© Journal of Higher Education Outreach and Engagement, Volume 26, Number 3, p. 149, (2022)
 eISSN 2164-8212

Theorizing Relationships in Critical Community Engaged Research: Justice-Oriented Collaborations as Resistance to Neoliberalism

Dani O'Brien, Kysa Nygreen, and Jen Sandler

Abstract

Academic writing about community-engaged research has long emphasized the importance of relationships and examined practices of relationship-building. Critical scholars have further argued that the neoliberalization of higher education distorts and narrows the quality of relationships in community-engaged research, a change that makes attending to relationships simultaneously more challenging and more important. Taking these observations as our starting point, in this reflective conceptual essay we draw from our experience as community-engaged researchers to reflect on the meaning, significance, and practices of relationship-building, particularly in the context of academic neoliberalism. We call for a reframing of relationships as an *outcome* (rather than simply a *means*) of community-engaged research, and as a *network* (rather than a binary) that builds collective power. Furthermore, we call on community-engaged scholars to reclaim and center relational practices. We argue that rethinking relationships in this light can be a form of resistance to academic neoliberalism.

Keywords: relationships, community-engaged research, community–university partnership, neoliberalism, solidarity

University-based practitioners of community-engaged research have long emphasized the importance of cultivating meaningful relationships with community partners. The nature of university–community relationships profoundly influences the processes and products of community-engaged research. Critical community-engagement scholars have further argued that the neoliberalization of higher education distorts and narrows the quality of relationships in community-engaged research, a trend that makes attention to relationships more urgent and more challenging. In this reflective conceptual essay, we draw from these insights and our combined three decades of experience as community-engaged scholars and community service-learning educators who work with youth, teachers, and community-based organizations on issues related to educational justice and equity, in order to reflect on practices of relationship-building with community partners in the context of academic neoliberalism. We argue that reframing and recentering relational practices in community-engaged research can be a form of resistance to academic neoliberalism. By making the micropolitical practices of relationality the highest priority, community–university partnerships can pivot around community partner realities and visions rather than the metrics and framings of the projects of the neoliberal academy.

Our opportunity to collectively reflect on these issues emerged when we collaborated on a project, Constructing a Vision for Racial Justice at the School–Community Nexus (CVRJ). In this essay, we describe the context and vision of the project, the

choices we made to translate our vision into practice, and some lessons learned. We do this in order to ground our conceptual arguments in a concrete example; this essay is not a research report on the CVRJ project but rather an argument that the practices of community-engaged research can—and often should—place multilateral partnerships, rather than research output, at the center. To set the stage for our discussion, we first situate the CVRJ project within a typology of community–university partnership approaches. Aligning ourselves with the critical, or solidarity, approach (Clifford, 2017), we explore how scholars working in this tradition have theorized relationships in community-engaged research, and how they have critiqued the rise of academic neoliberalism. We then describe the CVRJ project and identify lessons learned. These lessons fall into two categories: simple, concrete ingredients needed to construct and sustain richly collaborative community–university partnerships, and barriers that serve to undermine and/or devalue the relational work of collaborative partnerships. In the discussion, we draw from our description of the CVRJ project to advance a view of relationships as an outcome of community-engaged research (not just a means to outcomes) and a network (rather than a binary) that builds the collective power of the groups we work with.

Conceptual Framework: Academic Neoliberalism and Community–University Partnerships

Neoliberal ideologies and metrics frequently obfuscate the ethics of relationality that is at work in any collaboration or partnership. Contemporary neoliberal universities are particularly organized around audit and accountability in ways that force faculty to focus their energy on accounting for time and resources with efficient outputs that are recognizable to the system (Canaan, 2008; Shear & Hyatt, 2015; Shore & Wright, 2000; Strathern, 2000). The explicit standardized metrics of research outputs employed by UK universities are one form of audit culture that shapes faculty work (Shore & Wright, 2000). In the United States, public universities deploy neoliberal mechanisms through different means. One particularly powerful mechanism is the pressure to entrepreneurialize our research endeavors by perpetually seeking grant funding. Indeed, grant funding is an increasingly important metric for measuring faculty productivity; publications are often seen as almost secondary. Funding is increasingly what signifies the legitimacy of faculty research endeavors. In the context of the neoliberal university, university–community partnerships are often imagined and framed in ways that conform to neoliberal logic—prioritizing outcomes, products, or the potential for future revenue or funding.

To describe the influence of neoliberal logic on university–community partnerships, it is helpful to view such partnerships in terms of three basic paradigms: extraction, service, and solidarity (see Table 1). Although these categories inevitably represent an oversimplification of a vast spectrum of approaches, and are not mutually exclusive, the schema allows us to describe and look frankly at the different priorities, aims, and understandings of distinct community

Table 1. University–Community Partnership Paradigms

Paradigm	Purpose of partnership	Source of expertise	Role of community partner	Outcome of Partnership
Extraction	Procure data from community	University	Source of data, access to data	Generalizable knowledge
Service	Solve local problems	University	Recipient of services & knowledge	Generalizable & applied knowledge & practice
Solidarity	Seek justice or social change	University and community participants in relationship	Coproducer of knowledge	Transformative knowledge, structural change

engagement approaches. This classification also helps us locate ourselves and name the impact of neoliberal ideology on university–community partnerships.

In the extraction paradigm, the community partner is positioned as a source of data or an entrée into a community that will become a source of data. Data is collected from the community—sometimes mediated by a partnering community organization—for the aim of producing generalizable knowledge through research publication or grants. Although the results of such research might benefit the community that supplied the data or the community partner that mediated the relationship, the research is intended for broad application and its primary aim is to advance scholarly knowledge beyond the community site. The extraction model is the most common form of community–university partnership, though it is not often understood in these terms. Researchers are always in partnership with the people and places from which we collect data; in the extraction model, this is an unequal partnership in which the purpose is to extract data for scholarly knowledge production. The extractive research paradigm has long been critiqued, particularly by Indigenous communities and scholars, for its settler–colonial origins and colonizing outcomes (e.g., Smith, 2012). We call attention to how research relationships with a wide range of communities have been shaped in recent decades by individualizing, productivity-oriented discourses of neoliberalism. Because of the emphasis on outcomes and its transactional framing of community partnerships, the extraction model is the most aligned with neoliberal ideology of the three paradigms.

The service paradigm pushes back against the extractive model by insisting that community–university partnerships be reciprocal rather than exploitative, and prioritizing service to community partners alongside research outputs that benefit university partners. Instead of simply producing academic knowledge in the form of publications and grants, the service paradigm aims to advance the public good by applying academic knowledge to address local problems or meet community needs. Sometimes the local need being addressed is defined by a university-based researcher, sometimes by a partnering community organization, and sometimes through a process that brings researchers and community partners together. Drawing from land-grant universities' self-proclaimed commitment to serve broader publics, this approach frames the university as a source of knowledge that can be mobilized to solve immediate social problems faced by local communities (Aronson & Webster, 2007). It positions the university as the producer of knowledge and provider of service, and the community as the recipient of both. Historically, particularly in land-grant universities, the service model of partnership stems from the settler–colonial project. The narrow university goal of "serving broader publics" is based on an ideology of education and university knowledge-sharing as "civilizing," which went hand in hand with the displacement of Native people that made land-grant university establishment possible in the first place (Nash, 2019). The extent to which service-based partnerships align or conflict with neoliberal framings depends on how local community needs are defined and addressed. Projects that prioritize technocratic solutions, measurement, and reporting of quantifiable project outcomes are easier to align to neoliberal benchmarks of legitimacy than those that prioritize movement-based solutions, micropolitics of relationships, and power in the research process.

Like the service paradigm, the solidarity paradigm pushes back against some exploitative aspects of the extractive model, and strives to serve the public good; however, the service and solidarity paradigms differ in three ways. First, the solidarity paradigm challenges the assumption that university–community partnerships are always benevolent. This paradigm acknowledges how university–community partnerships can reproduce unequal power relationships in ways that further marginalize community partners; in this way, such partnerships can be harmful to communities and work against social change (e.g., Bortolin, 2011; Clifford, 2017; Cruz & Giles, 2000; Danley & Christiansen, 2019). Second, instead of solving narrowly defined social problems, the solidarity approach aims to produce structural change to address root causes of social problems (e.g., Brydon-Miller & Maguire, 2009; Clifford, 2017; Hall, 1992; Marullo & Edwards, 2000). Third, the solidarity paradigm recognizes marginalized communities as a source of valuable knowledge, not just recipients of university-based knowledge and not just sources of data. It assumes knowledge is not only transmitted from university to community,

but produced through collaborative practices (Caraballo et al., 2017; Dyrness, 2008; Glass & Newman, 2015). This paradigm is a challenge to dominant epistemological assumptions about who has knowledge, how knowledge is created, and what or whose knowledge counts.

Reflecting these assumptions, scholars working in the solidarity-oriented partnership paradigm write about the importance of cultivating equitable relationships between university and community partners (e.g., Danley & Christiansen, 2019; Dyrness, 2008; Hale, 2008; Morton, 1997; Strier & Shechter, 2016; Vakil et al., 2016). Highlighting power inequities between university-based and community-based actors, and the consequent dangers of cooptation and exploitation, they call on university partners to mitigate such inequities by working collaboratively with community partners to define problems, contribute knowledge, and share control of the partnership's processes and products (Caraballo et al., 2017; Dyrness, 2008; Glass & Newman, 2015; Warren, 2018). They call for paying close attention to the quality of relationships with community partners, and the practices used to build and maintain them. They emphasize the importance of ongoing relationship-maintenance, rather than viewing relationship-building as an initial step to be checked off at the start. In this paradigm, the process and micropolitics of collaboration matter more than short-term outcomes.

Scholars in the solidarity paradigm have also written about the effects of neoliberalism in higher education, or academic capitalism (Hyatt et al., 2015; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004), on the quality and type of relationships forged between university and community partners (e.g., Brackman, 2015; Clifford, 2017; Nygreen, 2017; Peacock, 2012; Westoby & Shevellar, 2019; Williams, 2019). As these scholars (and others) have argued, neoliberalism, or the encroachment of "market logic" into higher education, threatens to reduce relationships to commodities valued solely for their transactional uses, thus distorting the spirit and purpose of community engagement. The very idea of reciprocity that is central to community-engaged research can, in the context of neoliberalism, devolve into a commodified exchange: The university partner provides access to resources, the community partner provides access to data or a site for service-learning, and both provide some form of legitimacy to each other. With this arrangement, the challenge of creating and sustaining richly collaborative and equitable relationships with community partners becomes more essential and more difficult.

We situate our own work within the solidarity paradigm. We view social problems as inherently connected to structural injustices, and we strive to draw those connections in our work. We bring the assumption that justice-oriented social change must put the lived experiences of marginalized people at the forefront, and that university–community collaborations for social justice must involve those who are most affected by a social problem in theorizing and strategizing about how to address it. Research topics, questions, and frameworks should therefore be developed collaboratively with community partners, and community partners should share power in determining research processes and products. We view relationship-building as an ongoing practice and central ingredient of community-engaged research. Collectively and in our individual work, we strive to understand and attend to the relational practices that enable richly collaborative partnerships to unfold. Below, we describe the CVRJ project we worked on together, illustrating how we attempted to implement the above principles in practice.

The CVRJ Project

In spring 2017, our rurally located, predominantly White university offered 14 small grants to faculty who were interested in exploring how the university might develop a Center for Racial Justice and Urban Affairs located in (and ostensibly in some way serving) the neighboring cities of Springfield and Holyoke. Both cities are home to large communities of color, contain areas of concentrated poverty, and have persistently low-scoring public schools. Though aware of possible pitfalls and power dynamics common to university–community partnerships (e.g., Bortolin, 2011; Cruz & Giles, 2000; Clifford, 2017; LeCompte, 1995; Vakil et al., 2016), we viewed the grant as an opportunity to support community-led work that was already under way. Our project, Constructing a Vision for Racial Justice at the School–Community Nexus (CVRJ), was based on a small and short-term grant, but it was embedded within longer term community partnerships that each of us was (and remains) engaged in. It supported

those ongoing partnerships by allowing us to dedicate time, energy, and resources to one particular aspect of the work, and ultimately to make connections between youth/student activists in two cities and between our own distinct (but thematically connected) research projects and agendas.

Background and Purpose

The CVRJ project grew from a long-term partnership with a grassroots community organizing coalition called Pioneer Valley Project (PVP), which that was already in place. One of us (Sandler) had worked with PVP for 4 years prior through a campus program that brings University of Massachusetts (UMass) students to community organizations, and community organizers to UMass as part of a university course on grassroots community organizing. The long-term nature of this partnership provided a solid foundation for collaboration. Two of us (O'Brien and Nygreen), both education researchers and former public-school teachers, had collaborated with schools in the two cities and with PVP

In the school year prior to the CVRJ project, PVP created a Youth Committee to organize high school students around racial justice issues affecting youth. About a dozen teenaged members of the Youth Committee worked with an adult community organizer to identify key issues affecting their lives that could be the basis of an organizing campaign. Through this process they decided to focus on racial disparities in school discipline and the school-to-prison pipeline. They conducted a survey of students' experiences with school discipline and the criminal–legal system; they designed and hung posters in their schools to raise consciousness about the racialized nature of the school-to-prison pipeline; and they staged a major public action (see videos here: https://fb.watch/e-wZTVV5Gy/)

To be clear, the Youth Committee was a project of PVP, who initiated and led it for a year with no university partner involvement. We knew about the Youth Committee's work because of our involvement with local public schools and PVP. We conceived of the CVRJ project as a way to strengthen and support work the Youth Committee was already doing. Over a period of 2 months, our project team arranged, hosted, and facilitated nine meetings with the Youth Committee. The purpose of the meetings was for Youth Committee members to share about and reflect on their work, engage in a visioning process, and strategize about next steps. Meetings were also meant to promote intentional relationship-building, both within the current membership of the Youth Committee and with other youth activists or potential youth activists. Six core members of the Youth Committee attended regularly. We were able to support these meetings by providing facilitation, food, transportation, and coordination by a graduate research assistant. Meetings were facilitated by O'Brien and two undergraduate students trained in Sandler's grassroots community organizing course.

Process and Outcomes

From the first few meetings it became clear that Youth Committee members were knowledgeable about structural injustices and how they fueled the school-to-prison pipeline, and understood that community organizing was a strategy for building power to advance justice-oriented social change. However, they did not have concrete ideas for smaller, winnable demands or interventions they could push for at the level of their individual schools. This is where O'Brien's long-term partnership with a school-based group, Pa'lante Restorative Justice, became relevant (see O'Brien, 2019, for a detailed description of the project and their relationship). Pa'lante is a youth-led organization in Holyoke that promotes restorative justice as an alternative to punitive school discipline and uses youth-led participatory action research (YPAR) to fight against the school-to-prison pipeline. Both PVP and Pa'lante were supporting youth-led organizing on racial justice issues, but in two different cities and with slightly different approaches, and they were not in relationship with each other.

As a project team we decided to bring youth from the two organizations together. First, students from Pa'lante visited a Youth Committee meeting, where they led the CVRJ project team in a restorative justice community-building circle. This opportunity gave our team firsthand experience with a restorative justice circle to see how this practice can build community, mediate conflict, and create a more humanizing school culture. In a follow-up meeting, Youth Committee members visited Pa'lante at their school to share how they were organizing against the school-to-prison pipeline. In both meetings students shared about

their work, asked questions, and strategized together. While the youth from Pa'lante learned about community organizing as a way to push for broader policy change, the Youth Committee members learned about restorative justice as a feasible alternative to punitive school discipline, and concrete steps they could take to promote it at their schools. As an outcome of this dialogue, Youth Committee members contacted their school superintendent to request a restorative justice circle with members of the school district administration, led by youth. Their goal was to demonstrate the power of restorative justice and cultivate relationships with school administrators on the youth's terms. Although the circle was rescheduled multiple times and ultimately did not happen during the time frame of our project, Youth Committee members had established a relationship with their superintendent and had a concrete action step to work toward as they continued organizing.

Overall, the CVRJ project resulted in a viable beginning to a restorative justice project in Springfield Public Schools, as well as a new set of relationships—the beginning, we hope, of a network—between young racial justice activists in two neighboring cities, with concrete and ongoing links to various university-based resources. In fact, as we reflected on the project, we came to believe its most important outcome was the formation of new relationships in multiple directions. Relationships that were developed as a result of the project include those between youth activists in two cities; between youth activists and a school superintendent; between youth and adult community organizers; and between university-based scholars and community organizers in two cities. These relationships were not merely a by-product or added bonus of this project; they were arguably its most crucial outcome. The project is over, the funding is gone, the Center for Racial Justice and Urban Affairs has yet to be realized, but the relationships remain and have continued to make new things possible. In fact, a year after the project ended, the PVP Youth Committee organized an action at a local gun manufacturer to protest gun violence, and students from Pa'lante showed up to participate and helped spread the word in their city. Each of the authors continued to collaborate with youth and educators in the two cities after the CVRJ project formally ended, and new research partnerships developed through these collaborations, providing examples of how relationships can endure long after an official project (i.e., funding) has ended.

Lessons Learned

The choices we made in structuring the CVRJ project reflect our intention to center the knowledge and voices of youth partners. However, as our above description shows, centering youth does not mean everyone plays the same role or has the same responsibilities. The adults on the team took responsibility for structuring the relationship-building meetings (including scheduling, transportation, etc.) and holding the youth to the project they initiated. This is not a hands-off approach. Instead, we followed the conceptual lead and interests of the youth participants, and we (university faculty and adult community organizers) facilitated and removed barriers to the development of the project they articulated. The lessons learned from the CVRJ project can be grouped into two categories: specific ingredients for justice-oriented collaboration, and barriers to collaboration.

Ingredients for Collaboration

In our experience, and confirmed through this project, there are clear needs and ingredients to producing equitable justice-oriented collaborations between university and community partners. These ingredients include the material conditions of collaboration (space, transportation, and food), as well as time and facilitation. First, the material conditions of collaboration—specifically, the physical space where collaboration takes place, food, and transportation—are highly influential in shaping the quality and extent of collaboration. Universities should provide space, both on campus and within the community/communities they are in partnership with, where people can work individually and collectively, host meetings, and socialize. These spaces should be accessible to youth, people of different abilities, and those who will arrive not dressed in a "professional" way. But having space works only if people have an easy and free way to get to that space. Universities can and should provide funding to transport partners to campus and to visit other collaborators, as well as make vans and cars accessible to faculty, students, and staff engaging in partnerships. If meetings are scheduled during mealtimes or evenings, providing food can make the difference between participation and no participation

for parents and youth. A relatively small amount of cash goes a long way in making a meeting or event more accessible in this way.

Relationships that are authentic and sustaining require time together where partners are able to express personal connections to the issues and work through identifying problems, planning actions, and reflecting on outcomes. Establishing relationships is a slow process requiring significant investments of time; it cannot be achieved in a single meeting or through asynchronous forms of communication. The informal time before and after an official meeting agenda is often the most fruitful time for relationship-building. This is why providing food, and ideally gathering in person rather than virtually, are so important. In our experience, there is no shortcut to this process. This need for informal time should be anticipated, and time should be made available and compensated. However, we know people will stop participating if they feel their time is not well spent, rewarding, or moving a project forward. People are busy, with many demands on their time; this is as true for community partners as it is for university-based participants. For this reason, skilled facilitation is also a critical ingredient.

Well-facilitated meetings, in our experience, literally make the difference between a successful and unsuccessful collaboration. Simply bringing people together into a room does not ensure that all voices are heard and perspectives recognized. Nor does having people in a room ensure that actual collaboration is taking place, or that meaningful relationships are built. Facilitating groups across salient lines of difference—especially race, age, and structural power—is extraordinarily challenging. We should not assume that faculty members, simply due to teaching experience or expertise in their field, are skilled at facilitating effective meetings with community partners. Indeed, we have seen time and time again that they often lack precisely the facilitation skills necessary for effective partnership. For this reason, we dedicated almost our entire grant to supporting meeting facilitation. The facilitators had been trained in grassroots community organizing and brought skills for running an effective community meeting that builds authentic relationships and moves participants toward a common goal. Grassroots community organizers have developed these skills over generations of community meetings. Although there are multiple ways to ensure meetings are well-facilitated, we argue that community-engaged researchers must be thoughtful and intentional about facilitation. We need to think about how collaborative spaces are facilitated, and how we will ensure all voices are heard, throughout the course of a project. Drawing on the expertise of community organizers or professional meeting facilitators is one approach. Building in regular feedback from participants, about whether they feel heard and their time is well spent, is also important.

Barriers to Collaboration

The above ingredients may appear basic, even obvious, but they are often overlooked when university-based researchers initiate projects with community partners. If our goal is to cultivate rich, equitable collaborations with community partners, then the consequences of overlooking these ingredients are significant. It creates what Linda Stout (1996) described as "invisible walls" that people of color and low-income people face when organizing across lines of race and class. Although Stout was writing about community organizing, her insights about the invisible walls, specifically the invisible "wall of simple logistics" (p. 129) and the invisible "wall of meeting format and organizational structure" (p. 135), resonate with our experience that time, facilitation, and material conditions are in fact crucial elements that help better ensure that those most marginalized have the opportunity to participate. Even though these ingredients will not guarantee a successful collaboration, they are simple things that make a difference; we need to claim, prioritize, and sufficiently fund them.

If these ingredients are so important to rich community–university collaboration, why are they so often missing or overlooked? One reason, we believe, is the pressure of academic neoliberalism. The publish or perish, funding or famine culture common to the neoliberal university is set up to reward output, namely publications and grant dollars. The slow intentional work of meaningful collaborative partnerships stands in tension with this incentive structure. As Antonia Darder (2012) pointed out, the focus of

> professors in major public research universities today is not directed toward teaching nor public engagement (despite the rhetoric), but rather toward becoming published within refereed journals; getting publicly noticed as stars in the academic conference circuit; and developing effective grant writing skills—all the while, competitively shaping their research agendas in ways that will procure them greater access to private and public funds, along with the institutional benefits and privileges that these resources afford them. (p. 415)

As a further disincentive, many universities' guidelines for evaluating community-engaged research do not take into consideration the significant investment of time it requires and how its aims may differ from those of other types of research (i.e., producing materials that may be useful to a community partner rather than traditional academic publications; Morrison, 2020; O'Meara, 2018; Saltmarsh & Wooding, 2016).

We have also come to believe these ingredients are overlooked because they constitute "soft" aspects of collaboration akin to a form of "women's work." To take just one example, providing food at a meeting often involves anticipating participants' needs, making choices about what and how much to provide, going shopping, arriving early to display food and staying late to clean up—packing leftovers, wiping down counters, taking out trash, sweeping up crumbs. These tasks may appear tangential to a project, yet they matter, as argued previously. Feminist scholars have long argued that tasks like feeding, housekeeping, and caregiving are necessary to sustain life and community but are generally uncompensated, undervalued, or rendered invisible (e.g., Bakker, 2007; Bakker & Gill, 2003; Guy & Newman, 2004; Guy, Newman, & Mastracci, 2008; Hart, 2013). In capitalist societies, these life-sustaining tasks are typically assigned to women and coded as "women's work" in contrast to *productive* labor (Hart, 2013; Mies, 1982; Rioux, 2015). In a similar vein, ensuring our basic ingredients are provided is essential yet undervalued. Like women's work, it requires not just time but also cognitive, emotional, and physical labor. It is work, but not considered "productive." Rather than take this work for granted, however, we argue that community-engaged researchers should claim and center it as essential work within community-engaged scholarship.

Discussion: Theorizing Relationships in Community-Engaged Research

As noted earlier, scholars working in the solidarity paradigm of community-engaged research have written extensively about the role, meaning, and significance of relationships in this work, and many have critiqued the rise of academic neoliberalism. Their ideas have inspired and deeply informed our approach to community-engaged scholarship. Like them, we believe relationships are essential and researchers should center practices of relationship-building when we think about, perform, and represent community-engaged research in writing. Building from these assumptions, from the lessons learned in the CVRJ project, and from our collective experience with other community partnerships, we propose three contributions to move the field of critical community-engaged research forward.

First, many have examined the relationship between university and community partners, and rightly so, because it is a major axis of power inequality in which university-based scholars are directly implicated. However, the singular emphasis on one axis of power/difference may contribute to a binary notion of relationship between "university" and "community." This perspective constructs the university–community relationship as the most central and important one, thereby (perhaps unwittingly) (re)centering the university-based participants in this work, and presenting "community" and "university" as monoliths. In the CVRJ project, however, one of the most promising outcomes was a set of new relationships between youth organizations in two different cities, youth and a school district leader, and university-affiliated partners who had not previously collaborated. Throughout the project, we intentionally centered and took steps to develop relationships across, among, and between community partners. Therefore, following Danley and Christiansen (2019), we argue that community-engaged scholars should conceptualize relationships as a network rather than a binary, and this conceptualization should shape how we think about, write about, and practice community engagement.

Second, relationships are often framed as a means to community-engaged scholarship. This is why critical community-engaged scholars have given so much attention to the quality of relationships, often emphasizing the time, care, and labor required to develop and nurture meaningful, equitable relationships with community partners. However, as we reflected on the CVRJ project, we concluded that new relationships (and the strengthening of prior relationships) were not merely a means to accomplish new things; they were also an important and enduring outcome of the project. The community-organizing approach to social change seeks first and foremost to build power by cultivating relationships (Garza, 2020; Schutz & Sandy, 2011; Whitman, 2018). Although this practice of relationship-building ideally leads to desired outcomes (e.g., a policy is changed, a program created, a candidate elected), it is valuable even if a particular campaign is unsuccessful. Over the long term, strong relationships build power, or the ability to influence structures and practices. As community-engaged scholars committed to justice-oriented social change, we view relationship-building as an ongoing practice that is intricately connected to the work, and a legitimate outcome. To advance the scholarly conversation about community-engaged research, we want to reclaim and reframe relationships as not just a means to community-engaged research, but one of its most significant results.

Third, critical community-engaged scholars have critiqued the rise of academic capitalism (Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004), or educational neoliberalism, for imposing a market-based logic on community partnerships. Our experience resonates with their critiques, and we have struggled to find the balance between sustaining meaningful relationships with community partners and surviving within the neoliberal university's metrics of productivity and success. As we reflected on this tension, we observed how neoliberalization obscures and distorts the relational work of community engagement by casting relationships in transactional terms. As universities are governed by market logic, our value as faculty members is derived from our ability to produce; in turn, we may value community partnerships based on what they enable us to produce. Even those of us who understand and critique the impact of neoliberalism may find ourselves being shaped by it. We are forced to think in terms of grants, possible publications, and access; therefore, however unintentionally, we end up positioning relationships as a commodity or currency. Doing so has the effect of casting our relationships with community partners as transactional. If they do not clearly and quickly lead to a measurable, tangible outcome that we can claim credit for in our scholarship, they may not be worth our time and energy. In light of the effects of educational neoliberalism, it is essential to reclaim the relational practices that lie at the center of community-engaged scholarship. This means claiming time, space, and funding for relationship-building; ensuring the ingredients for justice-oriented collaboration are present; naming, recognizing, and compensating the labor needed to ensure the ingredients are present; centering and theorizing what relationship-building practices look like; refusing to define relationships in transactional terms or reduce community engagement to bounded projects with discrete outcomes; and recognizing the value of long-term sustained community relationships instead of just-in-time, grant-driven collaborations. Approaching relationships this way, we argue, is a form of resistance to academic neoliberalism.

Conclusion: A Call for Justice-Oriented Collaborations

Over 4 years have passed since our university allocated funds to 14 research teams with the goal of exploring how the university could develop a Center for Racial Justice and Urban Affairs. When the work first began, the university publicized the work in press releases and on university blogs and websites. One post boasted that "nearly 100 community partners are directly engaged in or will be touched by the work of the faculty teams" (News & Media Relations, 2017) Despite all this promise, after each research team turned in their final report describing their work, possible next steps, and funding potential, nothing happened. Not only was the center not realized, but the opportunity for cross-project collaboration and learning was dropped. The reports were not shared or made public. The various research teams never convened as a group to share our learning; likewise, there were no opportunities to bring together or answer to the 100 community partners who were involved in this work. Although some research teams, like ours, undoubtedly stayed connected to

their community partners and continued to collaborate, doing so was not supported at the institutional level. We find that this approach taken by universities—a hurried timeline (5 months), public relations posts that overpromise, and a lack of reciprocity or accountability to community partners—is emblematic of academic neoliberalism and the churn of administrator-designed projects that so often characterizes it. This tendency to overpromise and underdeliver is not merely unfortunate; it can break down and prevent future authentic relationships between university people and community people.

Many universities claim to support community partnerships and community engagement, and many academics pursue research that strives to make a positive impact by involving community participation. No one disputes that good relationships are essential to a productive collaboration, or that cultivating relationships in community-engaged research merits care and attention. However, it is one thing to argue that equitable relationships matter and should be centered; it is quite another to articulate what that means and how to achieve it on a practical level. In this reflective essay, we drew lessons from our collective experience with community–university partnerships to advance three modest contributions to scholarly discussions about relationships and relationship-building in critical community-engaged research. Grounding our arguments in one example, the CVRJ project on which we collaborated, we advanced a view of relationships as a network rather than a binary, and as an outcome rather than (solely) a means to community-engaged research. Further, we argued that reframing relationships in this way is both especially challenging and especially necessary in the context of academic neoliberalism. Centering relational practices and claiming them as a legitimate outcome of community-engaged scholarship might not only support more richly collaborative justice-oriented community partnerships, but also help push back against the effects of academic capitalism.

About the Authors

Dani O'Brien *is an assistant professor of education at Northland College.*

Kysa Nygreen *is an associate professor in the Department of Teacher Education and Curriculum Studies, University of Massachusetts Amherst.*

Jen Sandler *is senior lecturer and director of the UMass Alliance for Community Transformation in the Department of Anthropology, University of Massachusetts Amherst.*

References

Aronson, K. R., & Webster, N. (2007). A model for creating engaged land-grant universities: Penn State's engagement ladder model. *Innovative Higher Education, 31*(5), 265–277. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10755-006-9031-7

Bakker, I. (2007). Social reproduction and the constitution of a gendered political economy. *New Political Economy, 12*(14), 541–556. https://doi.org/10.1080/13563460701661561

Bakker, I., & Gill, S. (2003). Global political economy and social reproduction. In I. Bakker & S. Gill (Eds.), *Power, production, and social reproduction: Human in/security in the global political economy* (pp. 3–15). Palgrave Macmillan.

Bortolin, K. (2011). Serving ourselves: How the discourse on community engagement privileges the university over the community. *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning, 18*(1), 49–58. http://hdl.handle.net/2027/spo.3239521.0018.104

Brackman, S. M. (2015). Community engagement in a neoliberal paradigm. *Journal of Higher Education Outreach and Engagement, 19*(4), 115–146. https://openjournals.libs.uga.edu/jheoe/article/view/1235/1232

Brydon-Miller, M., & Maguire, P. (2009). Participatory action research: Contributions to the development of practitioner inquiry in education. *Educational Action Research, 17*(1), 79–93. https://doi.org/10.1080/09650790802667469

Canaan, J. (2008). A funny thing happened on the way to the (European Social) forum: Or how new forms of accountability are transforming academics' identities and possible responses. In J. Canaan & W. Shumar (Eds.), *Structure and agency in the neoliberal university* (pp. 256–277). Routledge.

Caraballo, L., Lozenski, B. D., Lyiscott, J. J., & Morrell, E. (2017). YPAR and critical epistemologies: Rethinking education research. *Review of Research in Education, 41*(1), 311–336. https://doi.org/10.3102/0091732X16686948

Clifford, J. (2017). Talking about service-learning: Product or process? Reciprocity or solidarity? *Journal of Higher Education Outreach and Engagement, 21*(4), 7–19. https://openjournals.libs.uga.edu/jheoe/article/view/1357/1354

Cruz, N. I., & Giles, D. E. (2000). Where's the community in service-learning research? *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning*, Special issue No. 1, pp. 28–34. http://hdl.handle.net/2027/spo.3239521.spec.104

Danley, S., & Christiansen, G. (2019). Conflicting responsibilities: The multi-dimensional ethics of university/community partnerships. *Journal of Community Engagement and Scholarship, 11*(2), 8-18. https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A689991226/AONE?u=googlescholar&sid=googleScholar&xid=5f71c284

Darder, A. (2012). Neoliberalism in the academic borderlands: An on-going struggle for equality and human rights. *Educational Studies, 48*(5), 412–426. https://doi.org/10.1080/00131946.2012.714334

Dyrness, A. (2008). Research for change versus research as change: Lessons from a mujerista participatory research team. *Anthropology & Education Quarterly, 39*(1), 23–44. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1548-1492.2008.00003.x

Garza, A. (2020). *The purpose of power: How we come together when we fall apart*. One World.

Glass, R. D., & Newman, A. (2015). Ethical and epistemic dilemmas in knowledge production: Addressing their intersection in collaborative, community-based research. *Theory and Research in Education, 13*(1), 23–37. https://doi.org/10.1177/1477878515571178

Guy, M. E., & Newman, M. A. (2004). Women's jobs, men's jobs: Sex segregation and emotional labor. *Public Administration Review, 64*(3), 289–298. http://www.jstor.org/stable/3542594

Guy, M. E., Newman, M. A., & Mastracci, S. (2008). *Emotional labor: Putting the service in public service*. Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315704852

Hale, C. (2008). *Engaging contradictions: Theory, politics, and methods of activist scholarship*. University of California Press.

Hall, B. (1992). From margins to center? The development and purpose of participatory research. *The American Sociologist, 23*(4), 15–28. https://doi.org/10.1007/BF02691928

Hart, M. (2013). Women, migration, and the body-less spirit of capitalist patriarchy. *Journal of International Women's Studies, 7*(2), 1–16. https://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol7/iss2/1

Hyatt, S. B., Shear, B. W., & Wright, S. (Eds.). (2015). *Learning under neoliberalism: Ethnographies of governance in higher education*. Berghahn Books.

LeCompte, M. (1995). Some notes on power, agenda, and voice: A researcher's personal evolution toward critical collaborative research. In P. McLaren & J. Giarelli (Eds.), *Critical theory and educational research* (pp. 91–112). State University of New York Press.

Marullo, S., & Edwards, B. (2000). From charity to justice: The potential of university–community collaboration for social change. *American Behavioral Scientist, 43*(5), 895–912. https://doi.org/10.1177/0002764021955540

Mies, M. (1982). *The lace makers of Narsapur: Indian housewives produce for the world market*. Zed Books.

Morrison, E. A. (2020). Exploring community-engaged scholarship: Insights and questions for HRD. *Advances in Developing Human Resources, 22*(1), 41–56. https://doi.org/10.1177/1523422319886301

Morton, K. (1997). Campus and community at Providence College. In Corporation for National Service (Ed.), *Expanding boundaries: Building civic responsibility within higher education* (Vol. 2, pp. 8–11). Cooperative Education Association (in cooperation with the Corporation for National Service).

Nash, M. (2019). Entangled pasts: Land-grant colleges and American Indian dispossession. *History of Education Quarterly, 59*(4), 437–467. https://doi.org/10.1017/heq.2019.31

News & Media Relations, University of Massachusetts Amherst. (2017, March 30). *Faculty, community groups lay groundwork for Center for Racial Justice and Urban Affairs in Springfield*. https://www.umass.edu/archivenewsoffice/article/faculty-community-groups-lay-groundwork

Nygreen, K. (2017). Troubling the discourse of both/and: Technologies of neoliberal governance in community-based educational spaces. *Policy Futures in Education, 15*(2), 202–220.

O'Brien, D. (2019). *When healing and high-stakes meet: Restorative justice in an era of racial neoliberalism* [Doctoral dissertation, University of Massachusetts Amherst]. ScholarWorks. https://scholarworks.umass.edu/dissertations_2/1612

O'Meara, K. (2018, August 8). *Accurately assessing engaged scholarship*. Inside Higher Ed. https://www.insidehighered.com/advice/2018/08/22/academe-needs-better-evaluate-engaged-scholarship-opinion

Peacock, D. (2012). Neoliberal social inclusion? The agenda of the Australian Universities Community Engagement Alliance. *Critical Studies in Education, 53*(3), 311–325. https://doi.org/10.1080/17508487.2012.703138

Rioux, S. (2015). Embodied contradictions: Capitalism, social reproduction, and body formation. *Women's Studies International Forum, 48*, 197–202. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.wsif.2014.03.008

Saltmarsh, J., & Wooding, J. (2016). Rewarding community-engaged scholarship: A state university system approach. *Metropolitan Universities, 27*(2), 74–86. https://doi.org/10.18060/21128

Schutz, A., & Sandy, M. (2011). *Collective action for social change: An introduction to community organizing*. Springer.

Shear, B., & Hyatt, S. (2015). Introduction: Higher education, engaged anthropology, and hegemonic struggle. In S. Hyatt, B. Shear, & S. Wright (Eds.), *Learning under neoliberalism: Ethnographies of governance in higher education* (pp. 1–29). Berghahn Books.

Shore, C., & Wright, S. (2000). Coercive accountability: The rise of audit culture in higher education. In M. Strathern (Ed.), *Audit cultures: Anthropological studies in accountability, ethics and the academy* (pp. 57–89). Routledge.

Slaughter, S. A., & Rhoades, G. (2004). *Academic capitalism and the new economy: Markets, state, and higher education*. Johns Hopkins University Press.

Smith, L. T. (2012). *Decolonizing methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* (2nd ed.). Zed Books.

Stout, L. (1996). *Bridging the class divide and other lessons for grassroots organizing*. Beacon Press.

Strathern, M. (2000). Introduction: New accountabilities. In M. Strathern (Ed.), *Audit cultures: Anthropological studies in accountability, ethics and the academy* (pp. 1–18). Routledge.

Strier, R., & Shechter, D. (2016). Visualizing access: Knowledge development in university–community partnerships. *Higher Education, 71*(3), 343–359. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-015-9907-5

Vakil, S., McKinney de Royston, M., Suad Nasir, N., & Kirshner, B. (2016). Rethinking race and power in design-based research: Reflections from the field. *Cognition and Instruction, 34*(3), 194–209. https://doi.org/10.1080/07370008.2016.1169817

Warren, M. R. (2018). Research confronts equity and social justice—building the emerging field of collaborative, community engaged education research: Introduction to the special issue. *Urban Education, 53*(4), 439–444. https://doi.org/10.1177/0042085918763495

Westoby, P., & Shevellar, L. (2019). "Singing up the second story": Acts of community development scholar "delicate activism" within the neoliberal university. In D. Bottrell & C. Manathunga (Eds.), *Resisting neoliberalism in higher education: Vol. 1. Seeing through the cracks* (pp. 205–222). Palgrave Macmillan.

Whitman, G. (2018). *Stand up! How to get involved, speak out, and win in a world on fire*. Berrett-Koehler Publishers.

Williams, J. (2019). Educational partnerships for social justice and community empowerment. In D. Bottrell & C. Manathunga (Eds.), *Resisting neoliberalism in higher education: Vol. 1. Seeing through the cracks* (pp. 283–302) Palgrave Macmillan.