

The Challenges, Implications, and Lessons Learned from Community-Based Research: Reflections from the Field

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Community-Based Research: An Overview

Community-based research is often defined as a participatory approach to the exploration, understanding, and application of knowledge. It values the active engagement of all participants in the various stages of the research process (Minkler and Wallerstein, 2003; Nyden et al, 1997; Israel et al, 1998). By design, this method has modified the traditional roles of the community and the researcher, reformed the dynamics of power in research relationships, expanded the types and applicability of knowledge, and redefined the objectives of research.

Community-based research uses a planned, systematic process to involve community participants as co-equals in defining, researching and addressing the existing problems facing the community (Israel et al, 1998; Nyden et al, 1997; Gaventa, 1993; Hall 1992). It recognizes community as a unit of individual, as well as collective, identity and builds upon the strengths and resources that are within community to foster its wellness and well being (Israel et al, 1998). This approach seeks lasting societal change by stressing co-learning (Wallerstein, 1999; Israel et al, 1998). Likewise, it places special emphasis on a diverse approach to the dissemination of findings (i.e., sharing of knowledge) to all partners or participants by including partners/participants in the dissemination process (De Koning and Martin, 1996; Israel et al, 1998). These efforts ultimately seek to promote enhanced capacity building by all segments of the research and action community and encourage the development and prolongation of collaborative relationships that last beyond the typical funding cycle (Israel et al, 2003).

Community-based research techniques share the same core principles. Often designated or described as community-based participatory research (CBPR), action research, mutual inquiry, or participatory action research (PAR), these approaches to research and action embraces a Hippocratic oath of sorts to “do no harm” in the pursuit and application of knowledge (Minkler and Wallerstein, 2003). But in order to abide by such a creed, community-based research goes beyond the confines and limitations of more hegemonic or orthodox approaches to research – approaches which erect and support power imbalances and limit participation, interpretations and the exploration of community issues.

The Philosophical and Theoretical Underpinnings of Community-Based Research

Community-based research enjoys an emancipatory orientation and philosophy, which has been influenced and informed by the writings of Habermas (1974), Freire (1970), and others. Thus, it connects well with the more enlightening, empowering, and liberating theoretical conception of critical social science (Fay, 1987) as well as the normative sponsorship thesis that advances the notion of the collective good will of communities (Sower, 1957). Likewise, it supports the customized application of Jones' (1987) liberation theology thesis regarding the ethical use of religion as "legitimator and liberator" of those who are oppressed as well as hooks' (1994) notion of "engaged pedagogy" to expand the role, rules, status, and results of research. Like Jones (1987) and Hooks (1994), critical analyses which offer practitioner implications, professional applications, and societal consequences, the community-based research approach to inquiry acknowledges its limitations, compensates for its deficiencies, and seeks to resurrect the good will and intentions of research through action. Consequently, advocates of this approach see the added value in advancing systematic inquiry to the point where it is informed by both the community and the university.

Community-Based Research as "Street-Level" Interactions

In many respects, community-based research reflects Lipsky's (1980) descriptions of the dynamic bureaucratic interactions that occur at the "street-level" and their resulting impact and effect on street-level bureaucrats. Lipsky's (1980) account provides a relevant perspective on the discretion street-level bureaucrats need to generate and apply knowledge to resolve community problems. Similarly, community-based research advances a streetwise version of informed scholarship; one that balances research and action, facilitates the transformation of passive research subjects to active research participants, and initiates a coactive research and problem-solving agenda. It does so by acknowledging that traditional research has been embedded in a single loop setting (Schön and Argyris, 1978) that generates "self-reinforcing systems of 'knowing-in-practice'" and inhibits individual, organizational, and community learning (Schön, 1983). Consequently, community-based research advances a "double-loop" learning approach to research and action (Argyris and Schön, 1978) thereby placing value on a co-active orientation to discovery by actively seeking to engage those who are not embedded in the same repertoire of professional skills and routines as co-equals, partners, and participants (Schön, 1983). This perspective advances a more grounded or bottom-up process in the co-production of research, action, education, and community well being (Wallerstein and Duran, 1997). Furthermore, it disputes the traditional assumption that the highest level of expertise that can be brought to bear on research is conferred by the ivy-covered, hegemonic institutions that train and credential researchers.

So where do we go from here?

Community-based research and its core principles have been offered as a more impacting and effective approach to explore and understand relevant community concerns and issues toward the facilitation of social change. This special issue contains analytical and descriptive papers which highlight the challenges (i.e., issues regarding bridging the class, race, language, culture, socio-economic, education and other divides), implications (for teaching, collective efficacy, tenure and promotion, community building, public trust, etc.), and lessons-learned (i.e., the practical, pedagogical, professional, institutional, etc.) from recent attempts to advance the community-based research approach against the hegemonic factors and forces that exist at the community and university levels. Questions ranging from “how to define community” to “what actions must community-based researchers take at the personal and institutional levels to be better prepared to listen and respond to the silent language of internalized oppression and privilege” are explored. Likewise, key findings and lessons from local, regional and national projects are offered as tried and tested beacons to guide individuals, organizations, and institutions as they sojourn down the path of community-based research efforts.

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