



Overcoming the Venn diagram: Learning to be a co-passionate navigator in community-based participatory research

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Abstract

This article is a personal account of working as an administrator and research scientist on a community-based participatory research (CBPR) project called Food Dignity. It describes how the community partners on the project taught the author about privilege and oppression in campus–community research partnerships. It describes her initial failures to acknowledge privilege and actively work to overcome oppression via acts of 'passive oppression' and suggests that acts of passive oppression produce and reproduce structural oppression. The article goes on to give specific examples of structural oppression in CBPR relationships and proposes ways that people in project coordination and administration roles can help circumvent or overcome them. It concludes by acknowledging the author's place of privilege as an academic in Food Dignity, and by re-envisioning her role within the project as a 'co-passionate navigator'. It examines the importance of co-passionate navigators in CBPR and describes their role in changing the campus–community research landscape, making CBPR partnerships more just and equitable for all partners.

Keywords: food dignity; community-based participatory research; CBPR; passive oppression; compassionate navigator; project administration

Key messages

- It is important to acknowledge privilege and oppression in community-based participatory research (CBPR) partnerships.
- It is important to identify ways in which academics might reduce or remove structural and passive oppression in CBPR.
- Co-passionate navigators have a role in reshaping CBPR landscapes.

Introduction

This is a story of communities and compost, of research and action, and of garden salads. It is also a story about privilege, the unearned benefits awarded to a person simply for being part of a specific social group – a tricky subject for stories. Privilege can be background noise when you are living it, but a cacophony when you are not. This is a story for those sitting in a place of privilege, particularly the relative place of privilege held by employees of academic organizations engaging in community-based participatory research (CBPR) partnerships. In sharing my story of working

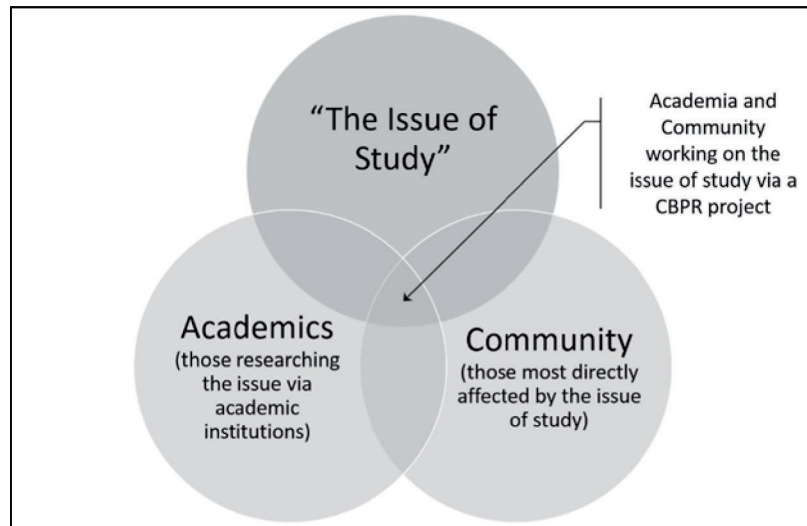
on the action research project Food Dignity, I aim to do the following: (1) turn up the volume on that background noise of privilege for academics working in CBPR; (2) identify some oppressive structures in academic institutions that, for those of us in academia, may be obscured because of their acceptance as the status quo; (3) share some ways I have found to mitigate and circumvent conventions that are oppressive for community-based research partners and (4) discuss the role of individuals I call co-passionate navigators in working to overcome or bypass oppressive structures in CBPR partnerships.

Being taught about privilege

In 2013, I joined a project called 'Food Dignity: Action research on engaging food insecure communities and universities in building sustainable community food systems'. Food Dignity began in 2011 as a five-year, US-based research project funded by the US Department of Agriculture (USDA) Agriculture and Food Research Initiative. I was hired as a part-time administrator, part-time researcher, and one of my first major tasks on the project was to set up an all-team meeting in Ithaca and Brooklyn, New York. I arranged for places to stay, flights for 20 people from around the country, ground transportation, reimbursement forms and a truly staggering amount of food. During the meeting, the project's community liaison named and had stand in turn, first all the academics, then all the students and then all of the community members actually doing food justice work on the ground. At the time, I found myself upset by the exercise. I felt that separating us into discrete groups belittled the fact that we were all working together for a common cause. Instead, I believed Food Dignity would be more effective through modelling and treating our partnership as a Venn diagram, bringing together the worlds of different partners and nurturing the slices of space where those worlds overlapped (see Figure 1). Moreover, throughout the naming, I found myself justifying the ways in which I counted as something other than an academic. Although my employment at the University of Wyoming and my master's degree from the University of Oxford placed me squarely in the camp of academics, I found myself hoping not to be named as such, because within my first week on the job, I learned that 'academic' could actually be spelled as a four-letter word.

I had been hired in the midst of preparations for an annual report to our funders, and the project director Dr Christine Porter told me I would be compiling lists and files of outputs and deliverables from the project partners. Wanting to take the initiative, I sent an email to community organizers of the five non-profit organizations associated with Food Dignity, asking them to send me their outputs for the year. I was looking for any document, presentation, publication, piece of media, public notification, flyer, set of meeting minutes or important email conversation they had produced over the previous year that could demonstrate all the amazing work being done by the Food Dignity team. After a week, wherein I received no responses from our community partners, I sent a polite prompt reminding everyone of my request. However, Christine then told me to drop the request and use only outputs we, or our other academic partners, already had on hand from the internal annual reports that partner organizations had sent several months earlier. She also suggested that we set up a meeting with the project's community liaison to discuss revising our approach to collecting the deliverables needed for the purposes of ongoing reporting and analysis, so as to make the process more efficient and less onerous for community partners.

Figure 1: My original conception and representation of a CBPR partnership as a Venn diagram



Only later did I see the storm of emails to Christine resulting from what I had seen as a simple request. I did not understand. I had thought sharing and reporting was part of being in a research project. I thought, 'We're giving them a lot of money to do this!' However, a deep sense of embarrassment hid just behind my indignation. Food Dignity felt different from any other project with which I had previously been involved – the way community partners pushed back against something that they thought was unreasonable, given our recent request for similar documents and the way that Christine changed our whole approach in response. I felt I had somehow upset a careful agreement that had been perfectly balanced before I barged in, like an elephant in a china shop. Did I need to tender my resignation? Was I simply a bad fit for this work? No, Christine assured me, this was an ongoing learning process for everyone. In short, I determined, all we academics are elephants.

Thus, I arrived at our team meeting in New York vowing to break nothing else in the Food Dignity partnership. Unnerved by my newly discovered elephantine girth, I started paying more attention to exactly how I placed my feet and the impact of every step. When I picked up a group of project partners from the airport, I overheard one person express his surprise at the cost of checked bags and felt fortunate that my travels abroad had taught me the benefits of carry-on luggage. Checking into our hotel rooms, though we had pre-paid for a block of rooms, the hotel staff required either a personal credit card or a \$50 deposit to insure the hotel against personal, incidental expenses. No problem for me; I handed them my credit card. While I was waiting for them to process it, I noticed Christine hovering at the desk trying to catch each community partner as they checked in, putting down her personal credit card to cover the deposit. At dinner that evening, I noted that some of the partners chose not to attend and felt slighted – I had, after all, put in a lot of effort to find restaurants and make group reservations for us.

Then my personal narrative of the day's events shifted dramatically. After dinner, a student from a Food Dignity partner university approached me and, after complimenting my choice of restaurants, asked for a reminder of how many more meals we would have to cover on our own. Several people had run into unexpected expenses and had already been forced to spend all the cash they had brought for the

week. I stumbled as I felt my elephant's feet grow a size larger. Food Dignity funds from the University of Wyoming budget covered hotel rooms and also catering for most meals, but some food had to be covered out of pocket for now, to be paid back later via per diem reimbursements. I personally found the government-rate per diem generous and had been able to front those costs, knowing that reimbursement would be forthcoming. Also, I had a credit card to cover unexpected costs. But what if I had no credit card, brought only \$50 to cover my meals and instead had to use it to pay for checked bags or a deposit at the hotel? Even if the hotel gave back the money at the end of our stay and the project reimbursed me with per diems, I would have nothing left to buy food in the meantime. When I got back to the hotel, I cried over Food Dignity for the first time.

From there, I started to understand the degree to which academic institutions have been built by and for other academics, making assumptions about research partners' organizations and resources. Programme and funding infrastructures may be reasonable for academic institutions but create an excessive burden for, or even entirely exclude, community-based partners. I saw how this was true for individuals on our trip to New York, and later saw that this was equally applicable at the organizational level. The Food Dignity funder (USDA), like many funders, requires that subawardees (two universities and five non-profit organizations in our case) be paid in arrears, just as the University of Wyoming required per diems be given as reimbursements. Academic institutions have enough financial padding to absorb these upfront costs, but small non-profits operating on shoestring budgets do not. These payment structures, meant to be 'pay now, reimburse later' arrangements, in fact turn into 'pay now, eat later' realities. Hungry people and organizations cannot function, and so are excluded from equitable participation in CBPR projects.

Later in our New York meeting, the Food Dignity team toured sites in the Ithaca area that were working for food security, justice and dignity. One of these sites, Dryden Community Garden, had received a minigrant (also known as a microgrant) funded by the Food Dignity 'community support package'. The Food Dignity-supported minigrants programme was designed to provide small grants of between \$50 and \$3,000 to fund action by members of low-income communities, communities of colour and other 'disadvantaged' communities, to improve the equitability, sustainability and/or healthfulness of their community food system. Each Food Dignity community partner organization devised a system to distribute \$30,000 in minigrant funds to community members or organizations over the course of four years. Kerra, the Dryden Community Garden manager, met us to give a tour of the site. She related how at first she did not want to apply for a minigrant because of what she had heard about grants – a lot of application and reporting work for comparatively little money. Fortunately, the community organizer for the Whole Community Project (the Food Dignity community partner in Ithaca), Jemila Sequeira, had been willing to work closely with Kerra to help fully develop her plan and put her ideas on paper. Jemila invented grant procedures to facilitate and engage individuals whom conventional granting mechanisms normally exclude.

It was still early in the season, and some plots had not yet been prepared for the upcoming growing season, so they were still choked with the previous year's growth and winter weeds. Kerra laughed at this and said that you could not impose any kind of structure on community gardens or the people working there. It worked against the sense of inclusion that the community was trying hard to foster. She said, 'That kind of structure pretty much doesn't work for anything I do. Except compost. Compost is the only thing around here that can use micromanaging.' We all laughed at this, but for me

Kerra's words also triggered something deeper. I started thinking back on my request for organizations' outputs, and at how I had felt confused about everyone's resistance to a structured and rigid (if not uncommon) way of collecting them. I had previously only experienced working with community partners via that rigid 'micromanaging', but Jemila's approach offered an alternative that met Kerra's needs and enabled her to put her assets to work. Jemila's flexibility with the minigrants process supported a community leader in excellent and important work that normally may not have received funding.

Two years later, I found myself organizing and attending a final Food Dignity team meeting in New Orleans. Throughout the meeting, partners had the opportunity to stand up and share stories, insights and experiences of Food Dignity. Near the end of the meeting, one community partner stood and shared with us 'a day in his life'. He commented that sometimes he was told to 'leave home at home' when coming to work. However, he added, 'It's not the money or the help that is the concern or the problem. [It's the] other things you have to deal with in life that hinder you when you want to go forward. Sometimes things so deep down you just can't go forward.' His story reminded me of a metaphor that summarizes privilege in CBPR projects: in a garden salad, green beans contribute but carrots commit (my vegan twist on the eggs and ham breakfast metaphor). You can pull a few beans off the vine, and the plant will go on living and producing more beans; when you pull a carrot, that's it for the carrot. Academics (whether elephants or green bean plants) sit in a place of privilege because we can simply *contribute* to a research project. Indeed, some academics are more privileged than others, based on institution, discipline, employment position, gender and/or race. Some of us choose to commit deeply to a project. But academic-based partners in CBPR are privileged in comparison to many community-based partners because we have the choice to engage in the work *or not*. For many community partners of CBPR, the research is about their lives, about survival. Their engagement is vital and, often, inescapable. If you, or your community, are food insecure, you are engaged with food security whether or not you would like to be, and whether or not any given project is funded.

Identifying oppression

The realization of my privilege within the Food Dignity project arrived with a great weight that at first I experienced as embarrassment. I wanted to hide or deny my privilege and my status as an academic. The people of Food Dignity taught me about privilege and oppression through sharing with me what matters to them, through pushing back and through their openness and generosity in sharing their experiences. Through them, I learned to understand the weight of privilege as a weight of responsibility, instead of as a weight of embarrassment. It is not enough to tiptoe through the china shop. When I find something broken in our CBPR partnership (or, more often, when someone points out the broken pieces I have been walking on all along), I have a responsibility to try to do something about it, share what I have learned with the world and give credit to those who have been my teachers. I have organized some of the myriad ways in which CBPR partnerships can be inequitable, unjust and unethical into two, related groups: structural oppression and what I will call passive oppression.

Passive oppression can be the failure to honour different ways of learning and knowing, or, more broadly, it can be the ignorance of, or unwillingness to see, feel or acknowledge, disparities of privilege and how those disparities shape the assumed status quo. Joining the Food Dignity project turned up the volume on my

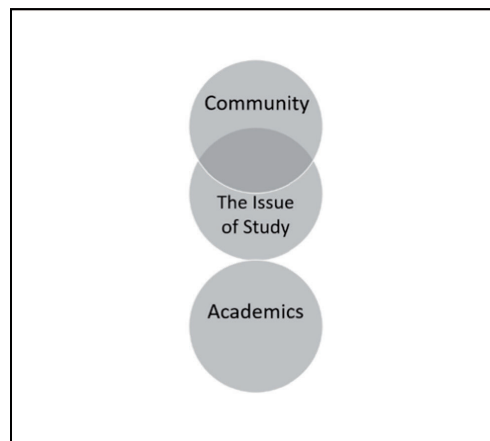
background-noise privilege, and I struggled with claiming that privilege. I wanted to say, 'Wait! I, too, have suffered! Let me count the ways! Let me into your circle, accept me, don't name me "Other". We are more the same than we are different!' The people of the Food Dignity project have encouraged me to examine my role and place within the project, but the people of Food Dignity have also demanded that their own spaces be respected. These self-examinations have helped me to understand and acknowledge my role as an administrator and academic in the project, and the privilege that accompanies that space. I am defined and described by pain I have lived, by my privilege, by oppression I have recognized, and also by oppression I have failed to see from my place of privilege.

Passive oppression may not be intentional, but its impact is producing and reproducing structural oppression. Our society centres academic institutions as the core of knowledge generation and sharing, and so they control (and are often the only eligible recipients for) large sums of research money, as well as many powers for defining what counts as knowledge. Additionally, academia assumes that academics will work *with* academics producing knowledge to be shared *with other* academics, and its structure mirrors that assumption. Academic institutions may be elitist and oppressive in many ways, but as the administrator for a partnership of both academic and community partners I experienced the explicit ways in which academia is structurally oppressive. I opened this article with three anecdotes that illustrate the specific oppressive structures that I encountered most often in Food Dignity: (1) payment and reimbursement structures (pay now, eat later), (2) approaches to sharing data and knowledge (micromanaging more than compost) and (3) power and privilege imbalances inherent to CBPR projects (the carrots and green beans metaphor).

Circumventing structural oppression

By naming and identifying structural oppression in CBPR, the Food Dignity team has been able to work towards circumventing (finding paths around or through) oppressive conventions. For me, this began with restructuring my understanding of how our CBPR partnership worked, accounting for disparities in privilege, and passive and structural oppression. In Ithaca, when I claimed that all partners' spaces overlapped in some equal way (as represented by the Venn diagram in Figure 1), I failed to acknowledge that as an academic in a CBPR partnership, I inherently experience 'the issue of study' differently from the community partners in the project. For example, in Food Dignity, community partners *live* 'the issue' of food injustice, while academics are close to and contribute to 'the issue' while retaining a degree of separation from it (see Figure 2). I was passive-oppressive through my failure to acknowledge my privilege and my resulting attempt to force a Venn diagram approach on Food Dignity partners. Just as passive oppression produces and reproduces structural oppression, acknowledging my privilege and overcoming my attachment to the idea of Food Dignity as a Venn diagram allowed me to see with more clarity passive and structural oppression and the need to work around or dismantle oppressive structures. I learned from the anecdotes I shared earlier (and from other similar experiences), devising and implementing solutions immediately when I could, and noting solutions that we could only implement in future projects. I also recorded (with frustration and often more tears) our failures, the obstacles that I personally, Food Dignity as a partnership or the system of community-campus partnerships in general perpetuated or failed to surmount.

Figure 2: CBPR partnerships as described by a modified diagram that accounts for disparities in privilege



Kerra and Jemila demonstrated the amazing results born of honouring different ways of learning and knowing, and conversely how rigid, standardized approaches to research can be passively oppressive, can silence those not in a place of privilege or power and can deafen those who are. From this and many other lessons throughout the project, the people of Food Dignity have worked hard to create a partnership where it is safe to learn from and share with one another, driven by the ethic that 'we value the fundamental dignity, worth, sovereignty, self-determination and the inherent power of all people' (a quotation from the Food Dignity values statement developed at the Ithaca meeting). In the context of the space created by those values, the community partners have been able to push back on and to reshape typical academic approaches to research, and Food Dignity academics have, in turn, discussed other ways of collecting and using data. A key part of this was the development of a 'community liaison' position, filled by an individual who could help translate between the needs of the research project and the realities lived by community partners. The community liaison helped devise a system whereby we restricted requests for outputs documenting the work that partners did all year to a single annual report from each community partner organization. Additionally, the community liaison helped each partner develop a system that worked for them to track and compile outputs, often using an academic partner, in close consultation with the community partner, to actually conduct the ongoing compilation and organization of outputs.

We have also found ways to circumvent the 'pay now, eat later' system. When I told Christine that I had learned some people were struggling to pay for meals and unexpected expenses, she offered what she called cash advances on per diems to the individuals who needed it, using her personal money. However, we knew it was a stopgap measure, not a solution. When we returned from our New York trip, I spoke with different university offices and determined that in the future we could distribute cash 'participation stipends' to non-academic partners, ensuring these stipends were worth at least the amount individuals would have been reimbursed via per diems. Similarly, early in the life of Food Dignity, Christine worked with the University of Wyoming Research Office to get an exception to the typical practice of paying subawards entirely in arrears. The Research Office has shown great flexibility and leadership in providing community-based organizations with the resources they need to complete their scopes of work in advance, essentially as unguaranteed loans, until

the university is repaid by the funder in arrears. Without that, the project would not have been possible at all.

While experiencing and implementing them, these solutions felt like flying leaps over previously insurmountable obstacles, although in reality they are only small steps along the path towards systematically dismantling structural oppression. However, even these relatively small steps helped create an action research environment in which Food Dignity partners could work together more effectively and with more dignity. Table 1 is a tool for identifying some types of structural oppression that often exist when administering CBPR projects, along with ways to mitigate or circumvent each structure. Many of these are specific to federally funded projects in the United States, but some principles and practices may be relevant in other contexts as well. We have been able to implement many of these approaches in Food Dignity, but it took years of doing it wrong and learning the consequences to get there, and in some cases we have not yet succeeded.

Table 1: Examples of structural oppression in administration of CBPR projects and examples of how Food Dignity worked around those obstacles

| Institutional structure | Food Dignity examples of circumventing oppressive structures (actual and planned) | Potential system change |
|--|---|--|
| Grant funding paid in arrears | The University of Wyoming (UW) Research Office pre-paid some subawardees in quarterly advances as de facto unguaranteed loans that were repaid in arrears by the funder. When funding rules changed in 2015 requiring some payment be made in arrears pending deliverables, UW began withholding a small percentage of each payment to meet Federal regulations but still reduce the up-front costs burden on community partners. | Funders enable up-front payments for the bulk of costs that small organizations incur in completing their scopes of work. |
| Community partners volunteering time or resources | Food Dignity budgeted for the maximum allowable federal non-negotiated indirect costs rate (10 per cent) for community partners. When even that was disallowed by the funder, it was reallocated to direct grant management costs. In subsequent grant-funded projects, UW partners also included use of meeting spaces in partner budgets to compensate organizations for project use of their buildings. | All CBPR partnerships co-develop comprehensive scopes of work (including grant management time) and use scopes to develop all budgets prior to grant application, including accounting for management, supervision and facilities. |
| Complexity of negotiating a Federal indirect cost (facilities and administration overhead) rate on grant funding | For Food Dignity partners without negotiated Federal indirect cost rates, we built in additional personnel time for a grant manager to help cover non-project costs (such as grant reporting). | Simplify the process for small organizations to negotiate indirect cost rates or, at minimum, at least double the non-negotiated indirect cost rate (currently 10 per cent) to more adequately cover real overhead costs. |

| Institutional structure | Food Dignity examples of circumventing oppressive structures (actual and planned) | Potential system change |
|---|--|---|
| <p>Barriers to travel for project, such as requiring air fare, hotel or meals be covered via reimbursements, or lack of support for dealing with unexpected travel expenses</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Put more travel money directly in community partners' budgets. • Christine kept funding for the annual team meetings in her UW budget. This had practical advantages for organizing group meals, booking hotels and coordinating travel. It also enabled flexibility, including in identifying locations, compensating invited consultants and facilitators, and expanding the number of community partners supported to participate. However, it also reduced partner control over this budget, and made it harder to fund per diems and other individual costs in advance. Over the life of Food Dignity, we established the following protocols: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o UW organized and directly paid for large expenses, such as flights, hotels and catered meals. o We set up hotel contracts so that all incidentals were covered by an academic partner, meaning that individuals did not have to put down a credit card or cash deposit (often setting up credit agreement forms on personal credit cards and following up with individuals if expenses were incurred). o We provided cash stipends up front in lieu of per diem reimbursements. If an institution does not allow pre-paying per diems in cash, look into distributing cash 'participation stipends'. (This likely will require approval from the project's ethical review board.) o For future projects, we plan to have someone who will not be travelling, project staff or a paid travel agent, readily available during times of travel who can help organize and pay for unexpected travel expenses such as hotels and ground transportation if a flight is cancelled. | <p>The organizations holding the travel funding can give travel cash advances and provide employees with travel credit cards. Event organizers can give every traveller a phone number of someone who can pay for unexpected costs by credit card. Hotels can offer event organizers a systematic option for covering incidental payments for those who may not be well positioned to put down their own cards. The main awardee (UW in this example) can subaward more travel funding to partners.</p> |

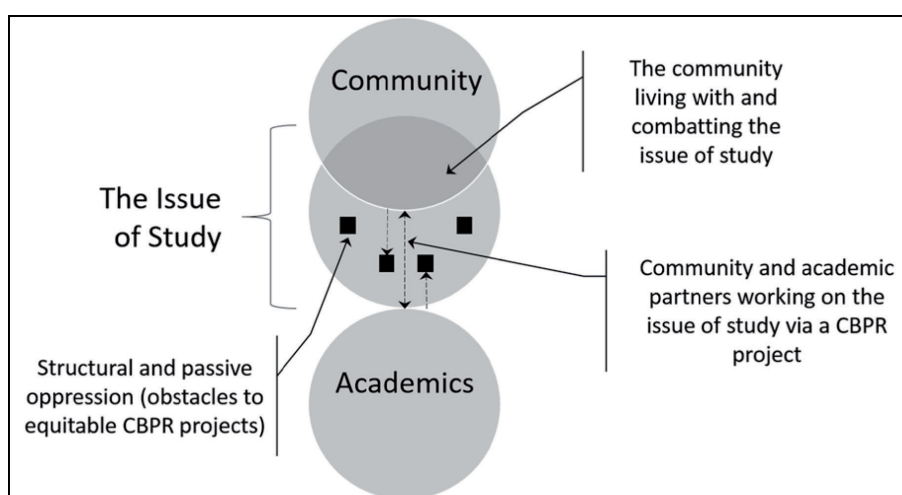
Learning to be a co-passionate navigator

My account of different aspects of structural oppression, which is focused on oppressive conventions of paying organizations and people, is not an exhaustive list. As an administrator on Food Dignity, I mostly have dealt with funding and reimbursement. Those with different roles in CBPR projects likely would identify other types of

structural oppression and would devise other paths of mitigation and circumvention. Additionally, each institution, each funder and each nation has different regulations and infrastructure, and each CBPR partnership will face different challenges. Therefore, no list can be exhaustive – there is no catch-all model for dealing with privilege and ending oppression in CBPR partnerships. However, the common thread among institutions and organizations participating in CBPR is the obligation to find or create those paths towards more equitable and just partnerships. I am trying to learn to use my privileges to reduce and resist complicity in, and reproduction of, oppression, one elephant step at a time.

My first steps on this path related to being taught about privilege, learning to accept and acknowledge my privilege and learning that we do not need to conform to a Venn diagram to work together. When I carried my privilege as embarrassment, I wanted to claim the overlapping space that did not label me simply as an academic. The people and administrative work of Food Dignity have taught me that in CBPR projects, academics and community partners inhabit different worlds separated by disparities in privilege. As represented in Figure 3, the space between those worlds is filled with dangerous obstacles (passive and structural oppression). As I discussed previously, claiming or renaming CBPR partners' worlds (for example as a Venn diagram) is an act of passive oppression. Similarly, if I see an obstacle and do nothing, I am passively producing and reproducing that structural oppression. Instead, Food Dignity partners have taught me to honour our different worlds and to act as a navigator of the spaces between worlds, identifying obstacles, actively circumnavigating them and, more importantly, working to remove them. I have come to think of myself, and others who actively try to avoid or undo oppression, in those in-between spaces, as co-passionate navigators.

Figure 3: A modified diagram of CBPR projects that accounts for disparities in privilege, the existence of passive and structural oppression and the need to work around those barriers to support a successful CBPR partnership



Christine coined the term 'co-passion' to help me describe what I feel as a deep-rooted obligation to find ways around and through oppressive structures. For me, these roots are in love and compassion; it is the systemic justice work together that transforms this into co-passion. In the words of Aboriginal activist Lilla Watson, 'If you have come to help me, you are wasting your time. If you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together.' Therefore, co-passion is not power- or

privilege-dependent – in Food Dignity, both community and academic partners have acted as co-passionate navigators. In CBPR partnerships, not all individuals must be co-passionate navigators; partners also sometimes can work best, and most safely, within their own circles (community or academia). However, I have also come to believe that co-passionate navigators are a vital part of fostering equitable CBPR partnerships. Individuals' collective prejudices create oppressive institutions of racism or sexism. Conversely, collective co-passion can build justice in CBPR. Additionally, the act of navigation or circumnavigation itself can help dismantle structural oppression. As wind and water flow around them, even the strongest rocks are eroded. Targeted and persistent efforts of co-passionate navigators can change the landscape of campus–community partnerships.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Cecilia Denning for patiently and honestly mentoring me through my struggle to understand privilege and oppression; Christine Porter for her enduring support, editorial direction and conception of 'co-passion' as a way to better describe what I had called 'compassion'; all the other partners of Food Dignity, who remain my persistent and insistent teachers; and my reviewers, who gave so much thoughtful and important feedback. The Food Dignity project was funded by the Agriculture and Food Research Initiative Competitive Grant no. 2011-68004-30074 from the USDA National Institute of Food and Agriculture.

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