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RESEARCH ARTICLE (PEER-REVIEWED)

When Consensus Falters, We Co-create: Attending to Power in a Practitioner/Scholar Partnership to Amplify Newcomer Belonging

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Abstract

This article interrogates the politics of belonging in scholar–practitioner collaborations by analysing and reflecting upon a group project that advocated for a more equitable approach to newcomer belonging and integration in an urban setting in the United States. The structure of our collaboration revealed unaddressed and unspoken dynamics that collectively reinforced boundaries and hierarchies in our group, despite a level of intentionality around democratic praxis among the community-engaged scholars who initially brought participants together. The article asks: How can we work towards a notion of belonging if we haven't worked out an equitable approach within our own group where everyone, including newcomers, feels like they belong? The article relies on a methodology of critical reflexive dialogue between the four co-authors – two scholars and two practitioners – to analyse and reflect on the ways that power imbalances are bound up in questions of belonging and representation.

Keywords

Belonging; Knowledge Co-creation; White Methods, Code-Switching; Critical Reflexive Dialogue

Introduction

In September 2019, eight community-based organisations involved in service provision to newcomer and migrant populations in Worcester, two community-engaged scholars from Worcester State University and Clark University, and representatives of the City's Office of Diversity and Human Rights came together to create the Shared Belonging Worcester initiative. This group of scholars, practitioners, city officials and folk from migrant or newcomer backgrounds discussed questions of representation for newcomer communities and the organisations that represent, serve and advocate for them. The conveners were committed to uniting the diverse group to amplify the voices of these communities. The group shared a commitment to ideals of equity, participatory visioning and shared decision-making, which we brought to bear on planning a launch event for April 2020. However, the emerging pandemic shifted our conversation to a focus on the City's COVID-19 response.

Because of the pandemic, we planned a series of smaller engagements, widened the scope to address newcomer inclusion in support services planning and brought in additional representatives. We then experienced a lack of consensus around immediate outcomes and a lack of clarity on how to connect this new approach with overall goals. After six months of productive dialogue and planning, with an agenda and list of panels and keynotes drafted, our process stumbled shortly after we went remote in the early weeks of the pandemic. Though we kept meeting virtually, the context had radically shifted and something within our collaboration had shifted too. Over the subsequent weeks and months, it became clear that we had lost our way. This affected our interactive process and raised additional questions about academic/practitioner dynamics.

Two months after the group stopped meeting, two community collaborators and two scholars from the Shared Belonging initiative came together to reflect on this unsuccessful attempt at collaboration. We shared awareness or experience of exclusion within community-engaged work in Worcester and found this to be an opportunity to reflect on our work together. Those conversations yielded greater understanding of the challenges of collaboration and co-creation. While many projects broke down or transitioned during the upheaval and uncertainty of 2020, we co-authors realised that we could not blame COVID for getting in the way, at least not entirely. Rather, the pandemic had merely rendered more prominent a set of power imbalances that shot through the Shared Belonging collaboration. Despite a level of intentionality around democratic praxis among the community-engaged scholars who initially brought participants together for the conversations that became Shared Belonging Worcester, the process was full of unaddressed and unspoken dynamics that collectively reinforced boundaries and hierarchies. The irony was not lost on us. While we had mobilised to advocate a more equitable approach to newcomer belonging and integration, the structure of our collaboration appeared to have been doing the opposite. How could we have worked towards a notion of belonging if we had not worked out an equitable approach within our own group where everyone felt like they belonged?

In this article, we interrogate the politics of belonging in scholar-practitioner collaborations, especially in work that is, itself, focused on the question of newcomer belonging, and on inclusion and exclusion in urban spaces. [Castañeda \(2018, p. 126\)](#) locates the latter question within interactions between migrants and the cities where they are situated, considering the importance of immigration laws, employment opportunities, hierarchies of race and ethnicity, patterns of urban segregation, and the possibilities for political voice and participation, among other factors. While our Shared Belonging collaboration spoke to many of these points, we also considered the notion of belonging as constructed and political ([Yuval-Davis 2011](#)). As cities are spaces in flux that are produced and reproduced amidst unequal power relations, the questions of who is

on the margins, who has a voice at the table and who has access to urban resources suggest that belonging is a struggle that affects both non-citizens and citizens, albeit in different ways ([Ramírez et al. 2021](#)). Keeping this in mind, we frame our conversation in this article around ‘power’ in community-engaged scholarship and practice primarily in terms of the Shared Belonging project, but we do so with the broader context of Worcester in mind, a City where many of us strive for an integrated and meaningful role for immigrant and refugee communities in co-creating the city as a dynamic space. We ask: which power relations were left unacknowledged or unaddressed initially in the Shared Belonging project, yet became increasingly visible as the context shifted around us? How did these relations constitute barriers that eventually threatened our process of co-production? Both questions can help us untangle how to make sense of, and learn lessons from, collaborative processes that fall apart.

To reflect on these ideas, we rely on a methodology of critical reflexive dialogue between us, the four co-authors, to analyse the ways that power imbalances are bound up in questions of belonging and representation. Our discussion here weaves or braids ([Donald 2012](#)) our diverse voices together, situating the micropolitics of our collaborative process within larger questions about how newcomers and those often portrayed as others struggle for belonging in an urban space. Rather than attempting to blend our diverse voices into one, we allow our individual voices to be heard and, in so doing, illustrate that collaboration does not necessarily mean consensus. Indeed, as our disparate voices emerge in this article, moments of both divergence and convergence will be seen. Writing this provides us with the space to co-create in a way that calls into the conversation our own positionalities, deepening our analysis and pushing back against the power dynamics of ‘traditional’ academic writing that has, in its own way, articulated the boundaries of belonging when it comes to the work of intellectual production. Consequently, our article does not strictly adhere to the common structure of academic articles.

In the next section, we introduce our individual backgrounds to provide a glimpse of our divergent positionalities. We then provide an overview of the Shared Belonging project, including our motivations for coming together and how we organised the process between September 2019 and April 2020. Following this, we outline the methodological approach on which our authors’ collective relied to reflect on, speak and write about Shared Belonging in its aftermath. We then address key themes on which we converged through multivocality and conclude by offering thoughts around the emergent practices that have come from our conversations and will serve as a guide for how we engage in collaborations in the future. These include ways of better attending to power so that there is more democratic ownership of the process from the beginning, and centring relationships and difference as part of our praxis.

Importantly, the ideas articulated below do not represent a consensus, but rather the divergent perspectives that we have braided together.

The Co-authors

Hilda: I came to the US at the age of ten from the Dominican Republic and grew up in New York City. A city where people from all backgrounds come together in public spaces. While people live in different neighborhoods, everyone seems accepting of each other and curious of each other’s norms and cultures. Learning from each other, for example through the arts, and transcending boundaries is the daily way of life. That is my experience of belonging, a city that is not asking me to give up who I am but rather, is creating opportunities to bring people together through the built environment. In contrast, as a professional working for a mission to lift my Latino community in Worcester, I don’t feel we are respected. I find that in many ways, the leadership of this city does not want to change the negative perceptions it carries of anything that is different from a Eurocentric American perspective. We need to get at the core of why some groups feel marginalized so that we can understand each other and rise above the differences. My language

and culture are really important to me and I appreciate when institutions are welcoming of other languages so it's not just about one language.

Anita: I developed a profound interest in belonging stemming from my own experience and curiosity as the American-born child of mixed European immigrant parents. The complicated refugee story of my Hungarian father was particularly influential in my learning about the nuances of otherness in different contexts. My marriage to a Sudanese migrant in Cairo attuned me to other experiences of inclusion and belonging, but also the intense white colonial privilege of my Euro-American background. A subsequent blended household in London introduced me to parenting children of color as a white privileged woman, and new conversations about cosmopolitanism and multiple heritage identities influenced my understanding of ethnicity, race and belonging. My relocation to my small 'hometown' in Massachusetts similarly reshaped my thinking about place, home, and identity, all of which emerged as questions related to dominant ideas of refugee and immigrant belonging in Worcester. My own consistent feeling of 'unbelonging' stems from how I experience my visible whiteness, as well as my class privilege, as a mask for a more unsettled and mixed set of identities.

Craig: As an asylee from Jamaica who came to the US seven years ago, I often feel little attachment to Worcester, despite being relatively integrated into many aspects of life in the city and being actively engaged in advocacy work on several racial and social justice initiatives which have a refugee focus. Being a person from a forced migration background, I often feel like I am in a state of constant transition. Although I am a refugee practitioner, belonging is a concept that I struggle with even in my native Jamaica because of my experiences of feeling rejection and isolation as a queer individual. Although I enjoy more freedoms in relation to my queer identity in my resettled home, as a black queer man in the US, I continue to feel a sense of unbelonging within my Caribbean diasporic community, US queer communities and among the various Black/African American communities. In addition to experiencing exclusion because I am queer and an immigrant, as a black man living in the US I am impacted by racism and white supremacy culture which is deeply rooted in the DNA of this country. Despite fleeing Jamaica in order to be free and to find a place where I belong, experiencing discrimination did not stop upon my arrival to the United States. I continue to face prejudice, harassment, social exclusion, rejection, homophobia, threats, violence, and alienation from my diasporic community and settled Americans because of my immigration status, race and sexual orientation. My many intersecting identities such as my race and immigration status often result in me experiencing challenges finding a community in Worcester where I am genuinely accepted.

Adam: I grew up in Southern California as white and Jewish, on the inside of dominant groups, but also aware of the edge. I often felt like I was in the position of having to strive to belong within the *idea* of a dominant group, which invokes one of the things about whiteness that really makes an impression on me, which is the way that whiteness often represents kind of the absence of cultural identity, it often represents the sacrifice of cultural or ethnic identity in exchange for power and property. I don't live in Worcester, but I work there. As an outsider, and also as a consequence of my race and class privilege, I have a level of freedom to pick and choose where and how I want to work without navigating my own historical relationships with the place and its communities. From a cultural perspective, I feel like a total outsider in this city, and I have not figured out the cultural codes to 'fit in', if that's even a possibility.

Context: A Shared Belonging Process in a Diverse City

To better understand our critical reflexive dialogue process, it is helpful to outline the Shared Belonging project that initially brought us together, starting with the City's historical and social dynamics from which this project arose. Worcester is a mid-sized, ethnically and racially diverse city in Central Massachusetts, USA. Historical migration stories and the heritage identities of Worcester's residents are widely celebrated through museum exhibits, landmarks and media coverage (e.g. Latinohistoryworcester.org). Foreign-

born residents increasingly hail from Central and Latin America, Africa and Asia, with the largest groups of international migrants hailing from Ghana, Brazil and Vietnam ([Goodman et al. 2015](#)). The ethnic composition of Worcester's residents is also increasingly diverse – linguistically, culturally and in terms of religious practices – stemming from its appeal as a refugee resettlement locale. The ongoing transformation of Worcester as a result of the movement of people to and through the city is reflected in the high percentage of households that speak English as an additional language (between 60 and 70 per cent by various estimates; see [Goodman et al. 2015](#)), the rise of businesses and non-profit organisations founded by migrants, and the central role that migrants and people from migrant backgrounds play in the labour force, particularly in essential or frontline jobs.

However, newer residents and residents of colour note that they have yet to see themselves represented or hold positions of power in key economic and political spaces ([Sami 2021](#)). This extends to most city institutions, including the school committee, which was the subject of a federal voting rights lawsuit against the city, alleging discriminatory electoral processes ([Ebbert & Toness 2021](#)). A consequence of deep-seated historical inequality in the city became especially clear during the pandemic, with disproportionate impacts on the health, wellbeing and economic stability of Black, Indigenous and people of colour (BIPOC) residents. The substantial lack of access to technology for virtual learning during the pandemic further highlighted the educational inequality experienced by the City's Black and Brown communities.

It was in this context that Shared Belonging emerged. Adam and Anita – the two participants who are white academics, though immigrant-adjacent – independently noted an absence of opportunity for immigrant and refugee groups to think collectively about their participation in city decision-making, and came up with the idea of convening what became the Shared Belonging group without initially consulting the rest of the participants. They invited a wide range of groups to the initial meeting, prioritising those led by people from refugee and immigrant backgrounds. They also included representatives of the City's Office of Human Rights, key program officers from what was, at the time of writing, the sole refugee resettlement agency, and several interested academic colleagues from Worcester State and Clark University, none of whom were from a refugee or immigrant background. In all, eight organisations regularly sent representatives to Shared Belonging Worcester meetings.

Adam and Anita began a process of what might be considered 'facilitated advocacy' ([Haylor & Savage 2018](#), p. xi) to 'bring together people situated across diverse spheres to engage with each other in ways that are equitable and that contribute to identifying ... changes in policy and practice', for which the group could advocate. Adam and Anita set up monthly cross-organisational conversations with the eight groups, adhering to a process they believed would centre participants' voices and interests with a view towards cross-sectoral collaboration. They designed meeting agendas that included time dedicated to sharing experiences and both large and small group work across the groups to identify and unpack obstacles and dilemmas shared by a range of communities and groups. Adam and Anita included polls, feedback 'homework' and other iterative techniques to hone in on shared ideas around which the groups might coalesce. Adam and Anita shared note-taking, agenda-setting and meeting-convening responsibilities, though at no time did they invite other members of the group to co-facilitate or take over the process of designing activities and capturing outputs of the process.

The group met every month with the expressed goal of assembling an event together, a kind of non-academic conference, but one that would bring together academics, practitioners and community members around the idea of belonging in Worcester. Through our discussions, a salient point on which many of us agreed was that the key to addressing patterns of exclusion was opening these spaces to people from different backgrounds and histories to create new patterns of shared belonging that would overlay the older bounded spaces of exclusion. Therefore, our aim with the Shared Belonging Worcester project was to create a platform to advocate for equity and inclusion of newcomer and migrant background communities in Worcester.

The group met in person approximately five times between September 2019 and March 2020 when the Coronavirus pandemic forced us to revert to remote planning. Though we had agreed upon a clear agenda for our conference, the group decided that it no longer made sense for us to hold the event amidst the crisis unfolding before us. As the pandemic wore on, fewer participants attended the regular meetings, now on Zoom, as many were pulled into meetings related to COVID response work. The group decided to pivot and focus on how the City was responding to the pandemic and how well newcomers and other minoritised communities were represented in decision-making. An idea emerged to develop a survey tool to expand our circle of collaborators and gather data from practitioners about community representation in COVID response discussions. Even as we prepared our outreach strategy and survey, it was clear that our group dynamic had shifted, though at the time it was not clear why. Before carrying out this new phase of the project in August 2020, participants came together one final time, agreed that our process had diverged from our initial agreed-upon goals, and that it was time to pause.

A Methodological Approach to Critical Reflexive Dialogue

Two months after the Shared Belonging project faltered, the four co-authors met in order to reflect on why our process had not worked out. This section outlines the process we followed to reflect on and co-create the knowledge that informs this article. In the spirit of deepening our understanding of why the larger Shared Belonging group was not able to continue its work, and with the hope of re-engaging with our initial objectives, we agreed to co-write this article.

The methodology for this writing project aspires to create a set of conceptual frameworks that deal with collaboration and the co-creation of knowledge. Our dialogic approach reflects scholar–practitioner collaborations that involve a substantial level of reflexivity and iterative dialogue for the purpose of co-creation and/or action. Reflexivity refers to collaborators centring ways they are situated in systems of power and privilege and the relationship between these systems, the topic of research and the process of co-producing knowledge. Critical reflexive dialogue involves exploring how intersectionalities relate to or impact the nature of collaboration, an emergent or evolving discussion of difference, and the problematising of relationships and power relations within our collaboration ([Collier & Lawless 2016](#)).

While scholars often practise individual reflexivity, we assembled what [Rankl and colleagues \(2021\)](#) describe as ‘team-based reflexivity’. They outline a process whereby collaborators structure time in their process for relationship building and iterative critical reflection on their research. Similarly, we made an effort to merge collective and individual reflection iteratively.

Our approach takes the notion of team-based reflexivity a step further than the model offered by Rankl and colleagues by operationalising our dialogue through joint writing. It has been important to us to keep *all* our voices centred on the project of writing, which is itself an aspect of co-creation.

Our efforts to weave multiple voices echo in some ways the practice of ‘braiding’ ([Jimmy & Andreotti 2019](#)), which emphasises a breaking down of traditional academic methods and barriers between those who are typically thought of as ‘insiders’ and those considered ‘outsiders’ to the research process ([Donald 2012](#)). Braiding has been described as the weaving together of many strands of knowledge and the overlapping of theory, practice and ethics. Like [Denzin and Lincoln’s \(1994\)](#) notion of *bricolage*, which stresses flexibility, plurality and reflexivity in the creation of theory, it centres the kinds of knowledge that emerge through relationality and collaboration, requiring ‘dedication to the reciprocating interpretive process and attentiveness to the insights that arise from it’ ([Donald 2012](#), p. 544). While braiding evokes an image of coherent strands of knowledge intertwining and overlapping to form something stronger, [Jimmy and Andreotti \(2019, p. 21\)](#) are quick to assert that to braid is to uphold difference and acknowledge the contradictions and forms of historical and structural violence that intersect in co-creation. Braiding is both full of possibility and a kind of productive uncertainty.

We decided to adopt a dialogic analysis to interrogate our understanding of the power relations at play among practitioners and scholars involved in the partnership. Meeting monthly, we first decided on key dialogue questions to address power and knowledge creation in practitioner/researcher projects and to examine our work together. We then recorded our four conversations on the virtual platform Zoom. Our dialogues unfolded as organically as we could make them, with no preordained structures or rules, and no one facilitating the conversations. In this way, we were each able to come to the table to try to examine our own engagement with each other in frank and open ways, unpacking our own implicit assumptions and sharing our different analyses of how power showed up in the Shared Belonging Worcester project at different levels and across different sets of relations. Our dialogue revealed rich diversity in intrinsic and extrinsic motivations, rooted in our identities, personal and professional goals for community engagement, spaces of equity, participatory visioning, shared decision-making, and meaningful collaboration. After reading and reflecting on the transcripts of our dialogues as individuals and then as a group, we collectively crafted an outline to guide our co-writing and divided sections among us. Finally, we generated a round of collective reflections on power, knowledge and belonging for the final analysis.

Weaving together our divergent voices as we wrote demonstrated that there were multiple ways of seeing and framing the Shared Belonging project. At times we made explicit which of us was writing, while at other times we opted for a collective voice. This interplay between a singular anonymous voice and multivocality enabled us to write together without forcing consensus, a strategy to protect the independence of each author's viewpoint and the importance of our diverse positionalities. The decision to write a research article precipitated a division of labour between those of us familiar with some of the scholarly debates on belonging and methodological inquiry. While we had collectively produced the key ideas around belonging and the role of power in our work and relationships, the academic partners ultimately drafted the sections that presented these ideas as part of ongoing academic debates. As redress, we pledged to write a complementary piece geared towards practitioners in the communities with whom we are involved. As the following sections show, we distil insights that are helpful for thinking about scholar-practitioner collaborations on newcomer experiences.

Emergent Themes in our Author Dialogues

In this section, we share salient points from the reflexive dialogic process, which enabled us to think together about the Shared Belonging Project and approach to our writing.

MAKING BELONGING AND POWER PERSONAL

To work towards an analysis of the Shared Belonging Worcester initiative, the four of us took time to reflect on how we each thought about belonging. To us, this was an important step in our collaboration, and it also provided insights into the nuances of the concept of belonging and the divergence in our own perceptions, differences rooted in our personal histories and positionalities.

Hilda: One experience of feeling isolated was when I was elected to serve on the Worcester School Committee. Decision making in the Committee is connected to trusting those who have been in office for generations and less about making decisions that impact the community of students and parents. Decision making is done behind closed doors and by generations of the same people in power who have only their own lived experiences as a perspective but are making decisions for many who do not share the same perspective. This style of decision making was problematic for me as somebody who values transparency and is looking to improve the conditions for all students and families. It is for this reason that I become sceptical when anyone approaches me about coming together to work and co-create. The question of power is often distorted in these relationships.

Craig: Belonging for me as a Black queer refugee is complicated to define but involves developing some shared habits and experiences with my diaspora community, Queer communities and general society and is more than merely a legal status assigned as part of the integration process. As a person from a population that is often in motion, belonging for me is often viewed in contrast to my precarious state of feeling in limbo because of being forced to wait on a bureaucratic immigration system to grant me certain immigration privileges that are often equated to acceptance and belonging to my newly resettled home. This state of limbo and tenuous sense of belonging continue to persist even though I am no longer on the move. Despite wanting to belong, several factors prevent me from feeling a sense of belonging in my resettled home. Chief among these factors is the assumed requirement that I need to erase much of my identity and culture to fit in, which is a part of the forced assimilation into American society as a newcomer during the integration process. Because of this, I often find myself in a constant struggle to resist being Americanised to retain my cultural heritage.

Additionally, while I am in community with and experience similar marginalisation and oppression as black Americans and LGBTQ communities, the past trauma and lived experiences with injustice are different for me as an immigrant and sometimes conflict with feeling a sense of belonging to both communities. Instead, what I often experience within many spaces of the Worcester community is tokenism, which is often presented as inclusive but is heavily influenced by a culture of white supremacy. To this end, I am often intentional about not attaching myself to an American value system that does not truly represent inclusion.

Anita: My sense of a disconnect between the discourse around belonging and my experience of it has been profound. I think a lot about immigrant communities, about people who share a language or share a cultural background, but my experience was different. With parents who were from two very different backgrounds, I don't know how they made their marriage work. When I think about 'community', I do so from the perspective of my parents and a first husband who was a Sudanese Muslim raised in Cairo as an immigrant. I recall my mother disapproving of me for marrying a 'foreigner', although despite her attempt to claim a common European identity, she had to explain her 'foreign' husband to her parents too. This double standard, and my feelings of alienation from a communal identity, did not allow me to have that sense of belonging described by Hilda – a Dominican world that's sort of self-contained and has its own logic and its own norms and language. I didn't feel like I had any of that, and I think it's probably one of the reasons that I spent so many years in Egypt after my university studies in the US.

Adam: When I think about newcomer experiences and belonging, I think about power and identity. At the same time, I do not feel like I ever really belonged in the places where I lived, but that's just in terms of my own internal compass, not related to my level of privilege in society. I have spent a lot of the last fifteen years living outside the United States, and for whatever reason I felt more of a sense of attachment in those other places, including in Southeast Asia and France, rather than in the United States. Thinking about how Craig and Hilda were talking about 'belonging' versus how I think about it in my own life – or how Anita was describing it, I realize that for me, belonging is primarily a social question – do I share a way of engaging with the world and ask the same questions as the people around me? Do we relate in ways that make me feel understood? It hasn't ever really been a question of power for me. That being said, my family's story is one of diaspora and movement, from Eastern Europe and the Middle East to the United States. I grew up hearing stories about exclusion and the struggle to belong. But I also know there are stories in my family's history about marginalising others, preventing others from feeling a sense of belonging – we do not tell these. The silence around such moments is itself a form of power.

These perspectives embody multiple meanings for 'belonging', and rather than attempt to achieve consensus on a single definition, we choose here to let these different personal experiences and

understandings sit together as a way to illustrate heterogeneity within our knowledge construction work. We suggest that bringing this diversity of perceptions and experiences to the surface is important for collaboration in its own right. As the next section demonstrates, the various ways we view and feel belonging or exclusion suggest why the Shared Belonging project stalled.

Multivocal Analysis: What Went Wrong with Shared Belonging

ACADEMIC CONTROL OVER THE PROCESS OF COLLABORATION

As outlined above, the two academics who were part of this process not only initiated the Shared Belonging project, inviting others to the table, but also retained control of the facilitation and note taking. Our multiple points of privilege influenced the way we organised Shared Belonging, from our identification and recruitment of potential participants to the format and facilitation of group meetings themselves. Meetings always took place at one of our academic institutions and during our work days; while we were careful to respect each other by alternating institutions, the process remained soundly within an academic space and time.

Co-authors noted a key moment when academic logic threatened the Shared Belonging process. As we sought to shift the focus to our COVID response and newcomer representation, the idea of carrying out a community outreach survey emerged and Adam and Anita both offered to incorporate student interns to support this effort. For Anita, ‘tensions emerged specifically because our interns had work that they needed to complete for their programs of study ... [and] that maybe drove me to adopt activities that didn’t need to be done’. Adam added that this moment felt like sliding unwittingly into archetypal academic roles and that ‘the survey idea was like a nail in the coffin of the process and a lot of people had a really negative reaction to it’.

The authors recognise that such dynamics echo what [Zuberi and Bonilla-Silva \(2008\)](#) call ‘white logic’, describing an entrenched pattern whereby social scientific research reinforces racial hierarchies through the privileging of white analytical frameworks, and because of white anxiety over the pervasiveness of white supremacy in scholarship. Anita echoed this sentiment, noting:

Academic ways of knowing have been hard for me to jettison ... I found myself drawn back to my tried-and-true techniques of data capture, analysis, and evaluation only to recognize that these practices often excluded both my colleagues and other ways of knowing.

Within the Shared Belonging project, and in the partnership involved in producing this article, meetings were sites of contestation and, often, domination. This included an unspoken centring of whiteness and academia as the epistemic space in which deliberation and co-production take place. As [Leach and Crichlow \(2020\)](#), p. 125 suggest, this includes a grounding of process and action in the ‘privilege of the dominant group’ and a retention of power among such actors to decide who gets to be at the table.

For Craig, questions of how settler colonialism inheres within academic-community collaborations as a dominant way of knowing were pertinent, with knowledge production being particularly relevant here. A settler-colonialist dynamic has been a consistent theme historically in much community-engaged work between academics and non-academics and indigenous communities, surfacing in Eurocentric narratives and practices that researchers may deploy ([Arvin, Tuck & Morrill 2013](#)). When working with marginalised and minoritised communities, scholars must attend to the inherent historical links to oppression, control and dominance reflected in social patterns of hierarchy related to race, gender and other intersecting identities. To Craig, the survey process seemed to evoke ‘the historical trauma of the extraction that happens oftentimes with these groups’.

Despite some researchers' intentions to create equity and flatten power dynamics, they can often be perceived as intellectual colonists who engage in extraction, treating practitioners and research partners as mere objects of their studies and sources of data. That is, it is never possible to erase the history (or presence) of oppressive scholar-community engagement which pervades the field. Hilda reminded us that, at the time we set out to gather data for Shared Belonging, surveys were 'everywhere!' She continued:

I went to every meeting [and] it was like this mentality of 'let's take care of the poor, let's survey them to see what they need', and that's not what the community needed at the time. We don't have to go survey people to know that through a pandemic people that are already vulnerable need services. That is exactly what I worry about: that there's a tendency to over ask and then not deliver.

JUST ENOUGH TRUST

Hilda's comment above translates to another key dilemma co-authors identified in our reflections. Part of the work of collaboration in research and action involves the establishment of trust among a variety of actors that have come together. Scholars have referred to this as 'just enough trust' ([Hershberg & Lykes 2012](#), p. 71). As noted, our Shared Belonging collective attempted to do this through democratic meeting practices and consensus building. For many of us, it initially felt like there was an adequate level of trust in our collaboration for deliberation, disagreement and reflection. We were able to plan out a full day-long conference from the ground up, coming up with each aspect of our work through these democratic principles. This was significant, perhaps, but partial:

Craig: It was like we had blinders on in getting something done. It's easy to put on a conference with just enough trust because it's a one-off thing, and even if I don't feel fully integrated in the process, I will stick with it if I have two or three points that I'm looking for.

This suggests that the level of understanding and trust this group sought to establish might have been far from what participants felt among one another, despite being able to engage in the level of co-production involved in planning a single event. But when the context radically shifted in March 2020 as a result of COVID-19 and further in Summer 2020 when people across the US erupted in protest at the murder of unarmed Black men and women by the police, we suddenly found ourselves aware that we lacked what it would take for us to pivot cohesively.

While none of us felt that the issue of newcomer belonging in Worcester was any less important than it had been, the practitioners suddenly found themselves responding to a crisis, coordinating aid to communities and solving problems. Meanwhile, as the numbers of COVID-positive cases, hospitalisations and deaths continued to mount disproportionately among many of the same newcomers at the centre of our Shared Belonging concept, the realities of our unjust and unequal society took on new urgency. The group agreed our conference, as planned, did not fit this new environment. Further, perhaps the goals that had brought us together initially no longer fit the immediate objectives, given the urgency of the moment. Or perhaps the systemic inequities infiltrating the initiative made many participants feel that it was no longer worth the effort.

CODE-SWITCHING

The concept of code-switching and why it happens came up in our dialogues as well. It can be defined in multiple ways, but within the context of this process, it was described as a method to conform to the dominant culture by 'adjusting one's style of speech, appearance, behavior and expression in ways that will optimize the comfort of others in exchange for fair treatment, quality service, and employment opportunities' ([McCluney et al. 2019](#): 2-3). This suggests that code-switching often occurs in spaces where

negative stereotypes run counter to what are considered ‘appropriate’ norms and behaviours for a specific environment.

One of the manifestations of inequality in multi-racial, multi-ethnic collaborations in Worcester, like in many places, is an uneven burden to code-switch. Hilda, who has been active in the city for many years, found that ‘the responsibility has been on me to code switch and to come into a space and know it is a white space’. She described her impression of these spaces as ‘cold’ where ‘people don’t make eye contact’. She has grown so familiar with this culture that she ‘can name it’ when she sees it. ‘This is Worcester, right?’ She noted that, with those in power being predominantly white, they set the culture ‘so the people [of colour] are forced to code switch, but if you don’t know how to code switch right you’re sitting there’ on the outside. There is no thought about getting to know each other, building trust and being clear about what is the expectation for all involved.

Anita jumped in and made the link to Shared Belonging:

Well, how can you co-create anything if there’s only unidirectional code switching going on, and it’s always the people with less power [having to code switch]? ... Why don’t we teach white youth how to code switch? Why aren’t they learning how to code switch and being able to move in different spaces? ... If we’re talking about shared belonging, I feel like the onus is really on the people with power to learn how to share.

Reflecting on our planning process, our collaborative space was always a university and the organisers of the discussion were always two white academics. Even if our collaboration followed an avowedly democratic format explicitly focused on co-creation, how could we assume that non-academic participants and participants of colour were not code-switching to adapt to our predominantly white space? What is lost in terms of co-creation when participants do not feel ownership of the space?

Envisioning social transformation that would reduce the exclusion that manifests in code-switching, Hilda noted:

So the real question and struggle is to have relationships in a community where we all can remain authentic. Practicing inclusion and belonging starts with ourselves as a daily practice that requires a strong sense of self or leadership that is curious about engaging using cultural differences as a way of building trust.

INEQUITABLE MEETING SPACES

Many of the dynamics described above have to do with how equitable a dialogue or meeting space is, i.e. the extent to which meeting spaces like ours contest and/or reproduce unjust power relations. White fragility ([DiAngelo 2018](#)) and the normalisation of white dominance in professional meeting spaces constitute a serious threat to open and equitable dialogue, among other harmful dynamics that reaffirm the status quo. As Adam reflected:

What does it mean to be in a professional space where meetings are run in a certain way? This is a racialized question in a sense: what we address and what we leave unspoken and don’t bring to the center to discuss, what kind of dialogue we engage in, what kind of space there is to build relationships. All these are mediated by – can’t be divorced from the racialized dynamics of who is in that space.

These questions relate not only to Shared Belonging meetings, but also to the common practice of meetings, which is a significant part of our own professional lives, whether as practitioners or academics. In these spaces, ‘sometimes people come in and they want to work on their own agendas’, as Hilda put it, ‘but they

don't take the time to really process and think about why someone is quiet', referring to a common reaction to the kind of unequal relations that characterise professional meetings. We began making connections between Shared Belonging, as a space where diverse positionalities converged on an unequal playing field, and the ways that meetings have often embodied inequality and exclusion for newcomers struggling to advocate for a place in Worcester. In Hilda's words:

My reflection is that not everyone is in a shared understanding because of the isolation that we experience. And that comes into play in a lot of spaces in Worcester—people just not having exposure from a lack of being in [diverse] spaces, not knowing how to make the connection to what [communities] are saying. In the history of the city, the city itself has physically divided people in the West Side from the other neighborhoods.

With these words, Hilda pointed to sets of social barriers that are a product of urban segregation and that often inhibit mutual understanding in meeting spaces. She identified one form of exclusion that many newcomers face in a city that is divided and where power has been entrenched for a long time. In this sense, the dynamics we produced and reproduced in our Shared Belonging process as we attempted to co-produce knowledge are interrelated to the spaces in Worcester where newcomers encounter the practices of 'othering' and minoritisation. Despite Worcester being populated by such a large percentage of newcomers and people of colour, municipal government and other institutions of power continue to be unequally concentrated along racial and ethnic lines in the hands of white residents (Ebbert & Toness 2021). The kinds of micro-level race politics that play out in meetings dominated by the city's power elites are part of what the Shared Belonging coalition organised to push back against, but as we reflected on our process, we realised that such dynamics might have infiltrated the politics of our collaboration in subtle ways that we did not name or address.

Even when participants are able to have a united agenda and achieve mutual understanding, trust and a sense of equity remain crucial aspects of genuine co-creation. As Hilda put it, challenging us to do better:

I go back to the process that we had, whether planning the conference or this conversation and [the work of] writing [this article]. It's always about grappling with the equity question: about how we can be more deliberate about structuring conversations so that they are equitable in that they're not leaning towards power like in a university-community partnership.

In the next section, we analyse our reflections on key practices in which Shared Belonging engaged or could have engaged to create more space to call out and address inequity and trust dilemmas, perhaps better enabling us to pivot our co-creation process as everything around us fell apart in the Spring of 2020.

Emergent Practices towards Belonging and Co-Creation

What practices for improving our efforts to collaborate and co-create in ways that foster a sense of belonging, democratic praxis and equity emerged from our process? Central is the notion of relationship-building – that is, establishing trust and a shared commitment to lay a foundation for working together beyond meeting agendas and planning. When we discussed alternate ways to organise Shared Belonging, we distilled a set of three emergent practices that we share here, offering reflection rather than prescription, recognising that other groups encounter a diversity of barriers and opportunities for democratic praxis.

Planning and engaging

First, in terms of Shared Belonging's inception, we concur that ownership of such a project must be democratic from the very early stages. As Craig reflected, 'a more inclusive process might [involve] making the invitation as open as possible [to] identify members who are more connected' to the issues and who are

interested in being core players at the beginning of such a project. This could help to reduce the challenge of tokenism. In practice, this would involve finding creative ways to invite the people most affected by the problem, including inviting those who are not in leadership positions. Craig noted that thinking early on about ‘what knowledge production [means], what constitutes data, what constitutes knowledge ... would probably help folks know that they are contributing to and creating knowledge’ as well. We also suggest making broader forms of knowledge production beyond academic practices more explicit. For example, we could discuss ways to use or co-create Indigenous research methods in our shared projects.

Creating safe environments for everyone

Our shared learning includes some obvious ways to create welcoming and safe places to co-create, and some not so obvious. We now plan to rotate meetings between community spaces and academic spaces, and to unsettle issues of ‘academic time’ in running meetings, setting agendas and other assumptions that are built into academic practice. In addition to finding inclusive ways to facilitate meetings, we aim also to take turns facilitating meetings. Regarding decisions around who to invite to the table, we now recognise the need to be more intentional in expanding the group. For academics, if we are involving students in our projects, we must make sure that other participants share in the decision to bring them in, and we must help students understand their responsibility to focus first on the process, not necessarily the outcomes of the project. For community leaders, Hilda reminded us, ‘to speak about an issue, I will always speak to [folks from] that community to figure out how I can put that community in front to speak for themselves ... advocacy has to be from the community that is most affected.’ For either party, when we are invited to convene people, we should do so, but also be prepared to play a supporting role. However, we ought to avoid brokering situations where we are not sure whether the interests of the community are at the centre. While we should strive to widen participation, there are agendas at play for all actors.

Authentic listening to communities is hard work but absolutely needs to be done in order to get co-creation right. We must not only acknowledge power relations but openly talk about how to move forward when we get into difficult spaces, when we are not in agreement. Hilda advocates a process whereby participants check in with their level of commitment and engagement, ‘having everybody go around and say “here’s why I’m coming to the table; this is what I’m hoping to get. And [we should] continue to do these” check-ins throughout, which would also facilitate building relationships. We want to err on the side of deliberate inclusion, along with deliberate discussion of aims and objectives, without necessarily having to align; we have learned much from using ‘braiding’ to address differences. It helps to acknowledge that consensus might not be possible, but we can still co-create a multi-pronged approach under a collaborative umbrella.

Working on systems change while embracing multivocality

We acknowledge that timeframes and funding are often driven by the requirements of the funding environment and universities. We also see two levels of collaborative work that address the politics and power in grant making: on one level, scholars and practitioners could move deliberately at their own pace to build trust and communication; on another level they could advocate for appointing more people from migrant and refugee backgrounds to grant agencies, city agencies and universities to better represent the perspectives of grantees’ shared experience.

Defying the pressure to maximise efficiency, we suggest reserving time in meetings for relationship-building, thus creating a foundation for working together that goes beyond preparing a meeting agenda, and instead involves planning a conference, which is also about trust and a sense of shared commitment.

Finally, we stress the need to move away from pushing for consensus at every turn. Adam notes that it can be useful to reflect on ‘where we can be deliberate about not having consensus, and instead centring the fact that there are many [divergent] ways of thinking about issues like belonging or what it means to be excluded – not represented – and a wide range of reasons for being at the table.’

Concluding thoughts

This article’s analysis may serve as a caution to those embarking on practitioner-scholar collaborations. Good intentions or, as Janke (2013) writes, ‘increased community presence’, are woefully inadequate. As we have shown, the struggle to address oppression that sits in and beyond our collaborative spaces must also accompany a meaningful redistribution of the power to lead and own the work of co-producing knowledge if all participants are to feel they belong. To do this, we insist, requires a challenge to dominant ways of organising partnerships. Sometimes, practitioner-scholar efforts to achieve consensus fail. But such failure is, as we have shown, generative and an important site for rebuilding and co-creation through acknowledgement, relationship building and democratic praxis. We may realise that consensus is not necessary – that it may even get in the way or mask forms of unjust hierarchy. Instead, we argue, multivocality, difference and braiding represent a kind of collective power in their own right that we can use to push for transformative change.

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