

Four Guideposts for Doing Research in Black American Politics

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Broadly speaking, I continue to examine social policy and community development in terms of race, class, and politics. Much of my work takes place in the realm of public policy in Black and Latino urban communities. Recently, I have also started to consider the nature and impacts of *spatial* inequality in the areas of local economic development and education reform, and to a lesser extent, public health. This interest coincides with re-emerging attention and scholarship on place-based urban strategies and policies for neighborhood revitalization. Though my focus is typically on Boston, I have looked at other cities, especially Lawrence, Massachusetts, one of the most predominantly Latino and immigrant cities in New England. A few publications reflecting my current research include, "Measuring Neighborhood Distress: Tool for Neighborhood Revitalization"¹; "The Empowerment Zone in Boston, Massachusetts: Lessons for Neighborhood Revitalization"²; and "Community Health Centers: From Cultural Competency to Community Competency."³

In the near future I hope to publish two working papers. One, "Foreclosure Crisis, Community Building, and Latino Communities" is a case study of how a small Latinan-run grassroots organization in Lawrence, Massachusetts, became involved in fighting this city's foreclosure crisis in order to save its surrounding neighborhood. The other working paper, "Black Churches and Neighborhood Empowerment in Boston, Massachusetts 1960s and 1970s: Lessons for Today" is a synthesis of interviews with elder Black activists in Boston who were involved with local economic development through churches or religious spaces in the 1960s.

I would like to take this opportunity to share four ideas integral to the intellectual approach I use in conducting research. First, I believe that examination of conceptual and political connections between race and class, and social policy, requires understanding of the history of an issue or question; related to this, and as important, is not overlooking the history of struggles germane to a particular issue. In some of my earlier research work on poverty, for example, I insisted that understanding historical aspects of poverty is a key first step in analysis of this challenge. What did the face of poverty in US society look like at the turn of the century, or during the period of the Great Depression, or in other periods? How were race and poverty played out in these earlier periods? Insight

into the history of a problem, as well as how people sought to overcome problems or challenges at the local level, is important not only for my research, but also for teaching and community work.

A second guidepost for my research and professional work is incorporation of the voices of community activists and residents. I always try to tap community voices and include them into my research and teaching. This is important because there are various kinds of expertise among people affected by a problem being studied that can be easily overlooked in scholarship. Unfortunately, too many in academe have succumbed to the almost mystical proposition that expertise rests exclusively with those who hold advanced academic credentials. A related myth is that social realities—regardless of inherent multilayered and temporal complexities—can simply be put into boxes for purposes of measurement by people who are appropriately and extensively trained. Recalling Thomas Kuhn's classic work, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, this is to be expected in academe, of course.⁴

A third guidepost reflected in earlier and current research is the connection between theory and praxis for understanding how policy and politics are connected to race and class at the local level. In the vein of the much earlier work of sociologist Kenneth Clark, I describe praxis as involvement with daily issues facing neighborhoods, or engagement with civic and economic issues affecting the lives of people and communities, in order to understand the nature and styles of oppression.⁵ Linking theory and praxis can highlight information and findings that could easily be overlooked in traditional scholarship. An example, perhaps: when welfare reform to "end welfare as we know it" was passed with the avid support of both Democrats and Republicans, it gave immediate birth to an industry of "objective" research and investigations regarding the impact of this policy on impoverished families. In examining this new policy many researchers focused on individuals and families as the unit of analysis; to wit, are individuals and families better off as a result of welfare reform? Because many of these researchers had little direct involvement with daily struggles and politics in some urban neighborhoods they actually missed a crucial research question; and, that is, what was or has been the social and institutional impact of welfare reform on urban neighborhoods, as the unit of analysis?⁶ In other words, how did welfare reform impact the civic and social infrastructure of neighborhoods where high concentrations of families on public assistance happen to reside? Oversight in the initial waves of research about the impact of welfare reform on neighborhood infrastructure in Black and Latino communities motivated me to publish a book examining the effects of such on three neighborhoods in Massachusetts.⁷

Finally, I should emphasize that the sharing of my research and research-related work is not bounded by the ivory tower. It is aimed at the academic community but also professional and even activist audiences. This gives me license, in a sense, to utilize both qualitative and quantitative methodologies depending on the particular policy or issue being examined. It also facilitates interdisciplinary approaches for analysis of a range of issues. Writing to audiences beyond exclusive academic sectors, furthermore, encourages a writing style that can be supportive of democratic deliberation of the problems, challenges, or policies affecting the quality of life in some of the nation's neighborhoods.

Examples of such writings include a number of evaluation and research reports that I have published over the years. Two years ago I authored *The State of Black Boston: A Select*

Demographic and Community Profile, published collaboratively by the William Monroe Trotter Institute at the University of Massachusetts Boston, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP)—Boston Branch, and the Urban League of Massachusetts. This last research report has been utilized extensively by foundations, public agencies, and many community organizations in Boston to discuss not only the status of the Black community in this city, but responses and actions as well. Another recent research report is titled *The Impact of Immigrant Entrepreneurs and Workers in the Leisure and Hospitality Business: Massachusetts and New England*.⁸ This research report, based on analysis of census data, public use microdata samples, and interviews, is being followed by another one focusing on the role that immigrant entrepreneurs are playing in the emerging green economy in the states of Massachusetts, Pennsylvania, and New York. Many times, the publication of these kinds of research reports is linked to follow-up workshops and community forums as a venue for sharing data and policy and political recommendations about issues and challenges facing neighborhoods.

I end by stating that I always hope that the approach to research briefly described here helps towards breaking down or at least challenging racial, social, and economic hierarchies in our society, and concomitantly pushes us towards visions of social justice and economic democracy.

Notes

1. "Measuring Neighborhood Distress: A Tool for Place-based Urban Revitalization Strategies," *Community Development: Journal of the Community Development Society* (available online, January 2012).
2. James Jennings, "The Empowerment Zone in Boston, Massachusetts, 2000-2009: Lessons Learned for Neighborhood Revitalization," *Review of Black Political Economy* 38, no. 1 (2011).
3. James Jennings, "Community Health Centers in US Inner Cities: From Cultural Competency to Community Competency," *Race and Ethnicity in a Changing World* 1, no. 1 (2009).
4. Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1962).
5. Kenneth B. Clark, *Dark Ghetto: Dilemmas of Social Power* (New York: Harper and Row, 1965).
6. An exception to this critique involved some of the work of the late Ron Walters. He organized and implemented several academic and professional forums in Washington D.C., and panels at meetings of the National Conference of Black Political Scientists, to explore how welfare reform and devolution affected Black neighborhoods.
7. James Jennings, *Welfare Reform and the Revitalization of Inner City Neighborhoods* (East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press, 2003); also see James Jennings and Jorge Santiago, "Welfare Reform and 'Welfare to Work' as Non-Sequitur: A Case Study of the Experiences of Latina Women in Massachusetts," *Journal of Poverty* 8, no.1 (2004).
8. James Jennings et al., *The Impact of Immigrant Entrepreneurs and Workers in the Leisure and Hospitality Business: Massachusetts and New England* (Malden, MA: Immigrant Learning Center, May 2010).