More than Research and Ruble: How Community Research Can Change Lives (Including Yours and Your Students')

Jamie D. Aten, Ph.D.
Wheaton College

The purpose of this article is to share lessons learned about engaging students in community research. In this article, I discuss lessons I have learned from engaging students in community psychology projects. Several strategies are provided for fostering the research process and community-based research. The strategies outlined are based on my experiences having taught at a large research university, as well as present experiences teaching at a liberal arts college in a professional school of psychology. In this article, I also highlight experiences that have helped shape the way I think about and approach community-based research.

I was on a recent trip to Japan to collaborate with churches and communities affected by the earthquake and tsunami. One of the pastors we met with shared a quote from a survivor he had recently visited. She said, "Every time you come, a piece of rubble is removed from heart." Experiences like this have had a significant impact on me both personally and professionally—and remind me that community-based work is more than research and rubble. In this article, I will share experiences from working with diverse churches and communities around disaster mental health issues, as well as from my experiences having taught in two very different settings.

Previously, I taught at a large Southern research university (The Southern Mississippi University). I now teach in an APA-accredited clinical Psy.D. program at a Christian liberal arts institution (Wheaton College). Overall, I want to highlight how I have sought to foster community-based research with students. The lessons that I share come from several years of trial and error. Most of the insights I offer I have learned from listening to my students and from colleagues who have been gracious to answer my questions about the very topic I write. Before moving into the more "how to" sections of this article, I want to add a caveat—I am still learning. My hope is that sharing some ways in which I have attempted to foster student research, as well as some examples, will allow other researchers and practitioners to decide whether these examples are applicable to their experience and setting. Thus, below I share some of the experiences that have helped shape the way I think about and foster research.

Background

I have heard it said that all research, to a degree, is autobiographical. Though perhaps not always true, in my case, this probably rings true. However, in many ways, I am an unlikely researcher. School work, even in elementary levels, had always been challenging. I was often placed in remedial reading classes. I did not do much better in subjects besides reading. I especially struggled with math and English courses, some of which I barely scraped by with a passing grade. I was a first generation college student who was clueless about how the system of higher education worked when I first entered it.

I grew up in a small rural farming community (a village according to census data). I can remember going to monthly gatherings at the community center to listen to bluegrass with my family and most of the town. Neighbors were anyone who lived within two to three cornfields of your land. Friends were often neighbors, so relationships tended to be determined more by geography than other social factors. Because there were few resources, I also learned that being a part of a community meant helping those in your community.

However, looking back, I can see how both the community I grew up in and the people whom I have encountered have continued to influence my research. One particularly influential person was an English professor from the junior college (within driving distance of my home town) in which I enrolled after high

Correspondence regarding this article should be sent to Jamie D. Aten, Ph.D., Department of Psychology, Wheaton College, Wheaton, IL 60187; jamie.aten@wheaton.edu

school. That professor encouraged me not only to read, but also to write. Fast forward to graduate school. I still did not have much interest in doing research. Statistics did not come easy for me, and it took me years to develop that skill set. Although I enjoyed writing in graduate school, I was (and remain) an incredibly slow writer. I can remember working with my professors on draft after draft of all my early papers. I also found that the types of questions I asked often did not appear to fit neatly in the methodological approaches I was learning about in my research courses at the time. However, as my interest in wanting to work with under-served populations grew, my interest in research grew correspondingly, particularly in regards to community-based research.

After finishing graduate school, I accepted a position in South Mississippi at a large research university where I had planned to study the role of the church in reducing mental health disparities. Six days later, Hurricane Katrina hit the region. I can remember after the university reopened, heeding our school's president's advice, "Try to pick up where you left off, and get back to what you had been doing before the storm." During the first week of classes, I met with a group of students to start a religion and mental health research lab. So, there I sat, about a month after the storm with my students in our second lab meeting, and did the best I could to try and get back to "normal."

Then, one of my students spoke up, "Why aren't we looking at issues of faith and Hurricane Katrina?" Less than a month later we had collected our data for our first study on the impact of Hurricane Katrina on God images (Aten et al., 2008).

About a year and a half ago, I moved to Wheaton College where I now teach graduate students in a professional psychology doctoral program at a liberal arts college. Though I now live in the Midwest, and nearly 7 years have past since Hurricane Katrina, I am still working with communities from Mississippi on projects related to disasters that have followed (e.g., 2010 Mississippi Delta Tornadoes, Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill). Our program's mission is to work with the under-served, and the college has an extensive global network and commitment to serving the church. There is also a strong interest in Christian integration, diversity, and justice (to name a few) issues among faculty and students. Consequently, I have found this to be an

ideal environment to continue community-driven research. Over the last several years, my research on the psychology of religion and disasters has begun to include work in diverse humanitarian and international settings. Being at Wheaton has helped further expand this work, including the development of the Humanitarian Disaster Institute (www.wheaton.edu/HDI). Next, I introduce several strategies for fostering community-based research that have been garnered from these experiences.

Specific Strategies for Fostering Community-Based Research

1. Seek out and introduce students to interdisciplinary perspectives and approaches.

Throughout the academic year, our college hosts numerous speakers, lecturers, and symposiums. Many of those bring together diverse thinkers and scholars from around campus and the globe. Whenever possible, I try and encourage students I work with to attend these. I also try and share what I have learned from our various interdisciplinary experiences. Encouraging students to think about and approach community-based research from interdisciplinary perspectives has helped broaden the depth of impact of my work on communities. I learned early on that to do effective community research requires holistic conceptualizations, methods, and relationships. I try and share this perspective with my students. For example, this may be even as simple as "thinking out loud" with students, such as sharing internal dialogue about possible points of connection I may see between psychology and public health. Thus, I try to help apply this perspective to our work.

2. Connect students with communities.

As in real estate, the same is true in community-based research. So much comes down to "location, location, location." I have found several ways to connect students to communities. For example, first, I can help students begin to think about contextual factors possibly impacting a community. Another approach may be to bring the community to my students, such as inviting a community leader to come and speak to the class, to help make community needs more tangible. Third, I also try to share the stories of those with whom I work, to give a "voice" to communities that I work with. For example, after working with refugee survivors of gender-based

violence from the District of Congo, I brought back their stories to share with my students. But whenever possible, I recommend trying to provide opportunities for students to get involved in the field. As I worked on a draft of this article, I was on a flight back from Japan where another colleague, doctoral student, and I spent a week conducting a community mental health needs assessment. We were collaborating with two international NGO groups and local congregations affected by the 2011 Japan Earthquake and Tsunami. Riding toward to the airport by rail, I was moved to hear how the experience had positively impacted the student team member.

3. Help students learn how to build sustainable capacity for community-based research.

"Staying power" is one of the biggest challenges to doing community research. Communities want to work with people who will stay the course and not come in and test and run. Whenever I begin to develop a new project, I always try and engage students in helping me think through how we might help build capacity for our work. One approach that I have found to be helpful for fostering sustainability, is to look for pre-existing networks and infrastructures. For example, are there possible groups doing work similar to the work I hope to achieve with whom I might be able to partner with or work through? Another approach is to think about equipping community members to be the change agents. Overall, I feel strongly about wanting to help students think creatively and realistically about resources and potential resources needed to carry-out community-based research.

4. Get students involved in learning about and seeking external funding.

Related to the above, most community programs could benefit from external funding support. I have observed that success with external funding starts with developing a track record. Taking some steps, such as working on publications and presentations around the topic is a great place to start. Another tangible way to start the process is to encourage students to go after smaller sources of funding, perhaps an internal college grant or student research competition. The goal is to work toward a snowball effect. Start small, get some good pilot data, and use what it found and produced to go after a larger grant, and so on. I also try and help students gain experience by having them on funded projects, or by connecting them with colleagues working on funded projects. Another way to build sustainability is by working with individual or corporate donors. Would a company be willing to help offset part of a student's project if the company was identified as a sponsor? Might the project be of interest to potential donors?

General Strategies for Fostering Student Research

1. Know what I am passionate about.

I can remember considering dropping out of graduate school fairly early on in my studies. I wondered whether I was in the right place. I felt like I was floundering. Probably noticing this, one of my mentors when I was in graduate school at Indiana State University (ISU), Dr. Michele Boyer, stopped—seemingly out of the blue—in the hallway one afternoon. She asked me, "What are you passionate about Jamie?" She helped me remember *why* I was where I was. She also validated my interest in integrating faith and psychology at time when this area of work was less than popular. Thus, as faculty or supervisors, an important part of work can be helping ignite students' interests. One of the parts of my job I enjoy most is having the honor of being able to walk along side students to help encourage their gifts. Knowing where my passion lies, and helping students know where their passion lies, can help not only clarify interests, but can also help sustain us in our work.

2. Understand and communicate my vision for research.

I remember attending a CAPS East conference a few years ago. I remember feeling like I was a struggling a bit with the direction of where I was going next in terms of my research. I had a chance to talk with one of the co-editors of this special volume (Worthington) one evening at the conference. I shared that sometimes I felt like I was getting in the way of myself, and that I felt like I was working without an "anchor" at times. He encouraged me to develop a mission and vision. In short, my vision is to equip the church to prepare for and respond to disasters. Having a clear vision has helped me stay more focused and moving forward. The same can also be said about engaging students. The late Randall Sorenson noted, that integration "is caught..." That is, students develop a passion for their work by interacting with others and having good models. Having a clear vision is

one way that I have found I can share my passion for research. This also provides me with a way to model the process, and provides something that students can grab a hold. It also provides opportunities for me to help students develop their sense of mission and nurture their growth and development.

3. Collaborate, collaborate, and collaborate.

Did I mention collaborate? Collaborating with students and colleagues has helped to expand and improve my work. Collaborating with others has challenge me to think differently and has introduced new life into my work. Collaboration has also lead to new opportunities, such as being invited to co-author papers, grant opportunities, speaking engagements, and the like. Working with others on research has also helped foster relationships. My father was great at fixing things. I have some great memories about standing out in the cold helping him work on a truck we had bought to fix up. Unfortunately, I am not very mechanically inclined (to say the least), but despite this, the act of getting together with my father to work on the truck provided an opportunity for strengthening our relationship. In a lot of ways, research, if I dare continue with this analogy, is the vehicle for connecting with students and colleagues. For me, more than any other area of my work as a professor, research is where I seek to develop relationships, mentor, and support students, and (to a large degree) how I continue relationships past graduation.

4. Be aware of what I value as a researcher.

What I mean by this is, asking myself why I do what I do? What drives me? What parts or aspects of my work have the most impact on others? What parts or aspects of my work most nourish me? Out of graduate school at ISU, I pretty much applied to positions across the entire research/teaching spectrum, from heavy teaching-no research to heavy research-no teaching. To my surprise, as I interviewed and thought about what vocation might look like at each institution, I discovered that writing and research was something that I deeply valued. I quickly realized that if I ended up in a place where writing and research were not heavily valued, then I was probably not going to be too happy, nor would my future employer. (My interests had come a long way from my dislike of those early struggles in remedial reading classes.)

5. Take steps in research to communicate what I value to students.

Being more aware of what I value as a researcher, and being able to communicate said values, enhances "informed consent" with students. Another part of good "informed consent" practices is communicating unspoken expectations that I may have that are strongly valued. For example, I might place a strong value on timeliness or maybe I really value students who are proactive. Similarly, others may have certain criteria they use to evaluate student research at the end of the semester or expect a certain level of involvement from lab members. These are all helpful things I need to take the extra step in communicating with students, and I would recommend putting these into writing. It not only helps ensure students have this information, but also helps my continued development as a researcher.

6. Conversely, it is important to know what others value about research.

What do my students value? I look where they are employed after they graduate, which helps me assess such values. For example, do a significant numbers go onto graduate school, clinical careers, or academic careers? I would also recommend that others consider what kinds of research are valued at their institution (or the institution where they hope to end up). For instance, what types of scholarship are others at a particular institution doing, or what types of scholarship are rewarded (e.g., college acknowledgments or department promotion-and-tenure requirements)? Overall, being cognizant of the environment(s) in which one works helps to enhance goodness of fit.

7. Be open about my research strengths and weaknesses with students.

This provides yet another opportunity for modeling. Sharing my own strengths and weaknesses helps remove some of the intimidation that some students feel as they are first getting involved with research, from feeling like they have to "know it all" for example. I have found sharing my strengths and weaknesses, and encouraging my students to do the same, helps us develop as a team. Being more authentic within the team helps me to be more intentional in how we work together, encourage each other, and challenge each other. Similarly, by the very nature of who I am, I tend to be drawn to particular philosophical approaches, types, and areas of research. Therein

lies possibilities for both strengths and weaknesses. For example, I once had a student whom I really enjoyed working with. She approached me about supervising a dissertation on the effects of the media on body image and eating disorders among adolescent females. I thought she had a great topic, but also felt like I would not be able to offer much in the way of mentorship in this area of study. This is not to say that others should avoid stretching themselves or expanding into new areas. Rather, I am suggesting that it is important to know one's limitations, and what is needed to help one's students succeed. Consequently, I have found that part of the process to learning more about my strengths and weakness as a researcher, also involves seeking to better understand how doing community research also impacts me as a researcher, which I discuss below.

Impact of Community Research

In general, the *way I do research* has changed with time. However, *who I am as a researcher* has changed even more because of my community research experiences. I no longer view community as just where I live, study, or work. I have come to embrace a much larger view of community. I no longer view community as hemmed in merely by geographical boundaries. Community for me now often centers around commonalities of faith, needs, causes, and hopes. Some of my faith and worldview have also changed because of my work with communities. For example, issues of justice and advocacy are now an extremely important part of how I think about and try to live out my faith. I have also noticed that being involved in disaster and humanitarian work has begun also to influence the social views that I hold. For example, I had been hesitant (if not resistant) to embrace advocacy in environmental issues. Whereas now, I have become strongly involved in creation care within the Evangelical church, and try and help share these values with my daughters.

Being involved in community-based research has also shaped me professionally. For starters, research is now more about purpose than productivity. I still feel that it is important to be productive (and I still need tenure), but my sustaining and underpinning motivations for doing research have changed. I have also garnered a much deeper appreciation for the ancillary skills of clinical psychology (e.g., consultation) and broader psychological science (e.g., community psychology) contributions that our field has to offer to those in need. For example, I believe that research can be a valuable clinical tool and can be used to bring healing and change. I am also much more intentional about trying, when ever possible, to bring students with me in the communities that I work. Not only do my students often report that these experiences have a positive impact on them, but I continue to be impacted by the insights and experiences that my students share with me.

The way I view Christian integration has also been stretched. In addition to the very valuable contributions that psychotherapy makes to helping under-served populations, I believe that we also need to think integratively about community approaches to psychology (for a great example, see Canning, 2011). For example, very early on in my career, I tended to view the task of integration as primarily a cognitive or theoretical task (which is still a central part of how I approach integration). However, community-based research has challenged me to reframe how I understand integration in many ways. I now see the task of integrating my faith and psychology even more as tasks of acting, relating, and being. Similarly, I had previously thought of integration as primarily what "goes on" inside the therapist (e.g., motivations, theoretical approach) or inside the therapy room. However, I also now spend a good deal of time reflecting on what it means to be a psychologists within the larger context of the Christian integration movement and with those involved—within the integration community.

Conclusion

Though this is a short article, I initially struggled with the manuscript. The reason I struggled was because on the early drafts, I had tried to write the article without sharing some of the experiences that have shaped who I am as a researcher and person; I hope that I have not swung to far the other way as you have read. However, I hope that by incorporating my personal experiences with lessons I have learned along the way, I can help others reflect on how research is not just about what they do, but is also in part about who they are, and perhaps even where they are headed. I believe this is a central premise for conducting integrative community-based research and to engaging and mentoring students. On a final note, I hope that some of the strategies I highlighted will encourage and aid others in engaging students in future community-based research.

References

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Author

Jamie D. Aten (Ph.D. in Counseling Psychology, Indiana State University) is the Founder and Co-Director of the Humanitarian Disaster Institute and Dr. Arthur P. Rech and Mrs. Jean May Rech Associate Professor of Psychology at Wheaton College (Wheaton, IL). Dr. Aten's interests include the psychology of religion and disasters, disaster spiritual and emotional care, and faith-based relief and development.