

“A Lot of Moving Pieces and They’re All Moving Without Us” Building Community Trust in an Era of Soft Extraction

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ABSTRACT

The Department of Surgery developed a summer program for rising second year medical students from underrepresented backgrounds with the aim of giving them early access to the OR and involving them in research on obstacles to care in the majority-Black Fruit Belt neighborhood of Buffalo. As we began to undertake the research portion of the program, we quickly came to understand that our preconceived project outline didn’t adequately take into account the history and complex dynamics of the Fruit Belt and its residents. In our initial conception, we had not understood that community distrust was present not only at the level of healthcare services—but *at the level of research itself*. Globally, there exists a surprisingly resilient research model that we call ‘soft extraction’—shorn of the blatant outward markers of racism, but still beholden to fundamentally damaging power dynamics. In soft extraction, research goals are often articulated using the language of diversity and inclusion. This makes it all the more disorienting for communities when researchers seek to retain control over all aspects of the project, reap a disproportionate share of the benefits, and move on as soon as the initiative is concluded in their eyes. It became increasingly clear that we needed to rethink our entire approach, ground ourselves in the rich literature of participatory action research, and carefully reexamine what we had understood as our project’s first step. This presentation will detail how our process of slowing down and beginning to build trust with the community we had set out to ‘study’ led us to understand the importance of *non-extractive constancy* to our future research. We hope that our modified trajectory, our renewed sense of purpose, and the nourishment we are gaining by our extended community contact may offer encouragement to other institutions who have encountered similarly damaged community relationships and seek a new way forward.

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