

Functional Analysis of Community Concerns in Participatory Action Research

YOLANDA SUAREZ-BALCAZAR AND FABRICIO BALCAZAR

More than a half-century ago, Lewin (1946) coined the term *action research* based on the belief that research is relevant only if it is grounded in the realities of the poor and leads to action. This emphasis on action and its focus on the relevance of research to promote social change has led to the development of new approaches to working with community members. Following this line of inquiry, the Colombian sociologist Orlando Fals Borda (1959, 1968) proposed the term participatory research, which, in turn, influenced the work of Freire (1970) on promoting critical awareness among the poor in Brazil and Hall (1975) on working with indigenous communities in Tanzania. Later on, the term *community-based participatory research* (CBPR) took front stage, with large bodies of literature emerging (Israel, Eng, Schulz, & Parker, 2005; Jason et al., 2005; Minkler & Wallerstein, 2008).

CBPR has gained recognition in the health and behavioral social sciences fields as an effective research approach to promoting the active participation of community residents in the research process (Israel et al., 2005). CBPR in itself is not a methodology but rather an approach to research. It emphasizes the inclusion of and engagement with community residents and community stakeholders in the earliest stages of defining the research questions, setting research priorities, and designing intervention strategies (Israel et al., 2005). CBPR researchers posit that social issues are best understood, analyzed, and solved when the identification of issues and solutions comes from the participants themselves. In contrast to more traditional investigator-driven research methodologies, CBPR begins with the issues of greatest concern to individuals, communities, and relevant stakeholders (Minkler & Wallerstein, 2008). The present

chapter provides an overview of a participatory action research community needs assessment methodology designed to facilitate a functional analysis of community concerns according to the views of the target population. We illustrate the methodology with an international case study.

INTRODUCTION TO FUNCTIONAL ANALYSIS OF COMMUNITY CONCERN

Many CBPR approaches to community-needs assessment research have included a functional analysis of policy efforts to promote environmental health in partnership with communities and institutions of higher education (Minkler, Vasquez, & Shepard, 2006) and the use of community surveys to identify community assets and concerns (Hennessey-Lavery et al., 2005), among other approaches. The term *functional analysis* was used by Skinner (1953) to denote empirical demonstrations of “cause-and-effect relations” between environment and behavior. In the behavior analysis literature, Hanley, Iwata, and McCord (2003) explained that the term *function* has been used in two main ways. One use conveys the effect that a behavior has on the environment, or, as Hanley et al. (2003) put it, the purpose the behavior serves for an individual (e.g., the function of behavior is to terminate an ongoing event). The second use describes a relation between two variables (typically between some environmental event and a class of behavior) in which one varies given the presence or absence of the other (e.g., responding as a function of an event). Both uses of the term are relevant to a functional analysis of existing behavior, in that relations between behavior and environmental events are demonstrated in the context

of learning about how the behavior operates in the environment (Hanley et al., 2003).

Based on their systematic review of 277 empirical studies that utilized functional analysis as an assessment tool, Hanley et al. (2003) found that most functional analysis studies had been conducted in hospital (inpatient) facilities (32.5%), schools (31.4%), or institutions (25.3%), with much less research (17.4%) having been conducted in other settings (e.g., homes and vocational programs). Although a substantial proportion of functional analysis studies (37.2%) included adults, the majority of studies included children, particularly those with some form of developmental disability, which reflects the current state of behavior analysis practice. Very few studies using a functional analysis behavioral approach have been conducted in community settings or with groups of community members. Such studies are described in Chapter 18 in this volume.

In this chapter, we posit that a functional analysis provides a general framework for understanding and analyzing relationships between community contexts, the behaviors of community members, and the general consequences of such behaviors in modifying—or not—relevant contextual features in the target community. Research methodologies that focus on a functional and contextual analysis of the community have included asset-based community development strategies (McKnight & Born, 2010), community mapping (Botello et al., 2013; Gelles & Ludeman, 2009), and mapping residents' perceptions of neighborhood boundaries (Coulton, Korbin, Chan, & Su, 2001).

Methodologies to conduct functional analysis of community needs are mostly framed under community needs assessments. One methodology developed by a team of researchers from the University of Kansas, including the first author of this chapter, and grounded in CBPR is called the Concerns Report Method (CRM). The CRM is a systematic CBPR approach for engaging participants in the research process, particularly for identifying concerns, conducting a functional analysis of community issues, and engaging in problem solving and actions to address identified concerns (Nary, White, Budde, & Vo, 2004; Suarez-Balcazar, Balcazar, Quiros, Chavez, & Quiros, 1995).

The Concerns Report Method

The CRM draws on a mixed methods approach to research, including focus groups, survey research,

and analytic strategies that originate in discrepancy modeling (Ludwig-Beymer, Blankemeir, Casas-Byots, & Suarez-Balcazar, 1996). Furthermore, the CRM is grounded in theories of empowerment, self-help, and community development (Fawcett, Francisco, & Schultz, 2004; Suarez-Balcazar & Balcazar, 2007). The CRM has been used to identify and take action with diverse populations, including low-income families in Costa Rica (Suarez-Balcazar et al., 1995), people with physical disabilities (Suarez-Balcazar, Bradford, & Fawcett, 1988), Colombian immigrants (Balcazar, Garcia-Iriarte, & Suarez-Balcazar, 2009), residents of a rural Mexican community (Arellano, Balcazar, Alvarado, & Suarez, ,in press)), Hispanic immigrant families (Suarez-Balcazar, Martinez, & Casas-Byots, 2005), rural communities in the United States (Mayer & Seekins, 2013), and people with emerging disabilities (Nary et al., 2004), among other populations.

The CRM's social validity and reliability were established by Schriner and Fawcett (1988), who reported high ratings of the helpfulness, completeness, and representativeness for a concerns survey developed by low-income families. Mathews, Petty, and Fawcett (1990), calculating a Spearman rank correlation between the responses of 405 participants with disabilities to the same survey items on a survey developed by people with disabilities at 18-month intervals, found highly consistent scores ($rs = .94$).

The CRM goes beyond being a needs assessment CBPR methodology. It has been conceptualized as an agenda-setting, capacity-building, and empowering approach, as participants take control of decisions and actions that affect their lives. In this process, members of the target group take an active role in conducting a functional and contextual analysis of community issues that they care about. In that it involves the target group's active participation, this method calls for the utilization of focus groups and interviews with diverse stakeholders to develop a concerns survey and a town hall meeting to provide the target group with an opportunity to analyze the issues identified as concerns and community strengths through the survey. Focus groups and town hall meetings, essential components of the CRM, have been found to be effective and culturally appropriate with minority communities (Balcazar et al., 2009). Thus, the CRM can generate a set of priorities, including

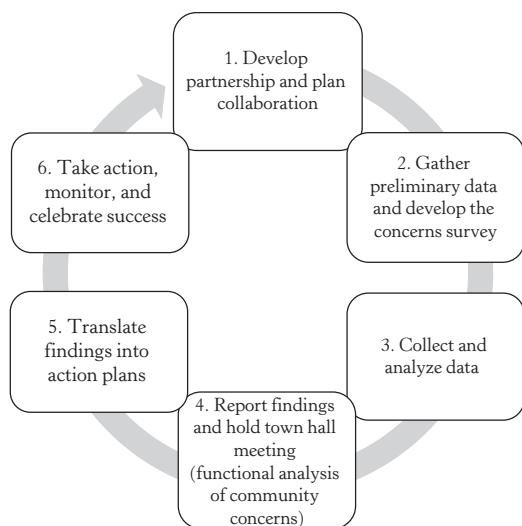


FIGURE 31.1: Concerns Report Method phases.

identifying community strengths and concerns from the perspective of participants that can be used in setting an agenda, conducting a functional and contextual analysis of community concerns, and informing services and policies regarding community issues. The survey results are analyzed, shared, and discussed with various stakeholders in town hall meetings and brainstorming sessions. During these meetings, participants discuss the dimensions of the issues identified and alternative solutions to address concerns.

The CRM includes the following six systematic phases (see Fig. 31.1): (a) developing partnership and planning collaboration; (b) gathering preliminary data and developing a concerns survey; (c) collecting and analyzing data; (d) reporting findings and holding town hall meetings to discuss data with community members and other stakeholders; (e) translating findings into recommendations and action plans through systematic stakeholder participation; and (f) taking action, monitoring, and celebrating success (see the Community Tool Box, 2014, for more details on the CRM). The following section discusses the six CRM phases within the context of a description of its application in a small rural community in Mexico.

CASE STUDY

Project Background

The focus of this case study was a small rural community in Mexico. The community has a

population of 13,000 people, with approximately 57% of the residents younger than 29 years old (Consejo Estatal de Población de Jalisco, 2010). The rebirth of this community was an initiative that involved collaboration from multiple agencies seeking to work with community members to address the community's needs. Partner organizations included FEDEJAL, a federation of small business owners and regional clubs from the Mexican State of Jalisco in the United States; the Club Pro-Obras, a Chicago-based club of immigrants from the community in Mexico; the government of the State of Jalisco; the Necahual Foundation, a Chicago-based charity created to promote youth development activities in the Mexican community; and the municipality of the community itself, all of whom teamed up to create a transnational program focused on identifying community strengths and concerns and addressing the needs identified by community members. The second author introduced the CRM into the project as an action-oriented, participatory methodology to identify the community's needs and use the findings to promote social change. The following is a description of the various phases of the CRM as they were implemented in this community.

Stage 1: Develop Partnership and Plan Collaboration

During this initial stage, the partners should define the purpose of the CRM, identify relevant stakeholders and target community, and discuss plans for utilizing the data that might emerge. In the present project, leaders from FEDEJAL contacted the second author to ask for advice about how to proceed in helping the community in a meaningful way. The researcher proposed the use of the CRM in order to identify needs, determine priorities, and set an agenda for action. The proposal was well received, and a meeting was arranged with FEDEJAL's executive committee in order to make a formal presentation of the proposal. A month later, the researcher was invited to visit the town to meet with key community leaders to discuss the idea. Two town residents volunteered to coordinate the process and implement the methodology under the close supervision of, and training from, the researcher.

Several meetings were held during this early planning phase. During the first initial meeting

with key stakeholders from the town—a political candidate, the parish priest, a long-time farmer from the township, the mayor at that time, and two community leaders—the researcher explained the process and method so that the group could identify potential participants, recruitment strategies, and the best strategy for administering the concerns survey once it was developed.

Stage 2: Gather Preliminary Data and Develop the Concerns Survey

For the gathering of foundational data, the CRM calls for using focus groups to identify the main values and issues that the target community cares about in order to narrow the focus. During this phase of the project, the researcher met with a group of stakeholders representing different community sectors (the town mayor, community business owners, farmer, leaders, and a local teacher) to reflect on values and gather preliminary data. A second meeting was conducted in the form of a focus group with a representative group of community leaders and members from the town to identify relevant community issues. This group of stakeholders, which reflected different interests, ages, and experiences, helped to generate the guiding framework for the development of the concerns survey and a preliminary list of survey items.

This qualitative-data collection phase was augmented with interviews and one-on-one meetings with key community stakeholders, including the former mayor of the town, a successful business owner, and two community leaders. Those who participated in the focus group or who were interviewed were asked to reflect on three general questions: What are the community issues that you value and that are important to you? What are the community issues that you worry about? What are the community strengths that you want to preserve?

Based on the preliminary data collected, the group developed a 53-item concerns survey. The survey's final draft was pilot tested with the help of five community volunteers. A 15-question demographic section at the beginning of the survey inquired about age, gender, marital status, education level, and types of disabilities in the household. The survey, created directly in Spanish, included two types of questions for

each issue. The first question asked about the importance of a particular issue, such as affordable and decent housing ("How important is it for you that ...?"). The second question asked about the respondent's satisfaction with the issue ("How satisfied are you with ...?"). Both questions were rated on a 5-point scale, with 1 indicating *not important* or *not satisfied* and 5 indicating *very important* or *very satisfied*. Items that participants rate high in importance and high in satisfaction are considered *strengths*, while items that are rated high in importance and low in satisfaction are considered *needs/concerns* (see Nary et al., 2004).

Stage 3: Collect and Analyze Data

Concerns surveys can be administered in different ways, including door-to-door canvassing, community gatherings, small groups, and/or made available at different community public settings, including public libraries. Given the cultural and geographical characteristics of the community in the present project, the team decided that door-to-door canvassing was the most appropriate method. Once the survey was finalized, the state government printed the survey. The town's former mayor asked for support from a local high school and a local college to collect the data. Two local project coordinators who had been trained by the researcher trained a group of 30 volunteer students in conducting door-to-door canvasses and administering the survey. The students collected the data as part of their community service requirement for high school graduation. The mayor supported the initiative and facilitated the transportation of interviewers during the data collection phase, which was held on weekends for a month and a half. A total of 1,228 residents completed the survey; the average age of the respondents was 44 years. Participants were 60% female and 40% male. A total of 53% of the participants had family members living in the United States, residing mainly in California (64%) and Chicago (18%).

Table 31.1 summarizes the list of the top community strengths and concerns identified by residents. As is typical for such surveys, the main data reported were the mean percentage of importance and the mean percentage of satisfaction for each item (see the Community Tool Box, 2014, for specific examples of how to analyze concerns report data). These results were the topic of discussion

TABLE 31.1: MAIN STRENGTHS AND CONCERNS OF THE COMMUNITY

Issues	Percentage Level of Importance	Percentage Level of Satisfaction
<i>Community Strengths</i>		
Having pride in being a citizen of this community	82.7%	85.6%
Preservation of the traditions and culture of the community	85.9%	80.9%
Conservation and protection of grassland areas	84.0%	80.8%
Being an active member of the community	89.9%	76.3%
Crime detection and prevention	89.4%	75.6%
<i>Community Concerns</i>		
Demand that the government penalize companies and individuals that pollute the river	89.8%	66%
Develop ideas for production and manufacture	88.2%	66.6%
Develop a project to produce local crafts	87.8%	64.6%
Create employment opportunities in the community	84.2%	56.3%
Provide opportunities for affordable and decent housing	83.3%	60.5%
Create opportunities to attend the university	83%	58.6%
Improve access to public transportation in the community	83%	61%

Note: Percentages indicate the level of importance and satisfaction on a scale from 1 to 100.

during a subsequent town hall meeting and were targeted for action by community members.

Stage 4: Report Findings and Hold Town Hall Meetings

In reporting the data obtained from concerns surveys, the top strengths and problems are listed in a one-page brief report that serves as a concise statement of the issues identified by the individuals surveyed. Preparation of this report is then followed by town hall meetings to discuss the results. Town hall meetings, also referred to as public forums or community forums, are large open gatherings of individuals who share a common predicament or condition and who are interested in expressing their ideas and suggestions for improving their conditions. These forms of public participation have been cited as ways of exercising democracy and empowering individuals (Lukensmeyer & Brigham, 2003).

The town hall meeting also provides an opportunity for participants to conduct a functional analysis—an in-depth analysis of the contextual factors associated with the issue—of the community concerns and strengths. Stakeholders who attend the meeting brainstorm answers to the following questions to facilitate a functional analysis of each concern identified:

Functional and Contextual Analysis of Community Concerns

Discussion of Antecedents

1. Why is this a community concern?
2. What issues are contributing to this being a community concern?

Discussion of Behaviors

3. How are you and your family affected by the concern?
4. In what situations does this concern affect you the most?
5. What impact does the issue have on your family and significant others?

Discussion of Consequences

6. What are the consequences of keeping the community concern as it is?
7. What are the consequences of addressing the community concern?
8. What can you and your community do to address the community concern?
9. What are the priorities (ask if several ideas are discussed)?
10. For each priority discussed: (a) What actions are needed? (b) Who is responsible for taking actions? (c) By when should action be taken?

Functional and Contextual Analysis of Community Strengths

Discussion of Antecedents

1. What specific situations and conditions facilitate the promotion of this community strength?
2. Is there any current threat to the strengths that you worry about?

Discussion of Behaviors

3. How are you benefiting from the strength?
4. What do you need to do to sustain/maintain the strength?

Discussion of Consequences

5. What are the consequences that maintaining the strength has on you and your family?
6. What would happen if you and your community do not preserve the strength?

The report of the survey's results was shared during Sunday masses and at a community town hall meeting held in the downtown plaza on a Sunday after mass. The report was also posted in the mayoral office. During the town hall meeting, the mayor directed the discussion of the strengths and concerns identified by the community. A total of 100 attendees were asked to conduct a functional analysis of community issues using the questions provided earlier. The majority of community members had very strong feelings about the pollution of the river, and that became a priority concern. Promoting the culture of Jalisco through dance and music was of interest to many teachers and parents of children and youth.

Stage 5: Translate Findings Into Action Plans

During town hall meetings participants are invited to sign up to work on different issues identified as community concerns and/or strengths. This work can be done in small teams who meet to plan the actions needed to address top issues. Teams working on different concerns will need to identify what actions and resources are needed to address the concern, who is responsible for taking action, by when actions should be taken, and how the actions would be evaluated.

In the present project, community members were asked to join various committees that fit their personal interests (e.g., environmentalists joined the river pollution committee, while teachers and

parents of school children joined a cultural committee). Community leaders used the survey results for planning and taking action. Some of the proposals involved increasing the promotion of social and cultural activities to enhance community traditions, such as celebrating Family Day to strengthen the town's families, providing field trips for children to visit museums in the nearby city, organizing soccer tournaments for children and youth, and conducting a traditional religious play on Christmas. The community leaders also proposed increasing community services and working with elementary school teachers to identify vulnerable children. Some of the ideas for new services included preventing violence against children, offering early-intervention workshops to improve early child development among low-income families, and instituting handicraft classes for youth. With respect to activities aimed at building community capacity, participants proposed to distribute environmental information on the status of the river in order to increase community awareness about the river's pollution and the health risks that it posed, and the group nominated a leader who would focus on improving the economic conditions in the agricultural fields near the town.

Stage 6: Take Action, Monitor, and Celebrate Success

Taking action to address issues is one of the joys of this methodology. It calls for the community researchers and local community partners to address the issues identified during the CRM process. During this phase a final report and a list of actions based on the recommendations from the results are developed and distributed widely in the community of interest. Copies of the report are sent to important decision makers who have a say in the concerns identified.

In the case of this community, one of the key project coordinators—a strong supporter of the project who was originally from that community and lived in Chicago—facilitated the community's addressing of its concerns by gathering funding from immigrants living in the Chicago area and the Mexican government and bringing together human resources to start the initiative. After the CRM results were analyzed and disseminated, community members came together to continue the discussion of ideas to enhance the strengths and address the main concerns that were identified.

Community Efforts to Enhance Strengths

Although the preservation of cultural traditions and family unity were identified as strengths, community members discussed threats, such as the lack of organizations for supporting families and addressing family violence. In order to increase community social services and promote activities that would enhance community traditions, community leaders decided to create a nonprofit association called Necahual Foundation. Necahual Foundation's mission was to help children and family members living in vulnerable environments in the community and to provide educational, cultural, and recreational activities to community members. Necahual Foundation operates with funds donated by immigrants living in the Chicago area. It created a social service delivery unit to offer support services and prevention to families affected by domestic violence. The unit provides free preventive, legal, and psychological services. In this vein, support from the university near the town enabled the university to conduct its clinical psychology internship program through the foundation. Currently, the university is collaborating with three clinical psychology interns to cover the growing demand for services. In addition, the Necahual Foundation offers the town's children a variety of social and cultural activities that enhance the community's traditions (e.g., Family Day and Children's Day celebrations and mini-Olympic games events).

Community Efforts to Address the Concerns

Club Pro-Obras members learned about a program called 3x1, created by the Mexican federal government to support efforts by Mexican immigrants living in the United States to improve the living conditions in their Mexican hometowns. The program involves the participation of Mexican federal, state, and local governments and hometown associations in the United States to facilitate community development. In the 3x1 program, for each dollar donated by an immigrant group in the United States, each level of the Mexican government donates a dollar, so a \$1 donation can potentially become \$4. The 3x1 program's objectives were to benefit communities with high levels of poverty by promoting employment and social development community projects, thereby reinforcing

civil society and government partnerships, and to strengthen Mexican emigrants' relationships with their hometowns.

One of the most pressing community concerns identified by the concerns survey was the lack of opportunities for young adults to attend college. Club Pro-Obras donated seven scholarships in 2012 and three scholarship in 2013 to students who, for lack of economic resources, were at risk for abandoning their studies.

Another community concern that emerged from the needs assessment was that of the river's pollution. The river in this community had become increasingly polluted during the past 40 years. There is an industrial corridor located near the river, with the industrial waste dumped directly into the river without any type of treatment to filter out contaminants. The river had become one of the most serious health threats for community residents (Instituto Mexicano para el Desarrollo Comunitario, 2007). In an effort to address this concern, the governor of the state of the region inaugurated the first industrial waste-water filtration treatment plant near the river (Vargas, 2014).

In summary, the application of the CRM in this community was very successful in bringing the community together to identify concerns and take various actions to address pressing needs. The community has celebrated its many successes while at the same time continuing to galvanize to address its concerns and preserve its strengths.

Cultural Considerations

Communities are infused with cultural and contextual elements that inform how individuals define and conceptualize issues and needs, live their lives, and relate to social and health systems around them (Suarez-Balcazar et al., 2010). Several cultural and contextual factors were considered in this case study. All meetings about the project were held in Spanish. Concepts relevant to the CRM, such as concerns, needs, empowerment, and community action, were translated to reflect local beliefs, values, and customs. This is a community in which residents value personal, one-to-one contact. Therefore, door-to-door canvassing was utilized as the most culturally appropriate method of data collection. Other methods of data collection, such as mailing the surveys, would have resulted in a low return rate because mail service in this community is lacking. Community focus groups and town

hall meetings were held at a local church and after mass, a common meeting place and time for this community. Finally, we note that, for the project to be successful, politicians such as the local mayor and the governor needed to be included, which is apparently typical of community projects in small Mexican towns.

CONCLUSION

In this chapter we have provided an overview of a participatory needs assessment methodology that utilizes a functional analysis of community issues. A needs assessment methodology such as the CRM should be utilized when there is interest in helping community members take action(s) on their identified needs. The CRM provides a systematic process for gathering the opinions of those most likely to be affected by programs and services (Mayer & Seekins, 2013). This mixed methods CBPR approach is a catalyst for community change by bringing community residents together in the process of pursuing social transformation.

Despite the successful application of the CRM, the process has some challenges. First, community members have to agree to participate, work together, and invest time and effort in the process. This may be challenging in some cases because many oppressed communities struggle to unite and seek common goals (Suarez-Balcazar et al., 2005). People have different priorities, and for the most oppressed community members, day-by-day survival takes away their energy to participate in communal endeavors. This is a paradox because those who could benefit the most from the process are less likely to get involved. We observed this in the case study. The most active members in the process were professionals, retirees, farmers, and community leaders. The poorest members of the community participated only as recipients of some of the services introduced by the process. Identifying effective strategies for involving the most marginalized community members continues to be a challenge that should be examined in future research.

Second, there are unanticipated political events that can either help or derail the community process. In this case we observed both. What was helpful was the personal relationship that the key community leader had with the governor of the state at the time. This relationship opened many doors and even led to significant investment of

state resources in starting the process of cleaning the river. What was not helpful was the election of the next mayor of the town, who was from a different party and had a history of corruption.

Yet, overall, the CRM was an effective process for generating significant changes in the town. As noted earlier, this methodology has been replicated in different cultural contexts with equally successful outcomes. Engagement in the community transformation process is also likely to empower participants and increase their motivation to remain engaged. Future applications of the CRM should continue to document its strengths and challenges as we learn more about the effectiveness of this participatory methodology in effecting social transformation and justice in various community contexts.

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