Reflexivity and Positionality in Researching African-American Communities: Lessons from the Field

Margaret U. D'Silva, Siobhan E. Smith, Lindsay J. Della,
Deborah A. Potter, Theresa A. Rajack-Talley & Latrica Best

University of Louisville, U.S.A.

Abstract: Researchers creating knowledge about African-American culture use various methodologies, including field research. Field research is knowledge creation in the space and location of interest to the researchers and is not limited to either qualitative or quantitative research methods. In this article, we focus on our diverse field research experiences as members on a multi-disciplinary research team that utilized mixed methods to examine the various factors that affect fruit and vegetable consumption in two African-American communities.

Interacting with participants at community events and at various data gathering sites became part of the experience of our fieldwork**.** Accounts of interactions and relationships such as these, however, are often missing in journal articles, particularly those reporting findings from quantitative studies. This article, therefore, focuses on the reflexive methodological reporting of ways in which each researcher's positionality may have affected the observed phenomenon, the data collection process, and the dynamics of participation in fieldwork. The authors' reflective statements show that the researchers were aware of their positionality before, during and after the research process. Positionality is a concept that has largely been individualized. In this paper, although we present our individual research experiences, we also had to consider our position as a group. As a multi-disciplinary, cross-cultural team, our group identity was complex. Those who were part of the African-American community or identified with a similar heritage acted as "insiders" (while simultaneously reflecting upon the ways in which they were "outsiders") and as cultural brokers, enabling us to respectfully gain access to willing participants. Those who did not identify as people of color played other vital roles.

Keywords: Reflexivity, positionality, African American communities

1. Introduction

As researchers who study communication across and among cultures, we create knowledge about culture by using various methodologies, including field research. Field research is knowledge creation in the space and location of interest to the researchers and is not limited to either qualitative or quantitative research methods. Field research allows one to interact with the participants in their own social settings and in their own language (Kirk & Miller, 1986). It is said that field research is both an art and science: a science for the sophisticated methodological principles and standards it must adhere to, and an art for the flexibility needed

to bend the process in a manner that suits the personality and style of the artist researcher (Fontana & Frey, 1994) as well as the emergent needs of various topics studied with diverse populations.

In this article, we focus on our diverse field research experiences as members of a multi-disciplinary research team from the Departments of Communication, Pan-African Studies, and Sociology.

2. Study Overview

Our research examined the various factors that affect fruit and vegetable consumption in two African-American communities in the United States, one situated in Louisville, Kentucky's largest city, and the other in Hopkinsville, a small rural city. The two areas in Kentucky were selected because both have fairly large African-American communities, 22.9% and 31.9%, respectively (United States Department of Census, 2012). The research was designed to examine cultural differences between these communities with respect to diet. The study's choice of locations provided socio-demographic distinctions, as Hopkinsville is a more racially integrated population as well as a small city surrounded by rural farmland, while the residents who provided the research sample for Louisville live in the western section of the metropolitan city, a segregated area where African-Americans compose 79% of the residents (United States Department of Census, 2012).

More specifically, our research examined community, environmental, and individual factors and how they affect fruit and vegetable utilization within these communities. This research focus developed because the state of Kentucky is ranked high in chronic diseases, of which food consumption serves as a key risk factor. Kentucky is the ninth most obese state, second for cardiovascular disease (Centers for Disease Control, 2009), and fifth for hypertension (Levi, Segal, Thomas, St. Laurent, Lang & Rayburn, 2013). Within the state, African-Americans experience higher rates of obesity (43%) than whites (27%) or Hispanics (22.2%) (Levi et al., 2013).

The study employed a mixed methodology. Qualitative data were collected via six transect walks and 40 semi-structured qualitative interviews. Quantitative data were collected using paper-and-pencil surveys (N = 327) and a computer-based survey (N = 393). Each of these data collection mechanisms required the team to engage in fieldwork in both communities.

For example, the transect walks incorporated observations made while either driving within the communities or participating in group walks around the communities. In this stage, researchers also had casual interactions with both area residents and key stakeholders. For the initial contacts and qualitative interviews, researchers relied on the personal connections with faculty researchers, staff members and students that snowballed beyond the networks of the research team. Participants for other aspects of the research were acquired through convenience and snowball sampling. Interviews were conducted at the respondents' homes in both communities and also in a local hotel lobby in Hopkinsville on days and times convenient for the participants.

The quantitative surveys and market-led trade off exercises were conducted at public sites within the community and included community centers, churches, and barber shops. In these

settings, a convenience sampling procedure was used that later became a snowball process as participants and community stakeholders recruited others. The research team also visited community events and anyone who seemed to meet the study's demographic requirements was asked to see if he/she qualified to take the survey.

Interacting with participants at community events and at various data gathering sites became part of the experience of fieldwork. One of the outcomes of conducting fieldwork is the establishment of relationships (Patton, 2015); in doing so, researchers identify and connect with the people being studied. Developing any kind of relationship with the people being studied—however brief that relationship may be—can be different for each individual fieldworker. Outside of action research (e.g., Kemmis & McTaggert, 2000), accounts of these relationships, however, are often missing in journal articles, particularly those reporting findings from quantitative studies. This article, therefore, focuses on the reflexive methodological reporting of ways in which each researcher's positionality may have affected the observed phenomenon, the data collection process, and the dynamics of participation in fieldwork. Our contemplations on our interdisciplinary research project are anchored in the concepts of positionality and reflexivity.

3. Reflexivity

Analyses of the methodological approaches used in studies are important because any research undertaking ought to consider the assumptions and values undergirding its practice. Swartz (1997, p. 295), in summarizing Bourdieu's critical analysis, writes, "While certainly not free of either analytical or moral dilemmas, Bourdieu's call for reflexivity speaks to one of the most pressing tasks for social scientists today: the need to gain a more objective, albeit not objectivist, grasp on the social world – including our own".

Reflexivity is premised on the idea that reality is socially constructed and knowledge is context-based and historically situated (Mauthner & Doucet, 2003). Reflexive research entails interpretation and reflection. It demands a critical self-examination from the researcher, an "explicit self-aware meta-analysis," (Finlay 2002, p. 209) to understand the researcher-participant dynamic that influences knowledge production. In other words, reflexive inquiry interrogates one's own interpretation (and construction) of empirical data (Alvesson & Skoldbery, 2009, pp. 8-9). Reflexivity helps in "situating the research and knowledge production so that ethical commitments can be maintained" (Sultana, 2007, p. 376), including those of the researcher to respectfully interrogate the social world he/she investigates. England (1994, p. 82) says such self-reflection "induces self-discovery and can lead to insights and new hypotheses about the research questions."

While some variant of reflexivity is an accepted part of qualitative research, reflexivity is less commonly utilized in quantitative research. Testing the validity of the questions in a survey or running a pilot study of an experiment are ways quantitative researchers have addressed whether the researchers' understanding of their subject is shared by others. The absence of reflexivity in a published article need not mean that the researchers did not engage in reflexivity (Barusch, Gringeri & George, 2011). Reflexivity may be included in the process of selecting the topic, the population and the region to be studied (Probst & Berenson, 2014). In our research

project, we utilized a mixed methodology to help triangulate the findings in a manner that allowed for reflexivity at various stages of the study. This ensured that the conclusions the team arrived at from one research method were cross-checked with those from another (Bryman, 2012).

4. Positionality

Reflexive research requires a willingness to consider how one's background, personal values, and experiences affect what he or she is able to observe and analyze. Therefore, related to the notion of reflexivity in field research is the positionality of the researcher. Temple and Young (2004) explain that positionality can affect research outcomes and interpretations, because "one's position within the social world influences the way in which you see it" (p. 164). Standpoint theories, which focus on positionality, have been utilized primarily by feminists representing a range of critical epistemological perspectives (e.g. Collins, 1990; Haraway, 1991; Hardin & Norberg, 2005; Smith, 1990).

Standpoint theories start from the general notion that one's position in society, including her identity construction(s) and cultural background(s), influences the way they perceive the world. Further, people who possess distinct backgrounds from others are likely to have divergent understandings of the world. Applying this theory to researcher practices, researchers' socioeconomic status, education, training, ethnicity, and so forth, as relational attributes, unconsciously influence their research (Goar, 2008; Lynch, 2000; Rose, 1997). Furthermore, whether one is an "insider" or "outsider," or even the degree to which the researcher confers upon or experiences such status, may influence participants' views of the researcher and how researchers view their study participants (McCorkel & Myers, 2003; O'Brien, 2011).

McCorkel & Myers (2003, p. 228) recommend pursuing a strategy that involves "a recognition and analysis of how the researcher's positionality facilitates specific forms of understanding and impedes others". Beyond acknowledging positionality, some scholars (Gawlewicz, 2014; McDowell, 1992) have argued that researchers must also "write this into our research practice" (McDowell, 1992, p. 409). Discussing one's position in relation to her research foci, provides those who are not a part of the study yet are engaging with the research (e.g., academic audiences), with an understanding of the researcher's perspective(s). Therefore, to situate each of our research experiences, each author provides, in her own words, a brief narrative about her subject position and her reflections on her positionality in her research work on a multi-disciplinary grant. The co-authors of this paper worked as part of the research team on a multi-year National Institutes of Health grant. Some worked on all stages of the project, others on selected portions. Our reflections, therefore, describe our lived experiences in the communities of study.

5. Gathering Reflections

In order to collect the reflections for the current paper, the first author contacted the faculty members of the research team, requesting "your experience (about 400 words)" concerning the research project, as one's experience related to the theoretical principles of reflexivity and

positionality. Six members of the eight-member team, including the first author, provided their reactions to the prompt. The responses, initially, were anywhere from 450 to 1100 words. After all of the responses were collected, the first two authors looked for similarities and contrasts in the reflections. The reflections, in their edited (i.e., shortened) state, are below. Further, each of the authors is in agreement with the presentation of her reflection, which serves as a test for the validity of our mode of collecting and presenting the reflections (Cresswell, 2003). The reflections are not in a specific author order but rather located for continuity and flow.

5.1. Reflections

Reflection 1: "Although I have conducted research in India and the United States, my research experience on the grant made me uniquely aware of the researcher's role in an intercultural context. From the writing of the grant to the execution of the research and subsequent conference presentations and publications—the entire process—has been an exercise in reflexivity demanding consideration of both the diversity of our participants and the diversity of our multi-disciplinary team.

Recruiting participants from two different parts of Kentucky, conducting the study, and collaborating with culturally diverse members created unforeseen opportunities and challenges. Because each discipline has its own thought-world, we had to negotiate that ground; the diverse ethnic and cultural background of the researchers added an extra layer of complexity to the working relationships. I found the research in the field, like other intercultural studies, to present many challenges and surprises.

Our participants were Black, and being brown skinned, I, as a person of color was generally accepted by the community. Our participants, in both places, were comfortable around me, and joked with me. Unprompted, one commented, "You are brown; you one of us," embracing me into her community. Mindful of my accent, another said, "We have experienced exclusion for so long, we welcome other groups," reflecting a shared ethos of marginalization. Perhaps because a few of the medical doctors in the small city community were of my own ethnic background, some of the participants mistakenly involved me in conversations about their complex medical problems. I learned to be a compassionate listener. The truth of who I am was not mine alone to make but rather what my participants made me out to be within their own boundaries.

Being on the transect walks in familiar areas, eating delicious catfish purchased at our data gathering store location, and buying second hand clothes in the store right next to a barber shop where we collected data were unique gifts of participating in the research. These opportunities, among several others, reaffirmed my connection to the community."

This researcher's reflection expressed that she brought her understanding of intercultural communication and positionality as a "brown"-skinned person of color to the project,

which impacted her interactions with her colleagues and in the field when she engaged with participants. By contrast, as illustrated in Reflection 2 (below), another researcher saw herself as a "sistah"' scholar, and had developed her professional and personal concerns—to research and always respect the African-American community—many years previously:

Reflection 2: "In the US, I have always defined myself as a Black woman/scholar. This political identity rather than race/ethnicity better represents who I am and my research focus on poverty of people of color globally. Participation in a cross-cultural, multidiscipline research project centered on low-income African-American communities was, therefore, of great interest to me. Over 25 years of field research in similar communities and working with multidisciplinary teams of researchers gave me the experience and confidence of what I could contribute in the study. Furthermore, over the years I have developed both professional and personal ties with other faculty, students, and staff members from the communities, as well as with the residents of the metropolitan neighborhood. Ironically, this level of familiarity brought a level of comfort negotiating the logistics and meeting participants, and at the same time, it brought a certain amount of academic and ethical responsibility to ensure that the community was not misrepresented in the interpretation of the data collected. These sentiments were further compounded by my pedagogical belief in the participatory approach to research and linking research to community development. It was from this conscious social position that I approached the research.

Although I am not of the African-American community, I am from a place that is part of the African Diaspora and consider myself a 'sistah' – an outsider/insider. I believe that my understanding of a similar culture, my personal and professional relationships, and my research and teaching portfolio in a Black Studies department that includes the African-American community gave me an identification and connection that was an advantage in the research process. This positionality has also resulted in my adoption of a race-based epistemology when studying the Black community. However, when I reflect on all my community research experiences, the main presentation of self that I think has been the stronghold in this and other research projects, has been my love and empathy for those who are not as privileged, and whom I recognize as different but equally as human as I. All good field researchers know that when you think you are observing a community, the community is watching and assessing you. There is no doubt in my mind that if a community's assessment of a researcher is positive, the research will be constructive."

Like the reflection shared above, the following reflection reveals that this member of the research team also experienced tangible connections to members of the community as a result of her identity. Also, similar to sentiments of the first reflection, the third reflection reveals that more than one researcher was particularly aware of her connections to the community:

Reflection 3: "I have always been very aware of my *self*, as a young Black woman from

the American South. Therefore, the majority of my research projects have focused on African-American women; research is *me*-search, after all. My research, in fact, focuses on how my participants' own positionalitie(s) influence(s) their life experiences. I tend to see my ethnicity and gender as a bridge between myself and others like me. With this research project, I was very aware of my identity as it related to both the research team and to our participants. For example, all of us on the grant were women; I have found that many frustrating experiences for women cross racial and educational boundaries. With my colleagues of color, even those whose race/ethnicity were not the same as my own, I found a connection that was rooted in our experiences as women of color. And with my White colleagues, I felt that they were aware of their positionality and had the best of intentions with what they wanted to do with the research. Concerning our participants, I felt a connection based on race. From the socio-economic standpoint, going out into the community for *all* phases of the research triggered feelings of protectiveness in me. Let me be clear—this wasn't, "Aww, look at these folks." It was, "Here are *my* people who are opening up their churches, business, and *homes* to us." In fact, during one of the face-to-face interviews in West Louisville, the participant and I realized that we knew some of the *exact* same people from my hometown in Arkansas. We laughed and called each other "kinfolk!" She and I *connected*, and I did so with other community members as our team conducted the research.

One of the very last transect walks that we did included a new grocery store that was built in one of the neighborhoods we were researching. The store had murals featuring brown-skinned people that looked like me, and the aisles had names of African-American people that were important to this community, and I thought, "Look at *my* store!" Seeing the store was some of what we'd been working for—it was my position that got me so emotionally overwhelmed in that moment."

This reflection reveals that as a result of the researcher's positionality, she became particularly emotionally invested in the participants and the community. The researcher who provides the fourth reflection names Social Demography as her profession. Because of this identity, it was particularly important to her that the data allowed for the authentic representation(s) of the participants to emerge:

Reflection 4: "I am a Social Demographer who primarily works with large national and international datasets. Although I have had some training in qualitative research methodology, much of my research is quantitative in nature. Because of my quantitative and, specifically, survey methodology background, I am constantly concerned with the representation of concepts and experiences in survey items. In fact, some of my current research examines and interrogates the construction and representation of race and ethnicity in national datasets. As both an African-American woman and a Black Studies scholar, I like to think of myself as a quantitative researcher who is quite aware of my position as a researcher in the construction and implementation of survey instruments and in the interaction with participants in the community. I am also

cognizant of the need for reflexivity in every step of the research process, regardless of whether the study utilizes qualitative, quantitative, or mixed methods approaches.

Because of my background, I felt an obligation to ensure that community members' voices were adequately represented in the study. Even though I am not a native of the communities studied, these locations were quite similar to the one I grew up in. The similarities brought about a sense of familiarity that led to an instant connection with the participants. As a Demographer, I am always thinking of the role location has in the examining social processes. My ability to understand the community's culture and the contextual aspects of their experiences enhances our research. I recognize and acknowledge my privilege as a researcher, but as a first generation college student of a working middle class family, I am able to relate to participants' responses to our line of inquiry. Thus, I cannot divorce my identity from participatory research, and it is this very fact, I believe, that allows me to be a more engaged and reflective researcher in the community."

This researcher was quite aware of her privilege while conducting the study. However, recognizing similarities between her hometown and the areas in which the team conducted the research allowed her to relate to the study's participants. Both reflections 4 and 5 reveal that while the research team respected the participants' experiences as distinct from any others', some members of the research team felt they were similar to the participants because they had lived in locales comparable to those of the participants. Despite this, reflection 5 stands apart from other reflections because it was shared by a member of the research team who arguably had a unique experience while undertaking the project as the Principal Investigator (PI):

Reflection 5: "As PI, I led a cadre of multi-cultural researchers of different ages, racial/ ethnic backgrounds, and tenure stages. As a field researcher, I predominantly played the role of organizer/facilitator rather than front-line interactant. My role migrated to the very foreground of participant interactions, however, when someone questioned the purpose of the study and I was called upon to further explain its details. In this role I was aware that, as the team's female white "leader," my responses could build or demolish participants' trust of our intentions and authenticity.

Reflecting on the data collection experience, I generally felt more accepted in Hopkinsville than in Louisville. I am from a rural, small town in western upstate New York and I have conducted much of my academic research in rural locations, so perhaps it is not surprising that I felt a sense of camaraderie with our Hopkinsville participants. It was easy to swap stories of small town living. Given that several of our research team members knew the history, politics, and people of Louisville better than Hopkinsville, it would have been all too easy to focus on our urban participants. Yet, my identity as a "small town girl" facilitated my recognition of the struggles and challenges that face individuals living in these more geographically isolated areas. I knew how easily and frequently these places and their residents are overlooked or

simply forgotten, and I have tried to ensure that these participants' voices have been heard with equal emphasis as those from Louisville. On the other hand, I could not draw on as many past life experiences to relate to our Louisville participants; and although I value my perceptions of their situations, I found my colleagues' insights to be invaluable during our sense making processes.

As a marketing communicator-turned public health scholar, I am interested in the way that different cultures' experiences, environments, and values affect behavior. In this sense, I tend to define myself as a persistent outsider whose purpose and intentions will constantly be tested during data collection. As I see it, no one has had the same convergence and confluence of experiences that I have had in my life; nor have I had the same as they. During the sensemaking process, I believe that a researcher continually slides along a continuum of "insider" and "outsider" perspectives, which, in my opinion, increases the importance of engaging in multi-method, participatory and reflexive research with interdisciplinary team members."

As discussed in the first reflection provided above, our final reflection also expressed that this researcher views herself as an outsider, and understands why she must pass certain tests to show her participants that they can trust her to treat their experiences respectfully:

Reflection 6: "As a medical sociologist with advanced training in both quantitative and qualitative research methods, I have conducted research on groups using the public health, substance abuse, and mental health systems. Consequently, participants often have been from poor, disadvantaged and, in some instances, largely minority communities. Although my birth family has working-class and middle class roots, I can only, at best, partially understand the experiences of those from similar backgrounds. As a white woman, the disjuncture between my experience and those of minority study participants is even wider. My research must allow participants to engage in ways that can reveal their own truths, told in their own way. For this reason, I now embrace more reflexive and participatory approaches and primarily use qualitative methods. Drawing upon feminist research methods and standpoint epistemology, I see myself, even within largely white communities, as an outsider. In predominantly minority communities and elsewhere, I have been tested to see if I have minimal knowledge of the community I hope to study and whether I will treat members with respect. These are rites of entry into the community that I both expect and respect. I must consciously and continually reflect upon my ongoing relationship with the community in which I am working and I have a responsibility to share study results in ways that reflect the participants' lived experiences and truth.

My identity as a white academic woman who lived most of her life outside of the South and had newly relocated to Louisville was a major consideration in the roles I played in this study. I know that my identity is filtered through the lens of those who view me. Research team members, with longer histories in Louisville, reflected

how my identity might be perceived. Due to the anticipated reaction of community members to me as an "outsider," I did not interview study participants and directly ask them personal questions. Instead, my roles were behind the scenes – helping to draft questionnaires, recruiting graduate students to assist in data collection, gaining entry to a community health center through an undergraduate student, and coding/analyzing qualitative data. In Hopkinsville, all of the research team were outsiders in various ways. Here, I did interact with community members in relatively unobtrusive and less personal research activities. Although my identity remained constant, the activities I performed varied with the historical and social context in which we collected data."

This reflection illustrates the researcher's pre-existing understanding of why she must pass muster before she gains entry to research spaces and why her participation in this data collection effort was constrained. It also demonstrates the value of feminist standpoint epistemologies, which encourages participants' voices to be privileged, rather than those of the researcher.

6. Conclusions

These reflective statements show that our research team was aware of their positionality before, during, and after the research process. We did not, however, discuss our different positionalities and their impact on the research to any large extent, except concerning those who had prior experience and linkages to the community. We also did not engage in formal reflexive research inquiries, as suggested by Walker, Read, and Priest (2013), during data collection. Instead, these formal, written, reflections were collected during the early stages of the data analysis process. We did, however, engage in the practice of reflexivity based on our social locations as well as our multidisciplinary effort to address the aims of our research project. This resulted in a collaborative effort in which both our personal and professional identities impacted the research and our engagement with the communities. These identities not only informed and shaped every step of the research process, but also affected our interactions with each other and the study's participants. As discussed in the reflections, engaging in research with culturally diverse members from different academic backgrounds proved to be a learning experience for some, as team members attempted to navigate discipline-specific orientations to research methodology in two different, and for some, unchartered locations.

Positionality is a concept that has largely been individualized. In this paper, although we present our individual research experiences, we also had to consider our position as a *group*. As a multi-disciplinary, cross-cultural team, our group identity was complex. Those who were part of the African-American community or identified with a similar heritage acted as "insiders" (while simultaneously reflecting upon the ways in which they were "outsiders") and as cultural brokers, enabling us to respectfully gain access to willing participants. Those who did not identify as strongly with our research communities played other vital roles. To be sure, skin color is not the lone criterion upon which "insider" status is based (Gallagher, 2008). Members of the research team were able to relate to participants in other ways, as evident in the fifth reflection, which discussed how growing up in a small town helped her relate to participants within the study's rural location. Together, we consciously and reflexively drew upon the

strengths that our identities and skills offered the group. Our ability to communicate well, from the inception of the project through the end, coupled with our diverse backgrounds, proved to be the key in establishing relationships with stakeholders and study participants. By having a diverse team of researchers who are acutely aware of their positions and are reflective in their approach to research, we were able to initiate and solidify our relationships with people in the communities.

6.1. Implications for Theory and Methodology

Positionality in fieldwork can be both a strength and a weakness. An outsider, not as familiar with a community, might see what the familiar eye might miss. However, "outsiders" who do not reflect on how their own social position might affect the research process and the theoretical lens used in analysis can miss intricacies that are not normally part of that researcher's experience. Further, the insider's personal involvement permits the understandings and meanings that study participants give to their life experiences; yet, if not managed well, one's involvement can lead to selective perceptions. By including reflexivity in the research design, both the insider and outsider can use their unique ideas, methods, theories, and interpretations, while also questioning whether there are hidden assumptions that influence the validity and reliability of their analyses. The concepts of reflexivity and positionality in research are particularly important in cross-cultural fieldwork conducted by multi-discipline, multi-racial/ethnic teams of researchers.

Field research is not particularly tidy, and to complicate things further "the researcher's moral, competency, personal and social values have an important influence on the research process" (Greenbank, 2003, p. 789). Add in investigators who hail from various backgrounds, geographies, races, and gender identities, and these influences on the research process become even more complex. Given the complicated realities of field research, Greenbank argues that a "reflexive approach does not have to be confined to qualitative research; those researchers utilising quantitative methods would also benefit from recognising the influence of values on the research process" (p. 798). Addressing this untidiness in our writing and in our journal articles would expose issues of positionality long ignored or given little consideration within the quantitative field. If researchers considered their positionality but did not feature it as a focus of their writings, a suitable place in a journal article or conference paper for articulating positionality issues would be the space reserved for "limitations of the study." Researchers' acquisition of such ways of thinking can have a positive impact on collaborative inquiry where we learn from the process (Patton, 2012) as well as from the findings.

Our research has been successful for several reasons. First, the project utilized mixed methods—the transect walks, the interviews, and the surveys—to understand our participants' own lived experiences in dynamic ways. The qualitative methods allowed us to design the quantitative procedures, but the surveys often helped us understand our qualitative findings more clearly. Second, our various positionalities not only influenced the adoption of mixed methods, but also the overall epistemological approach to studying the African-American community. Within the research team, our ontologies and epistemologies resulted in team consensus around the belief that even the most objective researcher still brings her viewpoints to her research,

and the most subjective researcher must consider the validity of her claims. It was this common belief that helped team members from various disciplines and methodological proclivities collaborate productively as a team. Moreover, some of the researchers entered the study because it focused on African-American communities, while the research interests of others centered on the project's themes (i.e., health, culture, food habits, and their intersections). Third, the members of the team who designed the grant were reflexive and from the study's inception prioritized being respectful to the community. Based on the reflexivity and positionality of our team, we realized that we must give back what we have learned to the communities before our project is complete. We, therefore, have sought formal and informal opportunities to discuss our research in ways that creates dialog with community members. These acts of giving back strengthen the research process and bolster the communities that we research In the course of our research, those who were not familiar with the African-American communities developed a greater appreciation of their experiences and the intricacies of doing research in unfamiliar territory. The researchers who already had personal and research relationships with the African-American community acquired a certain amount of satisfaction that the study was indeed beneficial to the people. Finally, we continuously strived to maintain this reflexivity, and having engaged in sense making with each other; we came to appreciate each other beyond and *because of* our different positions.

This paper highlights the advantages of having cross-discipline and multi-ethnic/racial research teams when researching communities that are socio-culturally different from the identities of the researchers. Equally important is the role that reflexivity plays regarding the positionalities of the researchers on entering the field and in data collection. However, while some researchers, like those of our study, are aware of and practice these sensitivities, this is not always the case. Moreover, reflecting on positionality is not always a formal part of designing and conducting the research. In addition, although positionality often has been viewed as an individual construct, fieldwork and other forms of inquiry would benefit from considering a corporate variant of the concept. To further explicate the complex issues raised in this paper, additional research is needed to highlight the role of reflexivity on positionality, particularly in cross-cultural research and among diverse research teams.

References

Alvesson, Mats & Skoldberg, Kaj. (2009). *Reflexive methodology: New vistas for qualitative research (*2nd ed.). London, England: Sage.

Barusch, Amanda; Gringeri, Christina & George, Molly. (2011). Rigor in qualitative social work research: A review of strategies used in published articles. *Social Work Research*, *35*, 11–19.

Bryman, Alan. (2012). Mixed methods research: Combining quantitative and qualitative research. In Alan Bryman (Ed.). *Social research methods* (pp. 628-652). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). (2009). Differences in prevalence of obesity among black, white, and Hispanic adults – United States 2006-2008. *Morbidity*

and mortality weekly, *58*(27), 5.

Collins, Patricia Hill. (1990). *Black feminist thought: Knowledge, consciousness, and the politics of empowerment.* Boston: Unwin Hyman.

Creswell, John W. (2003). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

England, Kim. (1994). Getting personal: Reflexivity, positionality, and feminist research. *The Professional Geographer*, *46*(1), 80-89.

Finlay, Linda. (2002). Negotiating the swamp: The opportunity and challenge of reflexivity in research practice. *Qualitative Research, 2*(2), 209–230.

Fontana, Andrea & Frey, James. (1994). Interviewing: The art of science. In Norman K. Denzin & Yvonna S. Lincoln (Eds.), *The Handbook of Qualitative Research* (pp. 361-367). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Gallagher, Charles. (2008). "The end of racism" as the new doxa: New strategies for researching race. In T. Zuberi & E. Bonilla-Silva (Eds.), *White logic, white methods: Racism and methodology* (pp. 163-178). Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.

Gawlewicz, Anna. (2014). Language and translation strategies in researching migrant experience of difference from the position of migrant researcher. *Qualitative Research 1468794114557992, first published on November 11, 2014 doi:10.1177/1468794114557992*

Goar, Carla. (2008). Experiments in black and white: Power and privilege in experimental methodology. In Tukufu Zuberi & Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (Eds.), *White logic, white methods: Racism and methodology* (pp. 153-162). Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.

Greenbank, Paul. (2003). The role of values in educational research: The case for reflexivity. *British Educational Research Journal*, *29*, 791-801.

Haraway, Donna. (1991). Situated Knowledge: The science question in feminism and the privilege of partial perspective. *Feminist Studies*, *14*(3), 575-599.

Harding, Sandra & Norberg, Kathryn. (2005). New feminist approaches to social science methodologies: An introduction. *Signs*, *30*(4), 2009-2015.

Kemmis, Stephen & McTaggart, Robin. (2000). Participatory action research. In N.K. Denzin & Y.S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (2nd edition, pp. 567-605). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Kirk, Jerome & Miller, Marc L. (1986). *Reliability and validity in qualitative research.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Levi, Jeffrey; Segal, Laura; Thomas, Kathryn; St. Laurent, Rebecca; Lang, Albert & Rayburn, Jack. (2013). *F as in fat: How obesity threatens America's future 2013*. Princeton, NJ: Trust for America's Health/Robert Wood Johnson Foundation.

Lynch, Michael. (2000). Against reflexivity as an academic virtue and source of privileged knowledge. *Theory, Culture and Society*, *17*(3), 26–54.

Mauthner, Natasha S. & Doucet, Andrea. (2003). Reflexive accounts and accounts of reflexivity in qualitative data analysis. *Sociology*, *37*(3), 413–431.

McCorkel, Jill A. & Myers, Kristen. (2003). What difference does difference make? Position and privilege in the field. *Qualitative Sociology*, *26(*2), 199-231.

McDowell, Linda. (1992). Doing gender: Feminism, feminists, and research methods in human

geography. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, *17*, 399-416.

O'Brien, Eileen. (2011). The transformation of the role of "race" in the qualitative interview: Not if race matters, but how? In John H. Stanfield, II (Ed.), *Rethinking race and ethnicity in research methods* (pp. 67-93). Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press.

Patton, Michael Quinn. (2012). *Essentials of utilization-focused evaluation* (4th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Patton, Michael Quinn. (2015). *Qualitative research & evaluation methods* (4th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Probst, Barbara & Berenson, Laura. (2014). The double arrow: How qualitative social work researchers use reflexivity. *Qualitative Social Work*, *13*, 813–827.

Rose, Gillian. (1997). Situating knowledges: Positionality, reflexivities and other tactics. *Progress in Human Geography*, *21*(3), 305-20.

Smith, Dorothy. (1990). *The conceptual practices of power: A feminist sociology of knowledge*. Toronto, Canada: University of Toronto.

Sultana, Farhana. (2007). Reflexivity, positionality and participatory ethics: Negotiating fieldwork dilemmas in international research. *ACME: AnInternational E-Journal for Critical Geographies*, *6*(3), 374–385

Swartz, David L. (1997). *Culture and power: The sociology of Pierre Bourdieu*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Temple, Bogusia & Young, Alys. (2004). Qualitative research and translation dilemmas. *Qualitative Research*, *4*(2), 161-178.

United States Department of Census (USDOC). (2012). *State and county quickfacts*. Retrieved from http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/21/2148006.html

Walker, Susan; Read, Susan & Priest, Helena. (2013). Use of reflexivity in a mixed-methods study. *Nurse Researcher*, *20*, 38-43.

Author Note

Margaret U. D'Silva is Professor of Communication and Director, Institute for Intercultural Communication at the University of Louisville. She was educated both in India and in the U.S.A. She teaches courses in intercultural communication and mass media effects. With research interests in the intersection of intercultural communication, media, and health, she has published two co-edited books and over thirty articles and book chapters. She has delivered plenary addresses at international conferences in Taipei, Vladivostok, and New Delhi.

Siobhan E. Smith is Assistant Professor in the Department of Communication at the University of Louisville since August 2010. She teaches courses in mass media, race, and culture. She has presented her research at several conferences and in published journal articles. Her research interests include the portrayals of race and gender in the media.

Lindsay J. Della is an Associate Professor in the Department of Communication at the University of Louisville. She holds a Ph.D. in health promotion and behavior from the University of Georgia. She is a social marketer who studies how communication can be used to influence lifestyle-related behavior affecting the public's health. Her recent body of research

has focused on underrepresented communities in the state of Kentucky, exploring barriers and enablers to lifestyle-related behavior change for better health.

Deborah A. Potter is a medical sociologist with a joint Ph.D. (Sociology and Social Policy) from Brandeis University. After over twenty years working in health-related policy and multi-disciplinary public health research, she now is an Associate Professor in the Sociology Department at the University of Louisville. Her research interests include lay involvement in health and health care; children's mental health services; and lay knowledge of health and health practices.

Theresa Rajack-Talley is Associate Dean, International, Diversity and Engagement, Arts & Sciences, University of Louisville. She is an Associate Professor and Director of the Graduate Studies Programs. She holds a Ph.D. in Sociology with a research focus on race/ethnicity, gender and social inequality in low-income and poor households and communities. Her research covers the Caribbean, African Americans and the African Diaspora overall. She links her research to the courses that she teaches, the students' research that she supervises, and her service to a global community.

Latrica Best is an Assistant Professor of Pan-African Studies and holds a joint appointment with the Sociology Department at the University of Louisville. She is a trained Social Demographer, receiving her doctoral degree in Sociology and Demography, with a minor in Gerontology, from the Pennsylvania State University. Her research focuses on race/ethnic and gender differences in population health across the life course in the United States and abroad. She teaches courses in research methods, statistics, global health, and aging.