Developing a Conceptual Framework for Dignity-Affirming Care in Collaborative Research

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Abstract: Applying a Black womanist perspective, I develop a conceptual framework to explain how two types of care, validating care in the present and validating care for potential can be used to understand the conditions under which dignity is affirmed in collaborative research.

Collaborative research projects and the potential for dignity-affirming care

The purpose of this paper is to develop a framework that can be used to explore how and when collaborative research settings are dignity-affirming learning environments for participants. Collaborative research, as I define it, encompasses a range of ways that researchers engage with school or community partners while doing research with rather than for and on participants (Penuel et al., 2020). An aim of this type of research is the “transformation of the research relationship from one in which communities were objects of study to one in which community members were participating in the inquiry” (Wallerstein & Duran, 2017, p. 28).

Following Espinoza, Vossoughi, and others, I characterize dignity as a “multifaceted sense of a person’s value” that “inheres in the person,” however, the experience of that is “contingent”; it cannot be taken as a given that a person’s dignity will be recognized and affirmed within interactions (Espinoza, Vossoughi, Rose, Poza, 2020, pgs. 1-2). The acknowledgement of intrinsic worth is the result of struggle and social action, such as through education. Dignity involves the ability to feel valued and to value others, but it is a “historical accomplishment,” not something received a priori (Espinoza & Vossoughi, 2014). This work is concerned with the ways that dignity is accomplished through interaction within collaborative research.

Collaborative research projects contain the potential to be dignity affirming because of their focus on equality, mutuality, and/or reciprocity, in contrast to more traditional, transactional models. The current turn toward more collaborative approaches to research is promising, however, “simply invoking the language and ideals of participation is insufficient” (Shirk, 2012, p. 29). Uncritical attempts at collaboration and participation may actually result in further marginalization as participants are erased and their knowledge and experience commodified. Routinized instances of researchers commodifying, appropriating, and making research participants invisible are still common (Patel, 2015). As collaborative research in the United States takes place within a racist milieu that prioritizes property rights over human rights (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995), participants in collaborative research must be vigilant to combat framing research as the property of researchers, rather than as a dignity-conferring activity. Therefore, new ways of thinking about relationships within collaborative research are needed. Black womanists’ perspectives on caring provide one model for understanding the caring interactions between research partners that support dignity in research.

Black womanist perspectives and the need for care in research

Scholars that theorize Black womanist caring have firmly linked practices of care to supporting human dignity. For instance, Collins (2009) describes Black mothers’ efforts to instill a strong sense of self-worth in their children by meeting their physical needs. Some scholars use Black feminist and womanist interchangeably while others make distinctions, however, both terms refer to theory that centers Black women's experiences and efforts towards self-determination and self-identification within the context of communal liberation. In these traditions, care is reciprocal and mutually beneficial, designed to affirm the humanity, value, and self-esteem of individuals, and to combat negative assessments and stereotypes from dominant cultures (Collins, 2009). Therefore, the aim of care in this practice is the collective benefit and the liberation of everyone, as well as a focus on individual empowerment (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2002). Black women’s traditions of care attend to the particular history, experiences, and physical reality of people with multiple marginalized identities (Thompson, 1998; Ward, 1995), as well as to understanding how multiple layers of oppression and privilege interact within a power structure defined as a matrix of domination (Collins, 2009). Black womanist theories of care view self and communal care, or “mothering,” as political action (Collins, 2009; Lorde, 1992). Care is both inward focused and healing, as well as outward oriented and seeking the formation of strategic coalitions (Reagon, 1983).

Connecting care to dignity in collaborative research
Using Sandoval’s (2014) idea of conjecture mapping, I reviewed scholarship on collaborative research, dignity, and Black womanist conceptions of caring to map the relationships between design processes in collaborative research, mediating processes related to caring interactions, and the dignity and learning outcomes that collaborative research projects present when caring mediating processes exist. I also reviewed empirical data describing the interactional norms across seven different collaborative research projects.

![Conceptual Framework for Care and Dignity in Collaborative Research](image)

I find that validating care for the present and validating care for potential are salient categories for understanding caring interactions within collaborative research. Understanding these facets of caring and how they are present (or not) within the practices of collaborative research projects is one promising step in ensuring that these projects are dignity affirming.

**References**


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