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DISCUSSION



## Center for Culture-Centered Approach to Research and Evaluation (CARE): organizing to transform the social determinants of health

Mohan Dutta, Venessa Pokaia, Selina Metuamata, Indranil Mandal, Pankaj Baskey, Rabindranath Mandi, Phoebe Elers, Mahbubur Rahman, Pooja Jayan and Samiksha Pattanaik

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### ABSTRACT

This essay outlines the organizing work of the Center for Culture-Centred Approach to Research and Evaluation (CARE) in mobilizing for social justice. Conceptualizing health in relationship to justice, the academic-activist-community partnerships built by CARE explore the organizing processes through which communities at the margins own voice infrastructures in seeking structural transformation.

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The Center for Culture-Centered Approach to Research and Evaluation (CARE) was co-created in 2012 by a team of researchers, community organizers, activists, and storytellers, guided by the leadership of Mohan Dutta at the National University of Singapore (NUS) to critically interrogate, build, and examine the meta-theoretical framework of the culture-centered approach (CCA) (Dutta, 2024). The CCA offers a conceptual framework for mapping the interplays among communicative inequality, the inequality in the distribution of communication resources, material inequality, and health disparities, seeking then to build friendships with communities at the margins to organize struggles seeking structural transformation that are anchored in the voices of the margins (Dutta, 2008, 2011). Through the creation of voice infrastructures, resources and tools for voice, culture-centered interventions build registers for struggles laying claims to justice (Dutta, 2004; Dutta et al., 2024). The earliest scholarship of the CCA emerged from journeys alongside *Santalais* (an adivasi community) in Jangalmahal, a highly resource-deprived space in West Bengal, India, putting forth a Santali theory of health and communication, anchoring health in human relationships with forests and the broader ecosystem. The voice infrastructures emergent from the CCA mobilized around securing Indigenous rights to land, forests, and ecosystems, working in the backdrop of a broader political infrastructure of Left politics in West Bengal in the 1990s negotiating the broader

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climate of neoliberal transformation that swept India. Through ethnographic immersion and partnerships to build resources for storytelling, the conceptual registers of the CCA drew out the interplays of culture, structure, and agency in the everyday meanings of health held by adivasis at the global margins, foregrounding the role of forests, food systems, and ecologies in the lived understandings and struggles for health, shaping the land-based collective organizing against the extractive forces of neoliberalism and the organizing for community ownership over development decision-making (Dutta, 2004).

## Decentering health communication

Decentering what was then the hegemonic approach to health communication that reduced health to individualistic behaviors (Dutta, 2005), the CCA introduced a register for Indigenous and Global South voices in how health is communicated, turning to questions of justice and centering the concept of community sovereignty, the ownership of knowledge of health in the hands of highly disenfranchised communities across global spaces. Dialogues and collaborations with public health and health communication scholars such as Collins Airhihenbuwa, Heather Zoller, Kim Kline, Lynn Harter, Laura Ellingson, Barbara Sharf, and Gary Kreps shaped the theoretical anchors of the CCA. Beyond health and communication, the engagement of the CCA with the Marxist, postcolonial, and Subaltern Studies projects shaped its conceptual development around the question of erasure, exploring the deep inequalities between academics and communities at the margins we work with, and tracing a set of methodological principles organized around the concepts of critical reflexivity, humility, commitment to listening, and placing the body on the line (Dutta, 2018). The earliest experiments with the tenets of the CCA by Devalina Mookerjee, Rebecca DeSouza, Iccha Basnyat, Mahuya Pal, Ambar Basu, Induk Kim, Nadine Yehya, Lalatendu Acharya, Raihan Jamil, Rati Kumar, Shaunak Sastry, Zhuo Ban, Christina Jones, Raven Pfister, and Agaptus Anaele among others shaped the key questions of the CCA around the role of health meanings in shaping the processes of mobilizing for health. Two early large-scale projects of the CCA emerged at Purdue through collaborations among graduate students and Dutta, building the framework for creating advisory groups and coalitions at the margins, critically experimenting with what authentic participation at the margins looks like, and generating practical solutions to the challenges of health experienced at the margins. The emergent question the CCA grappled with centered on communicative processes for building practices of listening in hegemonic structures that have traditionally worked through practices of erasure (Dutta, 2014).

The 'Voices of Hunger' project that was developed in Tippecanoe County mirrored the ongoing 'Voices of Hunger' work in West Bengal, tracing the cultural contexts, structural convergences, and agentic possibilities for connection among diverse global struggles being experienced by communities negotiating poverty and hunger (Dutta et al., 2013). Hunger as an anchor to health meanings creates mobilizing registers for resisting neoliberal extremism that produces extreme marginalization across global spaces (Dutta, 2020). The experiments with culture-centered methods started organizing coalitions around the emergent meanings in the form of community advisory groups, drawn from the intersectional margins of communities. Diverse methods of storytelling,

including Photovoice, video-based storytelling and performances emerged as communicative forms of knowledge generation through which communities at the margins could draw attention to the micro and meso level structures that constrained their health, and organize to change these structures. Spaces for growing, owning and distributing food connect with land and the ecosystem, enact sovereignty, and challenge the whiteness of neoliberal organizing that works through the ongoing dispossession of communities (Dutta et al., 2013; Dutta & Thaker, 2019).

The ‘Voices of Hunger’ project paved the way for co-creating Communities and Universities Addressing Health Disparities (CUAHD), a partnership with the Indian Minority Health Coalition, Lake County Minority Health Coalition, and Marion County Minority Health Coalition (Dutta et al., 2018). Through multiple iterative dialogues, our academic- community team converged on addressing the heart health disparities experienced by African American community members, seeking to build a community-led culture-centered communication infrastructure for critically engaging the evidence base around heart health, building a community infrastructure for culture-centered pedagogy around heart health, and creating policy interventions for addressing the racist structures (security, policing, lack of decent food, lack of areas to play) that shaped the lived struggles with heart health in the community. The three-year campaign, ‘Heart Health Indiana,’ that emerged from the partnership demonstrated the power of culture-centered organizing in creating community-grounded health information infrastructures around comparative effectiveness research (the scientific evidence base), in building material solutions around healthy food, exercising etc., and in shaping community-led advocacy against racism (Facebook). Critical to the project was the communicative process of building friendships with African American and broader minority health coalitions in Indiana, organized around addressing health disparities. These relationships shaped the ways in which academics and communities came together, critically interrogating the organizing of power and seeking to redistribute power. The idea of CARE as a center for hosting the scholarship and community-grounded practices of the CCA emerged in 2012, when an opening was offered by NUS for growing the work of the CCA in Asia by anchoring it in Singapore (CARE 10th Anniversary Documentary; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XKQiccSAqJc&t=563s>).

## Health and social justice

The planting vision of CARE in Singapore was to co-create a health communication research infrastructure in Asia anchored in questions of health and social justice, building empirically grounded registers from across Asia for turning the conceptual threads of CCA into practical applications (Dutta et al., 2024). CARE started building community advisory groups, co-developing pedagogies for methods in partnership with the community advisory groups and exploring the ways in which the entrenched power of knowledge generation invested into academics can be decentered through partnerships (The Piyalgeria Community Center Construction; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qqfs4XZRJfU>). Community advisory group members across diverse contexts of the work of CARE started highlighting the critical role of community sovereignty over communication and storytelling, turning to the power of stories as the bases for health

advocacy and health activism (Dutta, 2024). The struggles for social justice anchored and connected the various culture-centered interventions conceptualized and carried out at CARE, including projects on the labour rights of hyper-precarious migrant construction workers in Singapore ('Respect The Food Rights of Workers' Documentary; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b-yVsYetptk>), the health rights of migrant domestic workers in Singapore (RESPECT OUR RIGHTS Documentary; [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c1z-okT1\\_GY](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c1z-okT1_GY)), the health rights of households experiencing poverty in Singapore (Facebook; <https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=100064591426408>), the right to voice of the survivors of the 1965 Indonesian genocide (Facebook; <https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=100064798536510>), the health rights of transgender sex workers in Singapore (Facebook; <https://www.facebook.com/thestilettoalliancesg>), the health rights of workers in China, the health rights of Malay communities experiencing heart health disparities, the communicative rights of Dalit women farmers in India, and the right to land and forest of Indigenous communities in India.

### Voice infrastructures

Voice infrastructures at the global margins take the form of community advisory groups and community-led coalitions, community-owned radio, community-owned storytelling in the form of photos and videos, community-led journalism from the margins, placards and posters, processions, protest marches, sit-ins, theatrical and street performances, songs, dances, and community-led knowledge generation as white papers, policy briefs, petitions and submissions (Dutta, 2018, 2024; Elers et al., 2024). Community advisory groups emerge as spaces for imagining, conceptualizing, creating, implementing and evaluating solutions such as community-owned food systems, seed banks, hospitals, educational infrastructures, cultural spaces, systems for clean drinking water, irrigation systems, prevention campaigns (diabetes, heart health, cancer, violence prevention) and community-owned advocacy and activist campaigns (Dutta, 2024). The concept of voice infrastructure in the CCA critically interrogates dominant ideas of community and participation in community-based participatory research (CBPR), continually asking, what does it take for communities, as heterogeneous and diverse spaces, rife with power inequalities, to own the spaces of participation, to own research processes, and to hold academics to account (Dillard et al., 2018) (Figure 1).

The voices of communities at the margins, hitherto erased from discursive registers, appearing on public spaces, disrupt the erasures, shape public opinion, and create transformative openings for public policies. Culture-centered communication campaigns such as the 'Respect our Rights' campaign co-created by migrant workers in Singapore offer empirical evidence around the role of voice infrastructures built through culture-centered processes in challenging settler colonial, racial capitalist, patriarchal, and imperial structures (see here the documentary that supported the campaign: RESPECT OUR RIGHTS Documentary; [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c1z-okT1\\_GY&t=169s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c1z-okT1_GY&t=169s)). Moreover, the power of community organizing at the margins of an authoritarian state that models neoliberal extremism as a framework for global smart governance reflects the transformative capacity of culture-centered organizing in disrupting silences (Bradford & Dutta, 2018; Dutta, 2024).



**Figure 1.** Culture-centered processes of community organizing for mutual aid.

### Building knowledge from actual struggles

The ongoing partnerships generated by CARE in Aotearoa New Zealand with Māori land struggles and struggles around constitutional transformation, struggles of Muslims against entrenched Islamophobia, communities experiencing poverty, migrant working-class communities, Rohingya and Afghan refugees, and platform workers further offer empirical registers for theorizing culture-centered communication for social change in organizing to transform structures (CARE Massey – YouTube; <https://www.youtube.com/%40caremassey>). Currently, the work of CARE spans 17 countries and 137 communities, held up by a global network of community researchers, community organizers, and activists (see here a conference that reflects the ten-year work of CARE across global spaces: CARE to celebrate 10 year anniversary with conference -Massey University; <https://www.massey.ac.nz/about/news/care-to-celebrate-10-year-anniversary-with-conference/>). The knowledge infrastructures in communities mobilize communities in the creation of material solutions addressing the social determinants of health (Figure 2).

The activist-in-residence program housed by CARE, housing key activists from across global spaces such as Sue Bradford, Tina Ngata, Teanau Tuiono, Braema Mathi, Tame Iti, Jolovan Wham, Vijay Prashad, Catherine Delahunty, and Marise Lant creates a transformative space for generating theory-based knowledge around communicative practices of social change (see here for an example of an activist-in-residence collaboration with the Indigenous activist Tame Iti; [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OV\\_63qhkiKE](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OV_63qhkiKE)). The activist-in-residence program has negotiated various forms of state repression and targeting from powerful structures and has sustained itself as a space for generating knowledge around critical questions of Indigenous rights, migrant rights, labour rights, socialist organizing, and antifascist organizing. CARE hosts scholars in residence, internship programs, training programs, and various lecture series to connect knowledge of communication theory to practices of social change, bringing the pedagogy of the CCA into public spaces of conversations with communities (see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XKQiccSAqJc&t=41s> for a documentary that showcases the work of CARE).



**Figure 2.** Culture-centered processes of Indigenous community organizing to grow food.

### Resisting repression and body on the line

The voice infrastructures co-created through community partnerships at CARE have disrupted and continue to disrupt hegemonic structures. The concept ‘body on the line’ places the body of the academic amidst the relationships and the struggles one is writing about, requiring a basic commitment to be amidst struggles when writing about struggles (Dutta et al., 2019). Moreover, the concept disrupts the casteist politics of academic writing built around postcolonial and Subaltern Studies scholarship, often dominated by upper caste academics writing about critical concepts while being far removed from the actual lived struggles of people and communities. It calls for an ethic of humility that is first and foremost accountable to the communities one writes about, turning to a politics of listening as the basis for organizing for social change and anchored in embodied participation in struggles at the margins (Bradford & Dutta, 2018; Dutta, 2014).

Campaigns such as the ‘No Singaporean left behind’ campaign (Facebook; <https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=100064591426408>) created by households experiencing poverty in Singapore disrupted the carefully crafted state narrative around the ‘Singapore model,’ communicated through the story of Singapore’s success in development (see here a campaign video: Facebook; <https://www.facebook.com/1703496076595132/videos/1712538755690864>). This resulted in strong backlash from the various intertwined structures of the authoritarian state, including in various forms of pressure exerted by the university management (Dutta et al., 2019).

Similarly, the ‘Respect our Rights’ (Facebook; <https://www.facebook.com/FDWRespectOurRights>) and the ‘Respect our Food Rights’ (Facebook; <https://www.facebook.com/1557463061204402/videos/534615540804578>) campaigns created by hyper-precarious migrant workers documented the hunger, workplace risks, poor housing, violence and racism experienced by low-wage migrant workers in Singapore, and led to ongoing forms of surveillance, tracking and threats, with the livelihoods of

our community partners and research team members being threatened. The activist-in-residence program started in Singapore had to be shut down and was re-initiated again in Aotearoa New Zealand (the first activist-in-residence of CARE, the human rights activist Braema Mathi has documented the various human rights abuses that form the authoritarian infrastructure of Singapore: *Activist-in-Residence at CARE: A collaboration with Braema Mathi – CARE*; <https://carecca.nz/2018/07/03/activist-in-residence-at-care-a-collaboration-with-braema-mathi/>). Various tactics of repression including audits, surveillance of research programs, surveillance of courses on social change, organized meetings with administrators with veiled threats, planting rumors, seeding doubt, targeting activist partners etc. were carried out as techniques of intimidation. The Zionist, white supremacist, and Hindutva far right deploy a wide array of tactics, from threats to incarcerate, rape threats and death threats to targeting of our jobs at the University. The knowledge that when communication infrastructures create spaces of structural transformation, the structures will seek to repress shapes the wide array of communicative strategies of building solidarities and connections that offer the layers of protection for the ongoing work of CARE in co-creating voice infrastructures.

## Looking forward

Culture-centered processes that build voice infrastructures in communities at the margins create spaces for radical democracy (Dutta & Elers, 2024; Elers et al., 2024). These spaces of radical democracy are critical resources in the ongoing struggles against settler colonialism, imperialism, patriarchy and racial capitalism. Future scholarship at CARE is geared toward exploring the ways in which voice infrastructures co-created in local contexts and amidst local struggles can connect with each other in building global registers of resistance (Bradford & Dutta, 2018).

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