COMMUNITY BASED PARTICIPATORY RESEARCH

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Della Roberts worked as a nutritionist at the Harperville Hospital. As an African American, she was concerned about obesity among black children, and about the fact that many of Harperville's African American neighborhoods didn't have access to healthy food in stores or restaurants. She felt that the city ought to be doing something to change the situation, but officials didn't seem to see it as a problem. Della decided to conduct some research to use as a base for advocacy.

Della realized that in order to collect accurate data, she needed to find researchers who would be trusted by people in the neighborhoods she was concerned about. What if she recruited researchers from among the people in those neighborhoods? She contacted two ministers she knew, an African American doctor who practiced in a black neighborhood, and the director of a community center, as well as using her own family connections. Within two weeks, she had gathered a group of neighborhood residents who were willing to act as researchers. They ranged from high school students to grandparents, and from people who could barely read to others who had taken college courses.

The group met several times at the hospital to work out how they were going to collect information from the community. Della conducted workshops in research methods and in such basic skills as how to record interviews and observations. The group discussed the problem of recording for those who had difficulty writing, and came up with other ways of logging information. They decided they would each interview a given number of residents about their food shopping and eating habits, and that they would also observe people's buying patterns in neighborhood stores and fast food restaurants. They set a deadline for finishing their data gathering, and went off to learn as much as they could about the food shopping and eating behavior of people in their neighborhoods.

As the data came in, it became clear that people in the neighborhoods would be happy to buy more nutritious food, but it was simply too difficult to get it. They either had to travel long distances on the bus, since many didn't have cars, or find time after a long work day to drive to another, often unfamiliar, part of the city and spend an evening shopping. Many also had the perception that healthy food was much more expensive, and that they couldn't afford it.

Ultimately, the data that the group of neighborhood residents had gathered went into a report written by Della and other professionals on the hospital staff. The report helped to convince the

city to provide incentives to supermarket chains to locate in neighborhoods where healthy food was hard to find.

The group that Della had recruited had become a community-based participatory research team. Working with Della and others at the hospital, they helped to determine what kind of information would be useful, and then learned how to gather it. Because they were part of the community, they were trusted by residents; because they shared other residents' experience, they knew what questions to ask and fully understood the answers, as well as what they were seeing when they observed.

This section is about participatory action research: what it is, why it can be effective, who might use it, and how to set up and conduct it.

WHAT IS COMMUNITY-BASED PARTICIPATORY RESEARCH?

In simplest terms, *community-based participatory research* (for convenience, we'll primarily call it *CBPR* for the rest of this section) enlists those who are most affected by a community issue – typically in collaboration or partnership with others who have research skills – to conduct research on and analyze that issue, with the goal of devising strategies to resolve it. In other words, community-based participatory research adds to or replaces academic and other professional research with research done by community members, so that research results both come from and go directly back to the people who need them most and can make the best use of them.

There are several levels of participatory research. At one end of the spectrum is academic or government research that nonetheless gathers information directly from community members. The community members are those most directly affected by the issue at hand, and they may (or may not) be asked for their opinions about what they need and what they think will help, as well as for specific information. In that circumstance, the community members don't have any role in choosing what information is sought, in collecting data, or in analyzing the information once it's collected. (At the same time, this type of participatory research is still a long step from research that is done at second or third hand, where all the information about a group of people is gathered from statistics, census data, and the reports of observers or of human service or health professionals.)

At another level, academic or other researchers recruit or hire members of an affected group – often because they are familiar with and known by the community – to collect data. In this case, the collectors may or may not also help to analyze the information that they have gathered.

A third level of participatory research has academic, government, or other professional researchers recruiting members of an affected group as partners in a research project. The community members work with the researchers as colleagues, participating in the conception and design of the project, data collection, and data analysis. They may participate as well in reporting the results of the project or study. At this level, there is usually – though not always – an assumption that the research group is planning to use its research to take action on an issue that needs to be resolved

The opposite end of the participatory research continuum from the first level described involves community members creating their own research group – although they might seldom think of it as such – to find out about and take action on a community issue that affects them directly.

In this section, we'll concern ourselves with the latter two types of participatory research – those that involve community members directly in planning and carrying out research, and that lead to some action that can influence the issue studied. This is what is often defined as *community-based participatory research*. There are certainly scenarios where other types of participatory research are more appropriate, or easier to employ in particular situations, but it's CBPR that we'll discuss here.

Employing CBPR for purposes of either evaluation or long-term change can be a good idea for reasons of practicality, personal development, and politics.

ON THE PRACTICAL SIDE, COMMUNITY-BASED PARTICIPATORY RESEARCH CAN OFTEN GET YOU THE BEST INFORMATION POSSIBLE ABOUT THE ISSUE, FOR AT LEAST REASONS INCLUDING:

- People in an affected population are more liable to be willing to talk and give straight answers to researchers whom they know, or whom they know to be in circumstances similar to their own, than to outsiders with whom they have little in common
- People who have actually experienced the effects of an issue – or an intervention – may have ideas and information about aspects of it that wouldn't occur to anyone studying it from outside. Thus, action researchers from the community may focus on elements of the issue, or ask questions or follow-ups, that outside researchers wouldn't, and get crucial information that other researchers might find only by accident, or perhaps not at all
- People who are deeply affected by an issue, or participants in a program, may know intuitively, or more directly, what's important when they see or hear it. What seems an offhand comment to an outside researcher might reveal its real importance to someone who is part of the same population as person who made the comment.
- Action researchers from the community are on the scene all the time. Their contact both with the issue or intervention and with the population affected by it is constant, and, as a result, they may find information even when they're not officially engaged in research.
- Findings may receive more community support because community members know that the research was conducted by people in the same circumstances as their own

When you're conducting an evaluation, these advantages can provide you with a more accurate picture of the intervention or initiative and its effects. When you're studying a community issue, all these advantages can lead to a true understanding of its nature, its causes, and its effects in the community, and can provide a solid basis for a strategy to resolve it. And that, of course, is the true goal of community research – to identify and resolve an issue or problem, and to improve the quality of life for the community as a whole

In the personal development sphere, CBPR can have profound effects on the development and lives of the community researchers, particularly when those who benefit from an intervention, or who are affected by an issue, are poor or otherwise disadvantaged, lack education or basic skills, and/or feel that the issue is far beyond their influence. By engaging in research, they not only

learn new skills, but see themselves in a position of competence, obtain valuable knowledge and information about a subject important to them, and gain the power and the confidence to exercise control over this aspect of their lives.

TWO COMMON POLITICAL RESULTS OF THE CBPR PROCESS:

- **Through community**-based participatory research, citizens can take more control of the direction of their communities
- **Community researchers** – especially those who are poor or otherwise disadvantaged – come to be viewed differently by professionals and those in positions of power. They have vital information, and the ability to use it, and thus become accepted as contributing members of the community, rather than as voiceless observers or dependents. They have gained a voice, because they understand that they have something to say. Furthermore, the research and other skills and the self-confidence that people acquire in a community-based participatory research process can carry over into other parts of their lives, giving them the ability and the assurance to understand and work to control the forces that affect them. Research skills, discipline, and analytical thinking often translate into job skills, making participatory action researchers more employable. Most important, people who have always seen themselves as bystanders or victims gain the capacity to become activists who can transform their lives and communities.

Community-based participatory research has much in common with the work of the Brazilian political and educational theoretician and activist, Paulo Freire. In Freire's critical education process, oppressed people are encouraged to look closely at their circumstances, and to understand the nature and causes of their oppressors and oppression. Freire believes that with the right tools – knowledge and critical thinking ability, a concept of their own power, and the motivation to act – they can undo that oppression. Many people see this as the "true" and only reason for supporting action research, but we see many other reasons for doing so, and list some of them both above and below.

Action research is often used to consider social problems – welfare reform or homelessness, for example – but can be turned to any number of areas with positive results.

Some prime examples:

- **The environment**. It was a community member who first asked the questions and started the probe that uncovered the fact that the Love Canal neighborhood in Niagara Falls, NY, had been contaminated by the dumping of toxic waste.
- **Medical/health issues**. Action research can be helpful in both undeveloped and developed societies in collecting information about health practices, tracking an epidemic, or mapping the occurrence of a particular condition, to name three of numerous possibilities.
- **Political and economic issues**. Citizen activists often do their own research to catch corrupt politicians or corporations, trace campaign contributions, etc.

Just as it can be used for different purposes, CBPR can be structured in different ways. The differences have largely to do with who comes up with the idea in the first place, and with who controls, or makes the decisions about, the research. Any of these possibilities might involve a

collaboration or partnership, and a community group might well hire or recruit as a volunteer someone with research skills to help guide their work.

Some common scenarios:

- Academic or other researchers devise and construct a study, and employ community people as data collectors and/or analysts.
- A problem or issue is identified by a researcher or other entity (a human service organization, for instance), and community people are recruited to engage in research on it and develop a solution.
- A community based organization or other group gathers community people to define and work on a community issue of their choosing, or to evaluate a community intervention aimed at them or people similar to them.
- A problem is identified by a community member or group, others who are affected and concerned gather around to help, and the resulting group sets out to research and solve the problem on its own.

WHY WOULD YOU USE COMMUNITY-BASED PARTICIPATORY RESEARCH?

We've already alluded to a number of reasons why CBPR could be useful in evaluating a community intervention or initiative or addressing a community issue. We'll repeat them briefly here, and introduce others as well.

Action research yields better and more nearly complete and accurate information from the community.

- People will speak more freely to peers, especially those they know personally, than to strangers.
- Researchers who are members of the community know the history and relationships surrounding a program or an issue, and can therefore place it in context.
- People experiencing an issue or participating in an intervention know what's important to them about it – what it disrupts, what parts of their lives it touches, how they have changed as a result, etc. That knowledge helps them to formulate interview questions that get to the heart of what they – as researchers – are trying to learn.

Involving the community in research is more likely to meet community needs.

Action research makes a reasonable resolution or accurate evaluation more probable in two ways. First, by involving the people directly affected by the issue or intervention, it brings to bear the best information available about what's actually happening. Second, it encourages community buy-in and support for whatever plans or interventions are developed. If people are involved in the planning and implementation of solutions to community issues, they'll feel they own the process, and work to make it successful. It's equitable, philosophically consistent for most grassroots and community-based organizations, and practical in that it usually yields the best results

Action research, by involving community members, creates more visibility for the effort in the community.

Researchers are familiar to the community, will talk about what they're doing (as will their friends and relatives), and will thus spread the word about the effort.

Community members are more likely to accept the legitimacy of the research and buy into its findings if they know it was conducted by people like themselves, perhaps even people they know.

Citizens are more apt to trust both the truthfulness and the motives of their friends and neighbors than those of outsiders.

Action research trains citizen researchers who can turn their skills to other problems as well.

People who discover the power of research to explain conditions in their communities, and to uncover what's really going on, realize that they can conduct research in other areas than the one covered by their CBPR project. They often become community activists, who work to change the conditions that create difficulty for them and others. Thus, the action research process may benefit the community not only by addressing particular issues, but by – over the long term – creating a core of people dedicated to improving the overall quality of its citizens' lives.

Involvement in CBPR changes people's perceptions of themselves and of what they can do.

An action research project can have profound effects on community researchers who are disadvantaged economically, educationally, or in other ways. It can contribute to their personal development, help them develop a voice and a sense of their power to change things, and vastly expand their vision of what's possible for them and for the community. Such an expanded vision leads to an increased willingness to take action, and to an increase in their control over their lives.

Skills learned in the course of action research carry over into other areas of researchers' lives.

Both the skills and the confidence gained in a CBPR project can be transferred to employment, education, child-rearing, and other aspects of life, greatly improving people's prospects and well-being.

A participatory action research process can help to break down racial, ethnic, and class barriers.

CBPR can remove barriers in two ways. First, action research teams are often diverse, crossing racial, ethnic, and class lines. As people of different backgrounds work together, this encourages tolerance and friendships, and often removes the fear and distrust. In addition, as integral contributors to a research or evaluation effort, community researchers interact with professionals, academics, and community leaders on equal footing. Once again, familiarity breaks down barriers, and allows all groups to see how much the others have to offer. It also allows for people to understand how much they often misjudge others based on preconceptions, and to begin to consider everyone as an individual, rather than as "one of those."

A member of the Changes Project, a CBPR project that explored the impact of welfare reform on adult literacy and ESOL (English as a Second or Other Language), learners wrote in the final report: “What I learned from working in this project first off is, none of us are so great that change couldn’t help us be better people... I walked into the first meeting thinking I was the greatest thing to hit the pike and found that I, too, had some prejudices that I was not aware of. I thought that no one could ever tell me I wasn’t the perfect person to sit in judgment of others because I never had a negative thought or prejudiced bone in my body. Well, lo and behold, I did, and seeing it through other people’s eyes I found that I, too, had to make some changes in my opinions.

Action research helps people better understand the forces that influence their lives.

Just as Paulo Freire found in his work in Latin America, community researchers, sometimes as a direct result of their research, and sometimes as a side benefit, begin to analyze and understand how larger economic, political, and social forces affect their own lives. This understanding helps them to use and control the effects of those forces, and to gain more control over their own destinies.

Community based action research can move communities toward positive social change.

All of the above rationales described reasons for employing CBPR act to restructure the relationships and the lines of power in a community. They contribute to the mutual respect and understanding among community members and the deep understanding of issues that in turn lead to significant and positive social change.

WHO SHOULD BE INVOLVED IN COMMUNITY-BASED PARTICIPATORY RESEARCH?

THE SHORT ANSWER HERE IS PEOPLE FROM ALL SECTORS OF THE COMMUNITY, BUT THERE ARE SOME SPECIFIC GROUPS THAT, UNDER MOST CIRCUMSTANCES, ARE IMPORTANT TO INCLUDE.

- **People most affected by the issue or intervention under study**. These are the people whose inclusion is most important to a participatory effort – both because it’s their inclusion that makes it participatory, and because of what they bring to it. These folks, as we discussed earlier, are closest to the situation, have better access to the population most concerned, and may have insights others wouldn’t have. In addition, their support is crucial to the planning and implementation of an intervention or initiative. That support is much more likely to be forthcoming if they’ve been involved in research or evaluation.
- **Other members of the affected population**. People who may not themselves be directly affected by the issue or intervention, but who are trusted by the affected population, can be useful members of a CBPR team.

A businessman from the Portuguese community in a small city was an invaluable member of an action research team examining the need for services in that community. He was quite successful, had graduated from college in the US, and needed no services himself, but his fluency in Portuguese, his credentials as a trusted member of the community, and his

understanding of both the culture of the Portuguese residents and the culture of health and human service workers brought a crucial dimension to data gathering, analysis, and general information about the community.

- **Decision makers.** Involving local officials, legislators, and other decision makers from the very beginning can be crucial, both in securing their support, and in making sure that what they support is in fact what's needed. If they're part of the team, and have all the information that it gathers, they become advocates not just for addressing the issue, but for recognizing and implementing the solution or intervention that best meets the actual needs of the population affected.
- **Academics with an interest in the issue or intervention in question**. Academics who have studied the issue often have important information that can help a CBPR team better understand the data it collects. They usually have research skills as well, and can help to train other team members. At the same time, they can learn a great deal from community-based researchers – about the community and communities in general, about approaching people, about putting assumptions and preconceptions aside – and perhaps, as a result, increase the effectiveness of their own research

It's important that they be treated, and treat everyone else, as equals. Everyone on a team has to view other members as colleagues, not as superiors or inferiors, or as more or less competent or authoritative. This can be difficult on both sides – i.e. making sure that officials, academics, or other professionals don't look down on community members, and that community members don't automatically defer to (or distrust) them. It may take some work to create an environment in which everyone feels equally respected and valued, but it's worth the effort. Both the quality of the research and the long-term learning by team members will benefit greatly from the effort. (There are some circumstances where actual equality among all team members is not entirely possible. When community members are hired as researchers, for instance, the academic or other researcher who pays the bills has to exercise some control over the process. That doesn't change the necessity of all team members being viewed as colleagues and treated with respect.)

- **Health, human service, and public agency staff and volunteers**. Like the previous two groups, these people have both a lot to offer and – often – a lot to learn that will make them more sensitive and more effective at their jobs in the long run. They may have a perspective on issues in the community that residents lack because of their closeness to the situation. At the same time, they may learn more about the lives of those they work with, and better understand their circumstances and the pressures that shape their lives.
- **Community members at large.** This category brings us back to the statement at the beginning of this portion of the section that members of all sectors of the community should have the opportunity to be involved. That statement covers the knowledge, skills, and talent that different people bring to the endeavor; the importance of buy-in by all sectors of the community if any long-term change is to be accomplished; and what team members learn and bring back to their families, friends, and neighbors as a result of their involvement.

WHEN SHOULD YOU EMPLOY COMMUNITY-BASED PARTICIPATORY RESEARCH?

THERE ARE TIMES WHEN ACTION RESEARCH MAY NOT BE APPROPRIATE, AND THERE ARE TIMES WHEN IT'S THE BEST CHOICE. HOW DO YOU DECIDE?

One criterion is the amount of time you have to do the research on the issue or intervention. Action research may take longer than traditional methods, because of the need for training, and because of the time it often takes for community researchers to adjust to the situation (i.e. to realize that their opinions and intuitions are important, even if they may not always be right, and that their conclusions are legitimate). If your time is limited, CBPR may not be the right option

Another consideration is the type of research that's necessary. Action research lends itself particularly well to qualitative research. If you're obligated to deliver complicated, quantitative results to a funder, for instance, you may want to depend on professional researchers or evaluators. Most CBPR isn't oriented toward producing results couched in terms of statistical procedures. (This isn't to say that action research teams can't do quantitative research, but simply that it requires more training, and therefore time, and may require an outside source or an academic team member to crunch the numbers.)

QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

Relies on information that can't be expressed in mathematical terms – descriptions, opinions, anecdotes, the comments of those affected by the issue under study, etc. The results of qualitative research are usually expressed as a narrative or set of conclusions, with the analysis backed up by quotes, observation notes, and other non-numerical data.

(Almost anything can be expressed in terms of numbers in some way. Interviewers, for instance, can count the number of references to a particular issue, or even record the number of times that an interviewee squirmed in his chair. Qualitative research, however, relies on elements that can't be adequately – or, in many cases, at all – described numerically. The number of squirms may say something about how nervous an interviewee is, or it may indicate that he has to go to the bathroom. The interviewer will probably be able to tell the difference, but the numbers won't.)

QUANTITATIVE RESEARCH

Depends on numbers – the number of people served by an intervention, for instance, the number that completed the program, the number that achieved some predetermined outcome (lowered blood pressure, employment for a certain period, citizenship), scores on academic or psychological or physical tests, etc. These numbers are usually then processed through one or more statistical operations to tell researchers exactly what they mean. (Some statistics may, for instance, help researchers determine precisely what part of an intervention was responsible for a particular behavior change.)

It may seem that quantitative research is more accurate, but that's not always the case, especially when the research deals with human beings, who don't always do what you expect them to. It's often important to get other information in order to understand exactly what's going on

Furthermore, sometimes there aren't any numbers to work with. The Changes Project was looking at the possible effects of a change in the welfare system on adult learners. The project was conducted very early in the change process, in order to try to head off the worst consequences of the new system. There was very little quantitative information available at that point, and most of the project involved collecting information about the personal experiences of learners on welfare.

In other words, neither quantitative nor qualitative methods are necessarily "better," but sometimes one is better than the other for a specific purpose. Often, a mix of the two will yield the richest and most accurate information.

IT'S PROBABLY BEST AND MOST EFFECTIVE TO USE ACTION RESEARCH WHEN:

- There's time to properly train and acclimate community researchers
- The research and analysis necessary relies on interviews, experience, knowledge of the community, and an understanding of the issue or intervention from the inside, rather than on academic skills or an understanding of statistics (unless you have the time and resources to teach those skills or the team includes someone who has them)
- You need an entry to the community or group from whom the information is being gathered
- You're concerned with buy-in and support from the community
- Part of the purpose of using CBPR is to have an effect on and empower the community researchers
- Part of the purpose of using CBPR is to set the stage for long-term social change

HOW DO YOU INSTITUTE AND CARRY OUT COMMUNITY-BASED PARTICIPATORY RESEARCH?

Once you've decided to conduct an action research project, there are a number of steps to take to get it up and running. You have to find and train the participants; determine exactly what information you're looking for and how to go about finding it; plan and carry out your research; analyze and report on your findings; translate the findings into recommendations; take, or bring about, action based on those recommendations; evaluate the process; and follow up

What follows assumes an ideal action research project with a structure, perhaps one initiated by a health or human service organization. A community group that comes together out of common interest probably would recruit by people already involved pulling in their friends, and probably wouldn't do any formal training unless they invited a researcher to help them specifically in that way. The nature of your group will help you determine how – or whether – you follow each of the steps below.

RECRUIT A COMMUNITY RESEARCH TEAM

How you recruit a team will depend on the purpose of the project as well as on who might be most effective in gaining and analyzing information. A team may already exist, as in the example at the beginning of this section. Or a team may simply be a group that gets together out of common concerns. Many CBPR projects aim for a diverse team, with the idea that a mix of

people will both provide the broadest range of benefit and allow for the greatest amount of personal learning for team members. Other projects may specifically draw only from a particular population – a language minority, those served by a certain intervention, those experiencing a particular physical condition.

It often makes sense for at least half the team to be composed of people directly affected by the issue or intervention in question. Those numbers both assure good contact with the population from which information needs to be gathered, and makes it less likely that community researchers will be overwhelmed or intimidated by other (professional) team members or by the task

Recruiting from within an organization or program may be relatively simple, because the pool of potential researchers is somewhat of a captive audience: you know where to find them, and you already have a relationship with them. Recruiting from a more general population, on the other hand, requires attention to some basic rules of communication.

- *Use language that your audience can understand*, whether that means presenting your message in a language other than English, or presenting it in simple, clear English without any academic or other jargon.
- *Use the communication channels that your audience is most likely to pay attention to*. An announcement in the church that serves a large proportion of your population, a program newsletter, or word-of-mouth might all be good channels by which to reach a particular population.
- *Be culturally sensitive and appropriate*. Couch your message in a form that is not only respectful of your audience's culture, but that also speaks to what is important in that culture.
- *Go where your audience is*. Meet with groups of people from the population you want to work with, put out information in their neighborhoods or meeting places. Don't wait for them to come to you.

Given all this, the best recruitment method is still face-to-face contact by someone familiar to the person being recruited.

ORIENT AND TRAIN THE RESEARCH TEAM

Orientation and training may be part of the same process, or they might be separate. The two have different purposes. Orientation is meant to give people a chance to ask questions and an overall picture of what is expected.

Orientation might include:

- Introductions all around, and an introductory activity to help team members get to know one another
- Explanation of community-based participatory research, and basic information about this project or evaluation
- Participants' time commitment and the support available to them, if any. Are child care, transportation, or other support services provided or paid for?
- An opportunity to ask questions, or to discuss any part of the project or evaluation that team members don't understand or agree with

Especially if the team is diverse, and especially if that diversity is one of education and research experience, an important aspect of the orientation is to start building the team, and to ensure that everyone sees it as a team of colleagues, rather than as one group leading or dominating or – even worse – simply tolerating another. Each person brings different skills and experience to the effort and has something to teach everyone else. Emphasizing that from the beginning may be necessary, not only to keep more educated members from dominating, but also to encourage less educated members not to be afraid to ask questions and give their opinions.

Training is meant to pass on specific information and skills that people will need in order to carry out the work of the research. There are as many models for training as there are teams to be trained. As noted above, orientation might serve as all or part of an introductory training session. Training can take place all at once – in one or several multi-hour sessions on consecutive days – or over the whole period of the project, with each training piece leading to the activity that it concerns. It might be conducted by one person – who, in turn, could be someone from inside the organization or an outside facilitator – by a series of experts in different areas, or by the team members themselves. (In this last case, team members might, for instance, determine what they need to know, and then decide on and implement an appropriate way to learn it.)

Regardless of how it's done, here are some general guidelines for training that are usually worth following:

- *Find a comfortable space to hold the training*
- *Provide, or make sure that people bring, food and drink*
- *Take frequent, short breaks*. It's better for people's concentration to take a three-minute break every half hour than a 20-minute break every three hours
- *Structure the space for maximum participation and interaction* - chairs in a circle, room to move around, etc.
- *Vary the ways in which material is presented*. People learn in a variety of ways – by hearing, by seeing, by discussion, by example (watching others), and by doing. The more of these methods you can include, the more likely you are to hold people's attention and engage everyone on the team.
- *Use the training to build your team*. Training is a golden opportunity for people to get to know and trust one another, and to absorb the guiding principles for the work.

The actual content of the training will, of course, depend on the project you're undertaking, but general areas should probably include:

- *Necessary research skills*. These might include interview techniques, Internet searching, constructing a survey, and other basic research and information-gathering methods.
- *Important information about the community or the intervention* in question.
- *Meeting and negotiation skills*. Many of the people on your team may not have had the experience of participating in numerous meetings. They need time and support both to develop meeting skills – following discussion, knowing when it's okay to interrupt, feeling confident enough to express their opinions – and to become comfortable with the meeting process.
- *Preparing a report*. This doesn't necessarily mean drafting a formal document. Depending upon the team members, a flow chart, a slide show, a video, or a collage

might be informative and powerful ways to convey research results, as might oral testimony or a sound recording.
- *Making a presentation*. Knowing what to expect, and learning how to make a clear and cogent presentation can make the difference between having your findings and recommendations accepted or rejected.

DETERMINE THE QUESTIONS THE RESEARCH OR EVALUATION IS MEANT TO ANSWER

The questions you choose to answer will shape your research. There are many types of answers in either of these cases.

An evaluation can focus on process: What is actually being done, and how does that compare with what the intervention or initiative set out to do? It can focus on outcomes: Is the end result of the intervention what you intended it to be? Or it can try to look at both, and to decide whether the process in fact works to gain the desired outcome. An evaluation may also aim to identify specific elements of the process that have to be changed, or to identify a whole new process to replace one that doesn't seem to be working

Research on a community issue also may be approached in a number of ways. You may simply be trying to find out whether a certain condition exists in your community, or to what extent it exists. You may be concerned with how, or how much, it affects the community, or what parts of the community it affects. You may be seeking a particular outcome, and the research questions you ask may be designed to help you reach that outcome.

PLAN AND STRUCTURE YOUR RESEARCH ACTIVITY

Given your time constraints, the capacity of your team, and the questions you're considering, plan your research.

Your plan should include:

- The kind and amount of information-gathering that best suits your project (e.g., interviews, library research, surveys)
- Who will be responsible for what
- The timeline – i.e., deadlines for completing each phase of the plan
- How and by whom the information will be analyzed
- What the report of the research or evaluation will look like
- When, how, and to whom the report will be presented

ANTICIPATE AND PREPARE CONTINGENCY PLANS FOR PROBLEMS THAT MIGHT ARISE

An action research group, like any other, can have internal conflicts, as well as conflicts with external forces. People may disagree, or worse; some people may drop out, or may not do what they promised; people may not understand, or may choose not to follow the procedures you've agreed on. There will need to be guidelines to deal with each of these and other potential pitfalls.

IMPLEMENT YOUR RESEARCH PLAN

Now that you've completed your planning, it's time to carry it out.

PREPARE AND PRESENT YOUR REPORT AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The report, as explained previously, may be a written document, or may be in some alternative form. If it's an evaluation, it might be presented in one way to the staff of the intervention being evaluated, and in another to funders or the community, depending upon your purposes.

Some possibilities for presentation include:

- A press conference
- A community presentation
- A newspaper or newsletter article
- A written report to funders and/or other interested parties

TAKE, OR TRY TO BRING ABOUT, APPROPRIATE ACTION ON THE ISSUE OR INTERVENTION

Action can range from adjusting a single element of an intervention as a result of an evaluation, to writing letters to the editor, advocating with legislators, taking direct action (a demonstration, a lawsuit), and starting a community initiative that grows into a national movement. In most cases, a CBPR effort is meant to lead to some kind of action, even if that action is simply further research.

FOLLOW UP

An action research project doesn't end with the presentation, or even with action. The purpose of the research often has as much to do with the learning of the team members as it does with research results. Even where that's not the case, the skills and methods that action researchers learn need to be cemented, so they can carry over to other projects.

- *Evaluate the research process*. This should be a collaborative effort by all team members, and might also include others (those who actually implement an evaluated intervention, for instance). Did things go according to plan? What were the strengths of the process? What were its weaknesses? Was the training understandable and adequate? What other support would have been helpful? What parts of the process should be changed?
- *Identify benefits to the community or group that came about (or may come about) as a result of the research process*. These may have to do with action, with making the community more aware of particular issues, or with creating more community activists.
- *Identify team members' learning and perceptions of changes in themselves*. Some areas to consider are basic and other academic skills; public speaking; meeting skills; self-confidence and self-esteem; ability to influence the world and their own lives; and self-image (seeing themselves as proactive, rather than acted upon, for example).
- *Maintain gains by keeping researchers involved*. There are a number of ways to keep the momentum of a CBPR team going, including starting another project, if there's a reason to do so; encouraging team members to be active on other issues they care about (and to suggest some potential areas, and perhaps make introductions that make it easier for them

to do so); keeping the group together as a (paid) research consortium; or consulting, as a group, with other organizations interested in conducting action research.

CBPR is not always the right choice for an initiative or evaluation, but it's always worthy of consideration. If you can employ it in a given situation, the rewards can be great.

Community-based participatory research can serve many purposes. It can supply accurate and appropriate information to guide a community initiative or to evaluate a community intervention. It can secure community buy-in and support for that initiative or intervention. It can enhance participants' personal development and opportunities. It can empower those who are most affected by conditions or issues in the community to analyze and change them. And, perhaps most important, it can lead to long-term social change that improves the quality of life for everyone.

IN SUMMARY

Community-based participatory research is a process conducted by and for the people most affected by the issue or intervention being studied or evaluated. It has multiple purposes, including the empowerment of the participants, the gathering of the best and most accurate information possible, garnering community support for the effort, and social change that leads to the betterment of the community for everyone

As with any participatory process, CBPR can take a great deal of time and effort. The participants are often economically and educationally disadvantaged, lacking basic skills and other resources. Thus, training and support – both technical and personal – are crucial elements in any action research process. With proper preparation, however, participatory action research can yield not only excellent research results, but huge benefits for the community over the long run.

Contributor
Phil Rabinowitz
Online Resources

The **Action Catalogue** is an online decision support tool that is intended to enable researchers, policy-makers and others wanting to conduct inclusive research, to find the method best suited for their specific project needs.

Action Research Electronic Reader offers articles and links from the Graduate College of Management, Southern Cross University, New South Wales, Australia.

Appreciative Inquiry as a Mode of Action Research for Community Psychology by Neil M. Boyd and David S. Bright. In this article, the authors highlight the potential for rethinking approaches to community and social change interventions that draw on participatory action research at the organizational and community level.

Basic Guide to Evaluation is a website that provides links to information about specific aspects of evaluation including methods, logic models, and overcoming major evaluation challenges.

Brown University Training Materials include the **Community-Based Research and Environmental Justice Interventions: CBPR Best Practices and Intercultural Designs**. The

Northeast Education Partnership provides online access to PowerPoint training slides on topics in research ethics and cultural competence in environmental research. These have been created for professionals/students in environmental sciences, health, and policy; and community-based research. If you are interested in receiving an electronic copy of one the presentations, just download their Materials Request Form (found on the main Training Presentations page under "related files"), complete the form, and email it to NEEPethics@yahoo.com.

CBPR Toolkit is a detailed resource provided by the AAPCHO. It is intended to be a handbook for community health centers and researchers interested in collaborative research activities.

CDC Evaluation Resources provides an extensive list of resources for evaluation, as well as links to professional associations and key journals.

Community-Based Participatory Research is a website designed by the National Institutes of Health to assist in integrating community-based participatory research into evaluation.

Developing and Sustaining Community-Based Participatory Research Partnerships: A Skill Building Curriculum provides guidance for developing and sustaining community-based participatory research partnerships.

Highlander Research and Education Center is the grandfather of popular education and participatory action research organizations (founded in 1932). Highlander was a mainstay of the Civil Rights Movement in the US, and continues to provide training and support for participatory action research and social change.

The Society for Community Research and Action (SCRA), Division 27 of the American Psychological Association, is an international organization devoted to advancing theory, research, and social action.

The **Interactive CBPR Conceptual Model** is a product of "**Research for Improved Health: A National Study of Community-University Partnerships**", an in-depth investigation of promoters and barriers to successful Community Based Participatory Research. There are two ways to navigate the CBPR model. 1) an Instrument Matrix consisting of measurement tools that have been used, adapted or sampled by CBPR practitioners, and 2) a Variable Matrix consisting of specific individual items that have been used, adapted or sampled by CBPR practitioners based on literature.

International Center for Tropical Agriculture provides information on the use of local action research groups to improve the lives of farmers and others in Latin America.

ISSE: Community Partnership Center from the University of Tennessee, Knoxville links university resources with urban and rural grassroots community groups to understand and address the core problems facing low- and moderate-income communities.

Participatory Methods is a website that provides resources to generate ideas and action for inclusive development and social change.

Reflections on a Participatory Research Project: Young People of Refugee Background in an Arts-Based Program from Melbourne, Australia.

A Short Note on Participatory Research provides a good synopsis of the principles of participatory research.

Skill-Building Curriculum is an extensive online resource to community-based participatory research developed by the University of Washington.

Participatory Action Research by Caitlin Cahill.

Participatory Approach to Research provides good information on levels of participatory involvement from the Community Adaptation and Sustainable Livelihoods program of the International Institute for Sustainable Development.

Participatory Research provides participatory research links from Dr. Bunyan Bryant, U. of Michigan.

Principles of Community Change, Second Edition, a CDC resource, is an online book that provides the principles for community engagement.

The **Research for Organizing** toolkit is designed for organizations and individuals that want to use participatory action research (PAR) to support their work towards social justice. PAR helps us to analyze and document the problems that we see in our communities; allows us to generate data and evidence that strengthens our social justice work and ensures that we are the experts about the issues that face our communities. In this toolkit you will find case studies, workshops, worksheets and templates that you can download and tailor to meet your needs.

The Role of Community-Based Participatory Research is a comprehensive website developed by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services that is dedicated to providing information on CBPR.

Youth Participation in Evaluation Research - Urban Youth Building Community: Social Change and Participatory Research in Schools, Homes, and Community-Based Organizations.

Youth-led Participatory Action Research is an innovative approach to positive youth and community development based in social justice principles in which young people are trained to conduct systematic research to improve their lives, their communities, and the institutions intended to serve them.

Print Resources

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