



Building Trust and Collaboration with Rural Minorities: Experiences with Minority Farmers in the Mississippi Delta

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Abstract

The paper focuses on the question “What research approach is effective in building trust with minority farmers?” The question is answered through a documentation of researchers’ experiences building trust and collaboration with minority farmers in the lower Mississippi Delta. The researchers applied two research paradigms -logical positivism and paradigm of praxis. The logical positivism research approach was met with mistrust and open animosity and had to be abandoned for one based on the paradigm of praxis. Through this approach, and cognizant of the historical-social-political context, the researchers included insiders from the focus population as collaborators and researchers and succeeded in gaining the farmers’ trust.

Keywords

Farmers; Logical positivism; Minorities; Mississippi – Delta Region; Paradigm of praxis; Trust



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ABSTRACT

The paper focuses on the question “What research approach is effective in building trust with minority farmers?” The question is answered through a documentation of researchers’ experiences building trust and collaboration with minority farmers in the lower Mississippi Delta. The researchers applied two research paradigms -logical positivism and paradigm of praxis. The logical positivism research approach was met with mistrust and open animosity and had to be abandoned for one based on the paradigm of praxis. Through this approach, and cognizant of the historical-social-political context, the researchers included insiders from the focus population as collaborators and researchers and succeeded in gaining the farmers’ trust.

INTRODUCTION

This paper addresses the question- “What research approach is effective in building trust with minority farmers?” by documenting trust-building with minority farmers and lessons learned from that experience. The focus of this paper is the trust-building phase of a larger project¹ which was aimed at improving minority farmers' access to vocational rehabilitation services.

To put this documentation in context, it is important to briefly describe pertinent conditions of the focus population - Minority farmers in the lower Mississippi Delta. They are among the poorest, most marginalized people in the US. They have a quadruple health disadvantage. Like other minorities, they experience substantial and persistent health inequities (Institute of Medicine, 2002; Nelson, 2003). They experience inequities in access to healthcare and to health education (Kaiser Commission, 2000; Smedley, Stith & Nelson, 2002; Association of American Medical Colleges, 2002). There are inequities in all age groups including children and adolescents (Flores, 2010; Elster, Jarosik, VanGreest & Fleming, 2003). There are disease-specific inequities such as diabetes and cardiovascular illnesses (Xiang et al., 2011; CDC Cardiovascular Branch, 2008). Low-income minorities experience the most acute access barriers (Lillie-Blanton, Leigh, Alfaro-Correa, 1996). Despite programs to end health inequities current data indicate that they persist (Bonow, Grant & Jacobs, 2005; Holmes, Arispe & Moy, 2005; Polednak, 2004; Silventoinen, Pankow, Jousilahti, Hu, & Tuomilehto, 2005; August & Sorkin, 2010; Malinski, Connor, Oduro & Litwin, 2011; Charlton, Corliss, Missmer, Frazier, Tosario, et al., 2011).

Farmers live in rural areas where it is more difficult to access services (Larsen & Foley, 1992). Compared to urban Americans, rural Americans are more likely to be older, to describe their health as poor or fair, to lack private health insurance, and to face longer distances to health care services (Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality, 2008). Rural Americans also experience; inadequate insurance coverage, greater morbidity, and lower rates of service use (Ormond, Zuckerman & Lhila, 2000). Rural minorities fare worse than minorities in urban areas (Mueller, Ortega, Parker, Patil & Askenazi, 1999). Farming is a hazardous profession with high rates of job related illnesses, injuries, and disabilities (Rautiainen & Reynolds, 2002; National Safety Council, 2005; Greskevitch, Kullman, Bang & Mazurek, 2007). There are injuries from machinery, livestock, tools, and work surfaces (National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health, 2004; National Coalition for Agricultural Safety and Health, 2004). Farmers are exposed to deafening noise (Oskam & Mitchell, 2002; National Safety Council, 2002), long hours in the sun, concentrated toxic chemicals (such as nitrates and pesticides), gases, and fuels. Consequently they suffer high rates of some cancers (Van Maele- Fabry & Willems, 2004; Alavanja et al., 2003; Meyer, Coker, Sanderson & Symanski, 2007). They are exposed to grain and hay dust, and to dust from farm chemicals such as insecticides, fertilizers, and animal feeds. Farmers are exposed to zoonotic and respiratory illnesses because they often work in animal enclosures, silos, and manure pits. They are exposed to high levels of toxic gases such as carbon dioxide, carbon monoxide, methane, and hydrogen sulphide (Runyan, 1993). Farming has one of the highest levels of occupational stress, both physical and economic (Oskam & Mitchell, 2002; National Safety Council, 2002; Walker, 1988). Research indicates that minority farmers experience higher injury rates than white farmers (Richardson, Loomis, Wolf, & Gregory, 1997; Loomis & Richardson, 1998; McGwin, Enochs & Roseman, 2000)

Fourth, minority populations have higher disability rates than those of majority populations (Walker, 1988; Bowe, 1992; de Leon, Fillenbaum, Williams, Brock, Buckett, & Berkman, 1995). They receive proportionately fewer rehabilitation services, are less likely to seek rehabilitation services and when they do get into rehabilitation programs, they are less likely to complete successfully (Herbert & Cheatham, 1988; Mwachofi, 2008). Current census estimates indicate the continued persistence of disability disparities (US Census Bureau, 2006). Disability disparities are predicted to persist into the foreseeable future (Schoeni, Martin, Andreski, & Freedman, 2005; Miller, Wolinsky, Malmstrom, Andersen, & Miller, 2005). Given their quadruple health disadvantage, this population requires more research attention that will find methods of improving their socioeconomic and health status.

METHODS

The focus of this paper is the question: *What research approach is effective in building trust with minority farmers?* To answer this question, the paper documents the trust-building portion of a larger project whose goal was to improve minority farmers' access to vocational rehabilitation services. The larger project began by applying a research approach in the logical positivism paradigm. The study later applied an approach in the paradigm of praxis. The paper documents experiences and outcomes from the two approaches to demonstrate which approach was effective in building collaboration and trust with minority farmers in the lower Mississippi delta.

Some basic research paradigms

It is useful to summarize some basic research paradigms in order to put this study in the context of research methodology literature. There are three basic research paradigms: logical positivism, interpretive, and the paradigm of praxis. The guiding principles of Logical Positivism are: there is an objective reality that can only be known from data directly experienced and verified by objective observers; phenomena are subject to natural laws that are known through empirical hypotheses testing of scientific theory. This paradigm emphasizes researcher objectivity, quantitative measures and mathematical models (Gephart, 1999; Krauss, 2005). The Interpretive Paradigm is dominated by a belief in a socially constructed subjective reality that is influenced by culture and history. Although this paradigm applies qualitative methodology (phenomenology, ethnography, and hermeneutics), it idealizes researcher objectivity and views the researcher as a passive data collector and interpreter. The main principle of the Paradigm of Praxis is that knowledge is derived from practice, and practice is informed by knowledge, in an ongoing interactive and iterative process. It rejects the notion of researcher neutrality or objectivity and it is the basis for action research (O'Brien, 2001).

Logical positivist paradigm has two major protagonists: the observer who is collecting information and the informant (IN) who is the object of research and from and about whom the information is gathered. Within this context, there are four master roles on a continuum (Gold 1958). On the one extreme is the complete participant (CP) and on the other is the complete observer (CO). Close to the participant is the participant observer (PO) and close to the observer is the observer-participant (OP). These roles are defined by the distance between the researcher and the researched and by the degree to which the researcher participates in the activities of the researched (see Figure 1). For example, the CP is closest to the informants, is steeped into their daily activities and enjoys effective communication with them. From the perspective of "objectivity" the CP has a disadvantage of over-identifying with the informant or "going native."

The PO is further removed from the informant and can become a de facto observer by being totally detached from the informants. The OP is unlikely to “go native” but is likely to have ineffective communication with the informant and therefore, might misunderstand information gathered. The complete observer (CO) is even further away from informants and might be guided more by pre-existing/pre-conceived concepts and expectations and is therefore likely to misinterpret what is observed or merely confirm the pre-existing/pre-conceived concepts and expectations.

Experiences using Logical Positivism

Using this approach, researchers at the University defined the problems, research questions and created a research instrument- a survey questionnaire. The questionnaire was based on questionnaires that had been tested and validated by previous research. Some interviewers were hired to conduct one-on-one interviews with the farmers. Interviewers were poorly received by farmers and sometimes they experienced open animosity. Although the interviewers/researchers were minorities from a historically black college [University of Arkansas, Pine Bluff] most farmers refused to be interviewed. The project was shut out with a response rate at less than 10%. Thus trust and collaboration building became a major project goal.

It is easy to understand farmers’ animosity given the sordid history of minority abuse in health care and medical research (Washington, 2007; Davis, 2006; Smith, 2005; Lawrence, 2000). Historical marginalization, exclusion and discrimination experienced by minority farmers in the South make it even more difficult for them to trust researchers and outsiders. Moreover, the project timing coincided with a historical civil-rights lawsuit brought by minority farmers against the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) for many years of discrimination in federal farm programs and other services (*Pigford et al. v. Glickman, Secretary USDA, Civil Action No. 97-1978*, 1999; Cowan & Feder, 2009; Firestone, 1999). Upon realizing that the project was funded by a federal agency, the farmers were hostile and refused to be interviewed. The farmers’ responses made it clear to researchers that they did not differentiate between USDA and NIDRR (the agency that funded the project). As far as the farmers were concerned: NIDRR and USDA were part of the federal government; federal government agencies had discriminated against them for years and they were fighting them in court; federal agencies are not to be trusted. With these perceptions, farmers felt justified in their hostility towards the researchers.

Furthermore, the personal nature of the survey questions (health, income, experiences with state vocational rehabilitation services and with USDA agencies) increased farmers’ suspicions. Researchers observed other difficulties such as: most of these farmers hated paperwork and did not want to respond to a questionnaire on paper. Other farmers had genuine reading difficulties. The research approach had to change to facilitate trust-building, be cognizant of historical experiences and the current socio-political context affecting farmers’ perceptions and responses. Evidence from research methodology literature suggested a complete change in research paradigms away from logical positivism to the paradigm of praxis.

The new research approach

Similar to the paradigm of praxis, the logic behind the new research approach was that minority farmers live and breathe the conditions being studied therefore they understand them better than a researcher who is an “outsider” to their experiences. Secondly, because minority farmers have experienced marginalization and discrimination, imposing on them would engender resentment and lack of trust. To avoid this, farmers would be included as researchers. Thirdly,

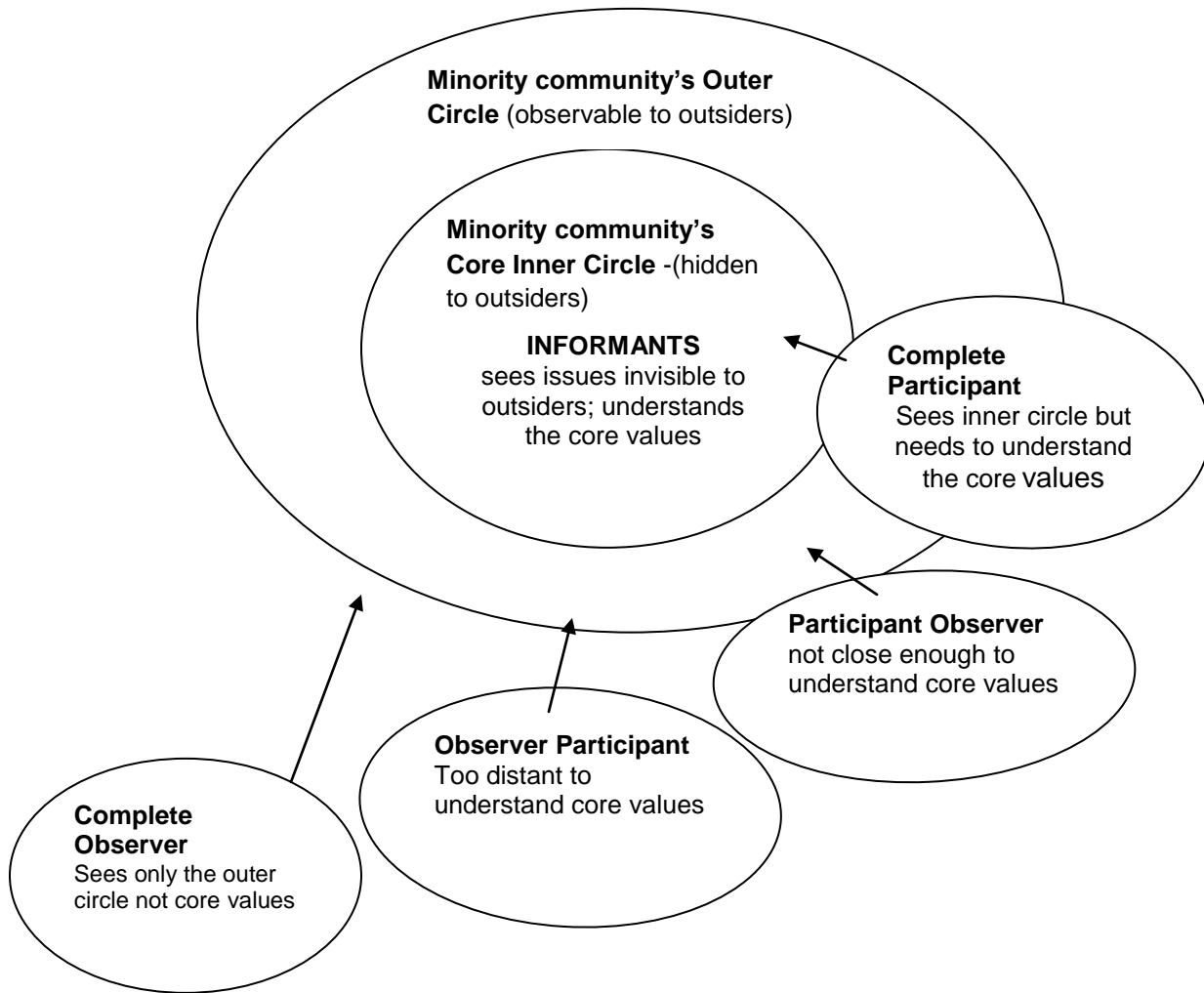
their inclusion would facilitate: effective communication and data collection because the farmer-researchers would be communicating with- and gathering information from their peers; and research being cognizant of the historical, socio-political context. This approach required researchers from the university to collaborate with farmers as equal partners each being respectful of the other's comparative advantage in understanding a situation. For example, in issues that strictly dealt with farming and the minority experience, the farmers had the upper hand in making the decisions.

The new paradigm is depicted in Figure 2. Unlike Gold's (1958) model with four roles in a continuum, this model recognizes five roles placed in an insider-outsider-dichotomy. The fifth role is that of the *insider or the informant* - a member of the focus population.

This approach recognized that because of the historical power inequities and the separation of races in the US, minorities have an inner-core knowledge about their lives that is not easily accessible to researchers from the mainstream (Mwachofi & waMwachofi, 2010). Such knowledge is born of their unique experiences, cultural values and expectations. It provides context and meaning to the outer/superficial observable knowledge that is more easily accessible to observers. The inner core knowledge contains potent information about what inspires and drives minorities and it is critical to the creation of relevant, effective, and dynamic interventions in health (Mwachofi & waMwachofi, 2010). Therefore, in this paradigm, objectivity becomes subordinate to capturing that inner-core of knowledge about the focus population. "Native" knowledge has a greater weight than the "objective" knowledge gathered by observers.

This research approach also recognized the advantages of including focus population (FP) insiders as researchers. They have full access to the culture, experiences, perceptions and expectations of the FP. They "live and breathe" the social conditions of the FP and can draw from experiences and insights not available to the researcher from outside. Their role is pivotal to effective research (Fox, 2004). A researcher from outside the FP can observe and access information that is easily accessible but will only get accurate answers by tapping into that inner-core that is necessary for accurate interpretation of observables (Mwachofi & waMwachofi, 2010). The insider can also make substantive and methodological contributions pivotal to the success of a research project. The insider provides information about important/relevant questions that could contribute to the improvement of conditions of the FP. The insider has critical methodological input in form of appropriate, culturally sensitive and effective research instruments and communication methods. Thus insiders facilitate effective trust and collaboration building, accurate data collection and interpretation.

Figure 2: New paradigm master roles in insider/outsider dichotomy



Adapted from Mwachofi & waMwachofi, 2010

The new research approach had elements and advantages of Participatory Action Research (PAR), community-based participatory research (CBPR), and the participant-observation approach used by cultural anthropologist and ethnographers. PAR is research by, with, and for people affected by a particular problem (Kendon, Pain & Kesby, 2008). PAR empowers a community by engaging people in a cyclical iterative process of: exploring and reflecting on their conditions, which leads to actions for change and to further research, analysis, reflection and action. PAR also ensures that researchers and the researched become partners in dynamic process that takes place in context (Baum, MacDougall & Smith, 2006). Therefore, this approach facilitates empowerment, self-determination and change (Corbett, Francis & Chapman, 2007). Empirical evidence supports PAR as an effective tool for research with farmers (Hoffmann, Probst & Christinck, 2007; Wallace et al., 2010) and with minority communities (Davis & Reid, 1999; Giachello et al., 2003; Olshansky et al., 2005; Stewart & Dene, 2009). Similar to PAR, Community Based Participatory Research (CBPR) involves scientists and community members as equal partners in carrying out research and in creating necessary interventions for the benefit of the focus community. It facilitates community participation in the definition of the research problem, data collection and interpretation, and application of the findings (Israel et al., 2001; Leung, Yen & Minkler 2004). Because it provides a better understanding of the social context while involving community, it is a powerful tool for research on complex multi-factorial issues (Israel, Parker, Rowe, et al., 2005). The Participant – observation approach builds “organic” long lasting relationships based on mutual respect between the researcher and the researched so as to obtain a holistic perspective on the internal logic and the external constraints of the social setting being studied (Bourgois, 2002; 2004; Bourgois & Schonberg, 2007). Similar to participant-observation, the new paradigm recognized the power of insider information and the perspective of the community as critical to gathering accurate information and for accurate interpretation of such information.

Trust and collaboration building with the new approach

It is important to state here that all project activities involving farmers directly were approved by the IRB at the University of Arkansas at Pine Bluff. It is also important to note that the project worked with farmers with disabilities and interviewed others without disabilities. For those with disabilities, necessary accommodations were provided to ensure their full participation. This concern was appropriately addressed through the help of Chief of Field Services of the Arkansas Rehabilitation Services who was part of the research team.

Trust and collaboration building took several steps:

1. Communicating individually with key community members

The Principal Investigator (PI) held a brainstorming discussion with three farmers known personally to her and who trusted her. The farmers explained that the reason they went into farming was that they liked the freedom it provided. They did not want “outsiders” telling them what to do. It was concluded that an approach that included farmers in creating project goals, objectives and in data collection would be more appropriate. The project was re-started by selling the project idea individually to key farmers who were well respected by their communities. These farmers were identified through the minority farmer organizations such as their cooperatives and associations (e.g. vegetable growers cooperative, Black Farmers and Agriculturalists Association, Arkansas Land and Farm Development Corporations, and their churches) and in consultation with the Small Farm Projects run by the land grant universities (University of Arkansas at Pine Bluff, and Alcorn University). The PI contacted such farmers

with the assistance of the farmers known to her personally. She visited with these leaders and discussed farm issues and obstacles to accessing services. She discussed extensively the objectives of the project and that although the project was not funded by the USDA the farmers did not trust project personnel. The farmers provided more information about the reasons for the lack of trust and made suggestions for approaching farmers. Most of those approached agreed to support the project. In the process, the PI gathered information about how to approach farmers, where farmers meet, where and when to hold meetings, what protocol to follow, what farmers resent and others. The PI also built some alliances with the key farmers after they understood that the project was not out to hurt them and that the data gathered would be used to improve farmers' access to VR services. These alliances proved to be effective in getting more buy-in by other farmers.

2. Getting insider involvement in project administration

Upon the advice of some of the key farmers, the project hired a research associate/project administrator from the farm community, a woman farmer who had farmed with her husband successfully for twenty two years. She brought a lot of insights about the farm community such as how they communicate, where they meet regularly and how to get their attention. She understood the professional stresses and needs of the focus population and the obstacles they experienced in accessing services. More importantly, the farmers recognized her as one of them and began to accept the project as one of theirs, aiming for their good. The project began to gain acceptance.

3. Gathering more background information about the focus population

The first two steps facilitated more background information gathering about the focus population. The information was necessary for building trust and collaboration with the focus population. Such information included their social and civic activities, their annual calendar, meeting places, social gathering times and places and other activities.

4. Meeting farmers on their turf and on their terms

After gathering necessary information about farmers' activities, the PI and other project personnel began to meet with farmers on their turf and at their own terms. Project personnel attended farmers' meetings, farm auctions, and met with them individually at their homes and other social gatherings. They talked about the project goals and objectives and why the project was important. Project personnel also met with recognized community organizers such as those who ran the farmer cooperatives, and those who ran civic organizations such as the officers of Arkansas Black Farmers and Agriculturalists Association, Arkansas Land and Farm Organization, Vegetable Growers Cooperative and other organizations. These meetings facilitated project familiarity and acceptance by the focus population.

5. Gaining acceptance by officers of farmers' organizations

After extensive meetings and discussion with the officers of the farmers' organizations and other community leaders they realized that the project was not out to hurt or exploit the farmers and that project findings might help the farmers to access services more effectively. These officers began to include project personnel on the agendas of their meetings, thus providing the project with opportunities to talk directly to farmers about the aims and objectives of the project and gather feedback from farmers about those goals. At such meetings, the farmers voiced their resentment. The PI used such opportunities to respond and to explain the project aims. The farmers responded with more information about their experiences, their unmet needs and their frustrations, further shaping project questions and objectives.

Although the community leaders accepted the project and were willing to be interviewed, the farmers still held back and were not fully open to participation in interviews and focus group discussions. They were willing to discuss issues in an indirect, fuzzy manner in fear of jeopardizing their positions. It was clear to the PI and to the research associate from the farm that the farmers were still not comfortable with the project. At times it seemed they were only stating what they thought the project wanted to hear. After discussions among the project personnel and conference calls with community leaders, it was clear that the only way to gain trust and full collaboration with the community was to involve farmers directly as researchers. This realization led to the completion of the new research paradigm being applied on the ground in this community. Farmers became a part of the research team and the insider role was fully incorporated into the project as the main mechanism for gathering data. Thus the insiders became the project's backbone.

6. Recruiting interviewers and focus group facilitators from among the farmers

In each state, under the advisement of community leaders and key farmers, the project recruited farmers who were willing and able to be trained as interviewers or focus group facilitators. They were trained together in a one location (Pine Bluff, Arkansas) to ensure consistency and uniformity in data gathering. The training sessions were also used to improve the data gathering instruments and techniques making them more relevant and more easily understood by the focus population. For example, in Louisiana, six farmers were trained as interviewers and four as focus group facilitators. The focus parishes (in Louisiana counties are referred to as parishes) were divided into six groups and each interviewer was responsible for conducting interviews in two or three parishes. The farmers were paid during the training and for conducting interviews and focus groups.

7. Follow-up meetings with farmer interviewers

The PI met with the interviewers regularly at a café in Alexandria in central Louisiana. The regular meetings were useful forums for exchanging experiences and ideas about the interview process. They also became an extremely useful tool for further training of the farmers in interview techniques and for feedback to the PI about the interview process. These meetings were a powerful resource for improving the interview process. Through these meetings the interview process evolved and was able to survive the serious weather-related problems that confronted the project.

The farmers trained each other even better than the PI could have. For instance, the farmer covering parishes in the southeastern part of the state had higher response rates than the others. He spent a lot of time in the meeting answering questions from the others about his methods such as timing, meeting places and the best approaches to use. The other farmers learned from his experiences and techniques and so did the PI. The interview techniques improved and the farmer-researchers succeeded in getting the attention of their peers. The response rate grew to 72% and kept growing. When the project conducted a follow-up survey toward the end of the project, the response rate was better than 95%.

RESULTS

Farmer sample – some summary statistics

After building trust and collaboration with this population the project was able to conduct surveys and focus groups. Despite other serious challenges such as severe weather, the farmer-interviewers were able to interview 1308 people in 659 farm households in Arkansas, Louisiana,

and Mississippi. The project also conducted 18 focus group discussions with 254 farmers in the three states. Some summary sample statistics are provided in tables 1-3. The project found that a high proportion of these farmers are older (mean age was 53.2) and they have a high school education. Although they have many years of farm experience (mean is 25 years) their farm incomes are very low (mean is \$2,469 per year) and they have low net farm values (mean net farm value was \$97,423.64). Consequently, they take off-farm employment to subsidize their low farm incomes. The average off-farm employment experience is 19 years. Most of the farmers in the sample were Black because they form the largest proportion of minority farmers in the South. The data also suggest that some of the farmers have high debt ratios and some experience heavy annual losses from their operations.

One of the important questions for this study was the “ruralness” of the location of the farmers. This measure is important because it provides an indication of amenities and services accessible to this population. This variable was measured in distances from various key services such as hospitals, doctors, schools, grocery stores and others. The summary statistics for these variables are depicted in table 3. The mean distance from the nearest doctor was 11 miles and from the nearest hospital was 14 miles but some farmers lived as far away as 60 and 70 miles away from the nearest doctor and hospital respectively. What was even more amazing was that some farmers lived 62 miles away from the nearest grocery store. The closest distances appear to be from churches.

Table 1: The study sample – number of complete interviews

State	Farm Households	State VR Personnel	Agriculture Agencies Personnel *
Arkansas	237 (54.61)	40 (70)	60 (34.88)
Louisiana	215 (51.81)	35 (53.03)	37 (34.58)
Mississippi	207 (51.75)	47 (72.31)	71 (50.71)
Total Individuals	1308 ** (52.76)	122 (71.35)	168 (40.1)

* *Agriculture Agencies Include: Cooperative Extension Service, Farm Service Agency, and Natural Resource Conservation Service*

** *This is the number of individual interviews – some households had two adults interviewed.*

The numbers in parenthesis are average response rates over the whole project period

Table 2: Farmer Sample Demographics

Variable	Mean	Std Dev	Min	Max
Age (years)	53.1925	12.3393	20.000	88
Years of Schooling	12.1247	3.1083	1.0000	23
Household Size	2.7147	1.4386	1.0000	10
Farm Profit	2469.44	26614.66	-210000	200000
Net Farm Value \$	97423.64	185926.41	-847000	1775000
Years of Farm Experience	25.0714	18.7717	.00000	76
Years of Off-Farm Work Experience	19.2851	12.7281	.00000	75

Table 3: “Ruralness” of the location of the farmers

Variable	Mean	Std.Dev	Min	Max
Miles from nearest Doctor	10.96	7.56	.00000	50
Miles from nearest Hospital	13.99	9.78	.00000	70
Miles from nearest grocery	7.68	6.66	.00000	62
Miles from nearest Movie	20.38	14.18	.00000	100
Miles from nearest School	7.87	6.31	.00000	40
Miles from nearest Church	5.52	6.08	.00000	35
Miles from nearest Town	11.05	8.9497	.00000	100

Trust-Building Stages

Trust-building went through three distinct levels:

1. “We don’t trust you, go away!”

This was the “no trust” stage where the project was shut out with a response rate at less than 10%. Project personnel often experienced open animosity. The project was faced with a choice between being objective and distant without data (10% response rate) and gaining data and understanding from the focus population’s perspective. The project chose the latter and changed research paradigms to include insiders as the cornerstone of the project.

2. “Okay! We’ll confirm your conclusions”

At this stage, the focus population was no longer hostile to the project. However, they did not trust the project and were not willing to express their true opinions. The focus population did not identify or relate with the objectives of the project. They still saw the project as an outside imposition on them. Some of the farmers stated what they thought the researchers wanted to hear/confirm. The project was able to discern such information through the help of the farmers already collaborating with the project. To correct this situation, the project chose to have farmers interview other farmers.

3. “Listen and let me tell you how it is”

Project personnel realized that they have reached this critical trust level when individual farmers began to initiate communication through telephone calls to the project office. Some calls asked questions about the project and others asked for about methods of accessing USDA programs. There were other calls not directly related to the project but about issues of concern to them. For example, some farmers from West Helen called to complain about an agricultural chemical plant in their neighborhood that was spilling chemical waste into the river. They were convinced that the plant was poisoning their water system. Project personnel helped the farmers to get in touch with the Environmental Protection Agency. This is the critical trust level that afforded the project the required collaboration and accurate data. This is the full trust level where the focus population stated their true perceptions and experiences often volunteered information that they thought was necessary for a complete picture of their situation and conditions. It took the project over a year to arrive at that level of trust. Credit for gaining this level of trust must go to farmer-interviewers and focus group facilitators. Without them, the project would not have arrived at that level of trust. Also very important to note - in this project’s experience, gaining the trust of the community leaders alone was not enough to attain the third level of trust with the farmers. That took involving the farmers directly in all project activities so that they could identify with the project objectives as being relevant to their conditions and not as irrelevant issues imposed from the outside.

Dissemination Conference and translation of findings into action

To complete the project, there was a research dissemination conference in New Orleans LA, which was attended by farmers, researchers, service providers and administrators. At this conference all researchers (including farmers and service providers) made formal presentations of their experiences with the project and what plans they had for the future. The conference provided opportunities for more brainstorming and collaborations among farmers from the three states. They also had opportunities to discuss their service access needs and experiences directly with service providers.

There were two important developments: a change in some services access regulations of the Vocational Rehabilitation Services and the birth of a farmer-to-farmer-support network

across three states. In summarizing research findings, it became clear that the eligibility requirements for accessing vocational rehabilitation services in Arkansas automatically excluded some farmers. Because the Chief of Field Services of the program was part of the research team, a decision was taken that effectively changed the regulations so that the farmers were not automatically excluded.

During the brainstorming sessions, the farmers concluded that they needed to be more pro-active in seeking services and that they needed to have a support network across the three states. Thus the farmers began the formation of the organization currently known as the Tri-State Stakeholders of the 1890s – a farmer-to-farmer support network across the three states (Arkansas, Louisiana and Mississippi). Its aims have broadened beyond accessing vocational rehabilitation services to include holding the 1890 institutions accountable to the needs of minority farmers and presenting a common front to the USDA on farm issues that affect minority farmers. These two developments demonstrate how inclusion of insiders can facilitate a seamless translation of research findings into practice. It also demonstrates how inclusion empowers the community into acting to improve their conditions.

DISCUSSION

Some limitations need to be considered. One, the paper indirectly compares two paradigms' effectiveness in trust building. The comparison could have been better if the project had conducted trust-building in two separate communities using the two approaches to see which approach was more effective. Secondly, it was not possible to identify a sample through the ideal method – i.e. random sampling because there were no complete lists of minority farmers in each state. The project had to rely on the Census of Agriculture to identify counties with at least 10 farmers. Within those counties, the project used convenience sampling.

Despite these limitations, there are some important lessons for researchers interested in minority marginalized populations. This research experience demonstrates the power of the insider role. Insiders bring invaluable substantive and methodological contributions and they facilitate effective trust-building. They are effective trust builders because they belong, are not an imposition from outside the population. They understand how to communicate with the focus population. Furthermore, they are sensitive to the needs of the focus population and therefore can articulate the relevant and critical research questions without alienating the focus population. Insiders have pragmatic approaches to data gathering because they are in sync with the fabric of the focus community. Even under difficult challenges they can find practical solutions to overcome such challenges. For example, the project was faced with serious data collection challenges weather-related delays. The project had planned to conduct interviews with farmers during the winter when they are not busy in the field. Unfortunately in 2000, there was a serious ice-storm in the southern planes causing several deaths, road closures, loss of telephone communication and electricity. Several focus counties were under states of emergency and were eventually declared disaster areas. When spring came, there were severe thunderstorms with heavy flooding in the focus counties. The storms blew off the roof of the project office. There was water damage in the office and several computers and data were destroyed. It was a huge setback for the project. Field surveys were delayed and had to be conducted in the summer time when the farmers were back in the field working hard to beat the seasonal deadlines. This was a challenge because farmers did not have time to talk to interviewers and the interviewers were also busy on the farm. The solution to this problem was found by the farmers. They changed the

one-on-one interviews to conducting interviews at dinner time with farmers in groups in restaurants or cafes where the farmers met to socialize after work. They would have dinner together followed by completing the survey questionnaires. This approach allowed the interviewers the ability to work on the farm and still interview several farmers while socializing after work. Without insider input on how to overcome this challenge, the weather conditions might have dealt the project a death blow. This is an example of potent insider information that was used effectively to overcome a serious setback.

Furthermore, in this project's experience, inclusion of insiders as researchers facilitated introspection into the roles they can play in meeting their needs. As discussed above, the farmers were empowered to act and to translate their findings into action. They set up an organization through which they would work collaboratively to reduce the obstacles they experienced daily. Inclusion was empowering while imposition created resentment, lack of trust, animosity and non-cooperation.

The new research paradigm shifted from creating solutions outside the minority populations. Instead, it used engagement and inclusion of minority populations in all critical phases. Engagement of the population became a catalyst to raising awareness and encouraging action by the population. Engagement of the population avoided creating feelings of imposition, oppression and resentment inherent in the old paradigm.

A necessary requirement of this approach is awareness by academic researchers that they know less about the conditions and experiences of the researched population than the insiders do. This is a difficult admission for researchers who were trained in the old paradigm and who have hypotheses that they want to test and questions they want to answer. However, when researching marginalized minority populations, it is important to remember that a research project is as good as the accuracy of its data. If the "research subjects" shut-out the researcher, there is no data to be had. If they sense that the researcher has preconceived notions and convictions to prove, they might tell the researcher what they think the researcher wants to hear merely to get the imposition over with. Data gathered will not depict accurately the reality of the focus population. The exercise will have served the purpose of reinforcing the researcher's prior convictions and the outsider "blindness" will be completely effective. It is also important to remember that people who feel oppressed and marginalized can always find innovative ways of dealing with the perceived oppression and imposition even without being overtly hostile.

Summary of Lessons and Implications for future research

This experience taught researchers several lessons about effective research among minority farmers:

1. Collaboration with minority farmers is more powerful and effective than imposition: this is true for all research phases including: defining the problem and appropriate research questions, creating strategic and effective data collection plans, accurate data collection and interpretation and most importantly in building trust and collaboration. This lesson is probably true of research with other minority marginalized populations.
2. A great deal of care and consideration is necessary in approaching minority farmers due to their distrust of researchers and outsiders.
3. It is important for researchers to listen to minority farmers because they have unique and complex experiences. As a result their perceptions, needs and expectations are different from those of majority farmers.

4. Once included as participants rather than mere passive research subjects, they are interested, pro-active, and capable of formulating and implementing ingenious solutions to research obstacles.
5. It is important to identify the leaders, or movers in the community through whom a researcher can gain access. However, gaining the trust of the leaders does not necessarily mean that the researcher has the trust of the farmers. This is probably due to the fact that minority farmers are fiercely independent and they do not allow other people telling them what to do.
6. Including them as participants empowers them to action, which leads to a seamless translation of research findings into practice. For example, the farmers in Arkansas, Louisiana and Mississippi decided to form a farmer-to-farmer support network across the three states during one of the focus group discussions.
7. Most important: they are capable of completely shutting out a researcher!

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