

EDITORIAL

Introduction to Hot-Topic: Migratory Labor and Social Adversity

Each of us in this hot-topic special section has conducted participatory research of one kind or another. Participatory research is one way to assure that a community of interest benefits from hosting and contributing to a research project. Sometimes payback is directly to the local community where the research took place; sometimes the research is intended to benefit the population that is represented by the community; and more often it's a combination of both. For contributors to this mini-hot-topic, payback to the community has come through collaborating on recommendations for program applications based on research findings (Garcia and Gonzalez), prevention advocacy through presentations at regional conferences aimed at front-line service workers (Bletzer), and increased understanding of labor forces to influence public policies that will affect the population of interest (Karjanen). All of us have participated in more immediate paybacks through small favors and institutional assistance or advice, directly to the community and to specific individuals.

The common thread for each of us is a commitment to working with those who come to the United States as immigrants from Latin America and the Caribbean. For many newcomers, the predominant means of livelihood has been migratory or seasonal agricultural labor or, more generally, occasional and/or regular short-term employment through day labor. In this respect, the biggest challenge to community payback has been identifying and/or generating a suitable means to benefit the community of interest. Payback may be directly to the community where research took place and other times it takes place indirectly through educating service workers, thus, improving delivery of services. The most abstract form of payback is influencing public policy that can set into motion more humane and responsive treatment of migrants in specific locales and across regions. Each of us has contributed indirectly, when a direct contribution to a community has not been possible. We also contribute by "personalized assistance" to those with whom we work and conduct field research, which may include occasional transportation, grant-allotted stipends for participation, responses to questions on where to find assistance or resources (commonly offered to those new to an area), and by the human factor of taking a genuine interest in someone on things that matter to them.

Participatory research will vary according to investigative styles as well as the issue that is the focus of inquiry. What remains the same throughout field activities is having community members become meaningfully involved in the research process in a manner that is beneficial to them individually as well as collectively. Format and content of the research must fit the cultural system(s) of the community [1, page 431]. Facilitating equitable control and ownership of results [2, page 1669] must be done in a way that does not compromise the application or integrity of the findings. Working to create a successful project "requires a continuing investment of time... appreciation of the strength, values, and knowledge of partners... working together to achieve common goals... [upholding] scientific integrity... throughout the process" [3, page 4]. These 'partners' are usually the stakeholders that have invested interest in the 'success' of the research as well as incorporation of findings into the agenda of community improvement. This often is viewed as 'applied work' for what was learned through the research. Stakeholders may be the community, or they may be members of the community where the research is (was) done, or they may be professionals who have a stake in securing benefits for the community from hosting the project and/or securing findings from the research.

In these three articles, we cover distinctive viewpoints in field research with populations that sometimes are viewed as hard-to-reach, if not "hidden" from everyday visibility to members of mainstream society. David Karjanen describes the intricacies of on-the-ground field practices among day laborers. He provides a strong picture of how members of the population, in this case, day laborers, can be instrumental as key collaborators in collecting field data and in generalizing research findings on the intricacies of day laborer strategies. Victor Garcia and Laura Gonzales examine aspects of institutional decision-making in which they participated, identify attributes that indicate a successful endeavor, and describe the sometimes frustrating experience of seeking to do more for the local community than derive recommendations. Keith Bletzer compares field strategies in research with agricultural communities against the background of classic models for social science fieldwork with a hidden population, and synthesizes the qualitative information he collected in presenting a mostly quantitative summary of drug use among farm workers.

Ethnography is well-suited to investigations where the information ("data") is not easily accessed by other methodologies. It requires long-term engagement with a population of interest, systematic data collection generally through qualitative rather than quantitative methods, and an immersion of the fieldworker into daily activities of the community. Each of us conducted field research prior to the particular project that is the focus of the article that we prepared for this hot-topic discussion. David Karjanen conducted prior research in work-related communities, before he initiated a formal study of day laborers along the border in the southwestern United States. Victor Garcia and Laura Gonzalez have conducted fieldwork in this country and in Mexico; this bi-national experience has contributed to greater attunement to needs of the local community where they currently conduct research in the northeastern United States. Keith Bletzer first conducted research in the United States while working for a community-based organization on Long Island (New York), where he completed a study of Hispanic youth, several years before he began long-term fieldwork with agricultural workers across multiple sites in the Midwest and in the southeastern United States.

Although the migrant population has shifted in numbers and composition over the years, it draws heavily on peoples from Latin America and the Caribbean who have immigrated to the United States, either permanently and temporarily. Currently Latinos and growing numbers of indigenous workers comprise the largest portion of the agricultural labor force, having replaced large segments of the African American population in areas along the East Coast. When not drawn to farm labor, the newest form of work these long-time migrants and recent additions seek is found in urban areas, where street corner gatherings provide a pool of potential labor recruits. Hardships they experience, no matter where they seek employment, stem from minimal language skills and assumptions their willingness to work stems from docility, if not complacency over frequent utilization as an expendable source of cheap labor. Whether they become entangled in adverse health practices or enmeshed in labor practices where advantage goes to the employer, improvements to conditions experienced by these marginalized workers can be accelerated by participatory research that increases our understanding of the social-economic dimensions of their daily lives.

Keywords: Participatory Research, Migratory Labor, Day Labor, Transnational Worker, Agricultural Labor, Methodologies, Community Benefits, Social Adversity, Ethnography.

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