social justice orientation. If the COP paper serves as a model, some essential components of a social justice-oriented, academic document are: (1) an analytic approach that is not biased by a deficit orientation (2) concrete recommendations devoid of academic jargon, (3) explicit statements about organizational and/or community assets. These characteristics of the COP report allowed for practical use of the information. Beyond the practical application, the report increased collective efficacy beliefs among community members and also instigated government agencies to initiate relationships with local communities that are based on reciprocity and mutual respect. In this way, both the surface and deep structure of the report contributed to community empowerment.

Conclusions: The Academic Scholar as Another Community Asset

Thus, academic scholars may have the greatest effect on community empowerment when they see themselves as another community asset rather than an external, institutional resource, and when they allow this view to penetrate their academic products. Exclusively identifying as a member of the academic institution—and not the broader community—represents a problem for the academic scholar and also for the larger community. For the asset-based orientation to penetrate academic (i.e. basic or applied) products, scholars have to insert their role, practices and products into the asset framework. Rather than doing research *on* or *with* community members, they have to do research *as* a community member (Marullo and Edwards 2000). Just as the applied research report discussed government agencies and community members as mutual assets, the academic scholar must actively establish herself and her products as an asset that is at least partially determined by the neighborhood. If this asset-based orientation is not consciously and actively pursued, the scholar might replicate and reinforce a power hierarchy that paints the community as an underserved population dependent on the skills and resources of academics and their institutions (Mathie and Cunningham 2005).

Although this orientation empowers communities, it should be recognized that it poses some risks to academics' power within their own academic institution. Higher education's dominant, charity-oriented paradigm of community engagement complements the existing reward system within academic institutions (i.e. one driven by the disciplinary silos that are devoid of a sense of place) (Marullo and Edwards 2000). Studies show that social justice orientations to community research often run contrary to institutional funding priorities and the discipline-based reward structure

(Bringle and Hatcher 2000; Giles and Eyer 1998). Thus, academics pursuing social justice-oriented projects may not see as much of a career-related return on their investment as other academics who concentrate on typical academic products.

Despite this obstacle, some professors have successfully implemented the ideological shift and have changed their research orientation. For example, some scholars committed to asset-based community involvement have adopted the role of a translational scholar. Originating within the health and medical fields, translational scholarship involves transferring scientific discoveries into a form that will affect (primarily population) health policies (Commission on Community Engaged Scholarship in the Health Professions 2005). Community-focused academics who do not focus on health research may want to use this established health model (along with the accompanying tenure and promotion resources such as those available from the Community-Campus Partnerships for Health at <http://depts.washington.edu/ccph/index.html>) to legitimize their community-based work as scholarship. The translational scholarship model continues to gain recognition and provides a venue for scholars to establish their work as science or scholarship that is being “translated” to affect real world outcomes.

This strategy should be problematized in a manner similar to the previous critique of MPSC’s reorganization, however it temporarily provides an avenue to protect scholars who are committed to community empowerment. It is readily apparent that part of the success of the COP research report depended on the academic’s structural power (i.e. her title and her institutionally recognized, approved and valued knowledge), so the institutional obstacles to social justice-oriented scholars’ career advancement also threatens community organizations’ empowerment. Therefore, in addition to taking steps to establish themselves as community assets on the same level as their peers—i.e. other community residents—community oriented scholars might also establish themselves as translational scholars and document the impact and readership of the reports that they produce. In so doing, academics may be able to balance two goals that are all too often contradictory: advancing a career in academia and producing scholarship that reduces the distance between marginalized communities and structural resources. In this respect, it is easy to recognize the academic as simply another community member. While attempting to help community organizations to overcome institutional barriers, community scholars must also overcome the institutional barriers in their own institutions.

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