



BLACK BELT RESILIENCE: MODELING A PROCESS OF COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

WHY WE DID THIS STUDY

We embarked upon this study because the Black Belt Region of the South has deep personal connections and commitments to the research team. The region is where our families live, where we learn and develop as researchers and where our work focuses on re-writing the narratives of creative and resilient communities. Through the emphasis on interdisciplinary approaches, we aim to reimagine university-community collaborative research processes that utilize community voices in theory and practice to improve the quality of life for people living in this region.

Our project rests on the three pillars of cooperative economics, agrarian traditional knowledge and black land holdings, which we viewed as important community assets. We set out to develop a nontraditional, Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR)

approach. Our goal was to develop a replicable model of collaborative approaches that can be successfully modeled in other Black Belt communities. The initial objective was to highlight communal assets, often overlooked in most existing literature on the region and we hoped to emphasize inherent community value and resiliency. Our research project utilized various CBPR methods with a focus on decolonizing and indigenizing research principles to identify sources of resiliency in Alabama Black Belt region communities. The project builds a replicable model of community-engagement that allows communities to define and prioritize their culture of health.

HOW WE DID THIS STUDY

We purposefully started building our research model of decolonization by inviting community members to serve as partners through recruitment activities and data collection for the study. The IRL community partner worked with the former Demopolis constituent services representative for the district's former US Congressman, to identify leaders within the Marengo county community that the entire research team could meet. The Alabama Black Belt team traveled to Marengo county in September 2018 to meet with these members of the community. This meeting served as both the first step to indigenizing the research project and as an educational opportunity for the research team to learn more about the community while informally interviewing potential members for the community council. This council would serve as a council of community partners (CRC) for the project. While there, the research team took an educational tour to learn more about the social, historical, economic and cultural make-up of the community. Another community member that founded the Marengo County Historical Museum and has extensive experience in genealogy throughout Marengo County

KEY FINDINGS

Top 5 Community Priorities

- 1) Mental Health Support
- 2) Spiritual and Community Leadership Development
- 3) Financial and Housing Education
- 4) Entrepreneurship and Business Development
- 5) Youth Development and Mentorship

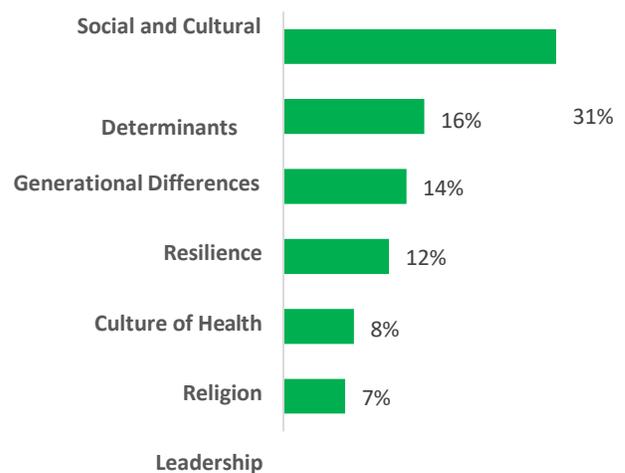
“in the Black Belt its persistent poverty, how are we able to still be here and still be thrivin' or still be existing, still be farming, or, you know,— I think that's resilience. How are we able to still maintain, since we are the lowest, that means we're the lowest in the country - not just the state, but in the country – how are we still able to maintain and survive? – that's resilience!!

organized this opportunity. These two community members assisted our efforts in establishing our process of decolonizing and indigenizing our research data. We participated in 14 separate discussions about the research project and informal interview sessions with the two aforementioned community members and representatives of various community constituencies such as: representatives of a legacy funeral home business, university dean, local business owners, civil rights activist, legacy landowners, registered forester, educator and credit union leader, beauty shop entrepreneur, nonprofit founders, ministers, youth organizer, third generation basket weaver, and botanical scientist. These community members represented a broad spectrum of the Marengo county community and were instrumental in helping to provide a diverse context to our understanding of the community; its pressing issues and framing our approach. From these conversations, the research team made a unanimous agreement to spend as much money in the community as possible so we invited eight of the fourteen to be a representative on the Community Resilience Council (CRC) and we compensated them \$2500 each; the maximum amount allowable. We requested that the CRC: (1) serve as representatives of the Marengo County community, (2) participate in check-ins with the researchers, (3) identify community priorities aligned with the three research pillars, (4) help finalize research questions and (5) organize three community listening sessions. We also requested their assistance in securing a location for the listening sessions, serve as research partners during the three community listening sessions, assist in the dissemination of research, and to identify

additional persons to develop Marengo county sustainability group after research was completed.

Our research project received IRB approval through Researcher 2's university (Georgia College) on 8-15-2019. We collected data through eight formal semi-structured interviews, four listening sessions, one focus group and one community engagement activity. Through these various activities, we interfaced with approximately 70 community experts. We used Homerow transcription services to transcribe more than 11 hours of audio. We utilized NVivo 12 to code and analyze the data referenced in Table 1. This table reveal the top six references most often expressed during the listening sessions. The listening sessions were comprised of the greater Marengo County community. During the recruitment and data collection process, the research team aimed to strategically spend grant resources within the Alabama Black Belt region. Out of the grant funds, the team spent over \$60,000 directly in

Table 1. Number of References



Marengo county and the Alabama Belt region on engagement, recruitment and data collection activities. Our fiscal sponsor, also located in the Alabama Black Belt, received \$24,000 for fiscal sponsorship.

WHAT WE FOUND

Our preliminary results from coding and analyzing the four listening sessions uses themes established by the research team, Community Resilience Council (CRC), and the greater community. We found that while there is significant overlay of priorities, the greater community both ranked and expressed a frustrating desire for specific priorities. The research team entered the community with a focus on agrarian traditional knowledge, land-based cooperative economic models, and Black landownership and communal land holdings as the foundation for establishing an understanding of the culture of health within this community. The CRC vetted and acknowledged our focus areas as sound and broad based enough to capture the community's voice. The CRC developed a 30-item community priorities list during the first focus group with the CRC and research team. The goal of the four listening sessions with the greater community was to have participants learn about the research project and rank the CRC priorities. Preliminary findings from the greater community rankings reveal the most common themes of these sessions were social and cultural determinants of health, resilience, culture of health, and generational differences. Out of 30 community priorities, the most critical priorities for the greater community were identified as mental health, spiritual and community development, financial and housing education, entrepreneurship and business development, leadership development, youth development and mentorship as their primary community priorities. Unexpectedly, the research team's three pillars did not match the themes of the priorities of the CRC, the themes of the 4 listening sessions, nor the greater community's rankings. In addition, the lens of the outsider research team did not match the community's definition of culture of health or their definition of resilience. Utilizing a community-based participatory approach and process, allowed the researchers and community to co-learn and develop a research process that truly captured the

needs of the greater community and ask relevant questions specific to those needs. The opportunity for the CRC influence in the research design and frame and assist in the development of a research strategy created the potential for greater long-term impact that will live beyond the life of the initial research project. The CRC formally organized into the Regional Community Resilience Council (RCRC) in March 2020, with the mission: to reinvent knowledge share, inspire action and sustain resilience. Their first project entitled, "Sowing Seeds Project" with the objectives of outreach to the African American communities in Marengo and surrounding counties to 1) encourage the development and enhancement of food production 2) provide farming training and education and 3) promote health and wealth in local communities. In this phase of the research, they will receive approximately an additional \$34,000 from the initial IRL Research project to carry out their work. Again, the research team unanimously agreed to provide these additional resources to the community to reinforce our commitment to true community-based participatory research engagement approaches, which includes the strategic sharing of research decisions and budgetary resources.

WHAT THESE FINDINGS MEAN

Our project revealed the misalignment between the definitions of culture of health, resilience, the priorities of the researchers, and the residents of the Marengo county community. The researchers' initial definitions and pillars for understanding a culture of health and resiliency in Marengo County are not aligned with how the community recognizes those same factors. Moreover, this study also revealed that there is not a clear direction between the community and its leaders on community priorities. In addition, the lack of congruence between the greater community and its community leaders has created fissures that were highlighted in the discussion during the listening sessions and reinforce the community's desire for more participatory leadership approaches. The findings also highlight the value of community-based participatory approaches to research and leadership.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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