Community-Based Research and the Two Forms of Social Change

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ABSTRACT

As community-based research (CBR) takes hold in academic settings, where there is vast expertise in producing research but a dearth of experience in producing practical outcomes, there is a risk that CBR will produce little of consequence. This paper begins by arguing that part of the problem is the result of CBR practitioners assuming that research is, in itself, causal. Yet it is only when research is embedded in an effective overall social change strategy that it matters. The present paper develops a model specifying the role of research in both local and broader social change strategies. The overall model focuses on a community change cycle, based in community organizing, that begins with a participatory effort to diagnose some community condition, then develops a prescription for that condition, followed by an implementation of the prescription and an evaluation of the outcomes. Research can play a role at each stage of the process, but only as part of a broader strategy linking knowledge, action, and power. The paper concludes by showing the kinds of training and community relationships that academics will need to make CBR matter.

Do our community-engaged research practices – which have become known by the various names of community-based research, community-based participatory research, action research, and similar labels – matter? We are beginning to hear about some real impacts. Yet the literature is populated more by stories of how people did the research than what happened because of that research (Stoecker, Beckman, and Min 2010). What would it mean to say the research mattered?

Indeed, asking whether CBR-type practices matter can feel like a strange question in an academic environment where a "pure research" culture is the norm and where "statistically significant" (rather than practically effective) findings are the gold standard. Descriptions of such practice inside and outside academia emphasize carrying out a research project, with only passing reference to any broader social change strategy to which the research will be connected. In addition, researchers identifying with such labels are as likely to do research that is simply

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located in a community as they are to do research that is controlled by the community (Stoecker 2009).

Before we address the question of whether work done under the label of CBR or similar practices matters, however, we need to address some conceptual issues. I will begin by using the label "participatory and action-oriented forms of research" (Stoecker 2009). While a clumsy phrase (and I will resist the temptation to reduce it to yet another acronym whose meaning will soon be lost) I find it helpful to remind me of a couple of things. First, participation and action are distinct forms of social change. It is, in fact, quite easy to have one without the other. Governments and corporations engage in action without participation all the time. Participation can actually be done for participation's sake, or even used to prevent action (Whelan 2007). By understanding the independence of the two concepts, we can then also understand them as variables. Action can have many variable measures: consequential or inconsequential, widespread or localized, organized or disorganized, deep or superficial. Participation can be influential or token, continuous or sporadic, broad or narrow. The "-oriented" part of the phrase provides a directional concept. A compass is oriented to north. So when we say that we are engaging in participatory and action-oriented research, we are engaging in a practice that is pointing toward a carefully understood concept of participation and a carefully understood idea of action. And just like with a magnetic compass, the closer your approach is to the point by which it is oriented, the less clear that point gets. This implies a need for not just careful planning on the front end of the practice, but careful attention to the need to make adjustments along the path of a project.

This more descriptive phrase then provides both the admonition and the conceptual framework to clarify the two crucial parts of the practice – the action and the participation. The concepts of action and participation will then provide a foundation to help us understand the relationship of the practice to the two forms of social change and, consequently, a better understanding of how to achieve both forms of social change.

ACTION

Action is perhaps the most direct and immediate, if poorly understood, aspect of participatory and action-oriented forms of research. Understanding action is essential to achieving the most basic form of social change. The two concepts depend on each other. Social change cannot happen without action. The action might be unplanned or disorganized, but nonetheless consequential. Riots are the

quintessential form of unplanned (though not always disorganized) action that can produce intense social change. Simplistically, action is people engaging in behavior. Still, I want to emphasize the more coordinated and organized forms of *collective* action based in more rational, goal-oriented, group-based action carried out by community groups and social movement groups.

Thus, for a research project to be action-oriented, it needs to be oriented to informing and supporting the actions carried out by such groups. Here we run into an important conceptual dependency. For research to inform and support action, the action itself needs to be goal-oriented. In other words, the group needs to have a clear social change objective, which can then inform the design of the research. Such goals need to be concrete – changing a policy; transforming a social condition; or eliminating a specific practice of oppression, discrimination, or exploitation.

It is important to note that I am drawing on the higher education community engagement tradition that emphasizes faculty and student involvement in social change, in contrast to the charity model (Marullo and Edwards 2000). This parallels the contrast between collective action and individual treatment. The social change approach is not about changing individuals but about changing systems and particularly about changing power structures. In this approach, both the goals and the strategies are necessarily about collectives – groups, communities, and forms of collectives all the way up to and perhaps beyond societies.

Acting on a clear concrete social change goal, with a clear concrete social change strategy, is the first kind of social change. We might think about it as the first test of a good participatory and action-oriented research project. However, should we think about it that way? I worry that we place too much burden on the research itself to produce change. Do we even know what the theoretical mechanisms are by which the social change is supposed to occur? Take the example of a study of black-white school achievement gaps that engages black parents and youth in the research process. Such a study may be participatory, but what does a group do with the results? If the research is not designed from the beginning with an eye toward the actions that may be organized as a result, the participants may too late discover that they have important findings, but no one is listening. Instead, the group needs to think of the kinds of actions it wants to take, and then develop the research to inform the action. Perhaps, for example, the group wants to make sure that all educational opportunities are being provided equitably to all youth. The study then researches that specific question so that the group can develop specific strategies and proposals for change.

Within the connection between research and action lies the key to achieving the first form of social change. Successful participatory and action-oriented research projects are part of successfully organized social change campaigns. As I have considered this connection, I have begun to notice some correspondence between my favorite versions of participatory and action-oriented research and the practice of community organizing. Community organizing is a very specific vein of community work, and I am convinced of the necessity of community organizing as the strategic framework within which participatory and action-oriented research can be most effective.

What is community organizing? Dave Beckwith (Beckwith and Lopez 1997) has said that community organizing is:

> …the process of building power through involving a constituency in identifying problems they share and the solutions to those problems that they desire; identifying the people and structures that can make those solutions possible; enlisting those targets in the effort through negotiation and using confrontation and pressure when needed; and building an institution that is democratically controlled by that constituency that can develop the capacity to take on further problems and that embodies the will and the power of that constituency.

The practice of community organizing is most identified with Saul Alinsky (1969, 1971), the famous community organizer who coined the term and is most known for building powerful organizations in neighborhoods otherwise excluded from access to the benefits of contemporary society. Nevertheless, it has been practiced equally effectively by many others, including Ella Baker, whose community organizing work during the Civil Rights Movement helped build and maintain the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, the southern Freedom Schools, and the Mississippi Freedom Democratic party, among others (Ransby 2002). The craft experienced renewed visibility in the wake of the 2008 election, where Republicans mocked community organizing at their national convention, and a former community organizer, Barack Obama, was elected president.

The goal of community organizing is to both win on issues and build powerful community organizations that can better influence the public and private policies affecting their members. A good community organizing process parallels and informs a good participatory and action-oriented research process. Community organizing often starts with an outside organizer – a specialist in how to build

powerful people's organizations – partnering with the people of an excluded neighborhood. Participatory and action-oriented research likewise often starts with an outside researcher partnering with the people of a marginalized or excluded community. After this initial similarity the ideals remain parallel but the practices diverge substantially. The ideal in both models is to engage community residents in defining issues to work on, developing strategies to take on those issues, and then putting the strategies into motion.

However, in too many attempts at participatory and action-oriented research, the actual practice is often for academics to bring research projects *to* the community, rather than developing research projects from the community members' issue priorities. Even when those research projects come from the community's interests, the strategy discussion is limited to how to get the data, not how to deal with the issue. In the end, then, because there is not enough strategy discussion in the research process, there is not enough informed action. That is because the research practices we are using lack a theory of change.

To remedy this situation, we need to link participatory and action-oriented research to practices that do have their own theory of change. Because so much participatory and action-oriented research attempts to do research that is *community-based*, community organizing is a better fit than other forms of social action such as external advocacy, where the strategy is controlled by people other than those experiencing the problems.

Many community organizers are writing about the relationship between research and action. Rinku Sen (2003) devoted a chapter of her book on community organizing to the use of research, focusing on the research process in community organizing. Will Collette (2004:226-228) listed specific purposes for research in community organizing:

- Target the best neighborhoods for organizing
- Pick your shots
- Pinpoint your target's vulnerabilities
- Determine available sources of money
- Establish the legal basis and precedents for what your group wants
- Compare the living conditions of your group and your opponents
- Unearth sources of financing behind your opposition
- Find people who share an interest in the group's issue
- Uncover hidden connections
- Investigate scare tactics used by opponents

Noting how this list focuses on research supporting action is important. This is not a list of research questions, but a list of action items that require research to be accomplished. Thus, the list implies that a group has already developed a clear, concrete, social change goal and an overall strategy for achieving that goal. These items imply that a group has, in organizer-speak, *cut an issue.* Cutting the issue means gathering community members to consider what challenges they are facing, and then choosing a challenge on which they believe they can gain some ground (Beckwith and Lopez 1997). The strategy and research support needs then follow from the issue that is cut.

It is possible, however, that research can also inform this initial issue selection. After working with both community-based social change efforts and participatory and action-oriented projects over the years, I have found that really effective change efforts go through four steps. While the model may resemble the typical "medical model" where an expert physician does things to disempowered patients, please read this as the "patients" taking over the process for themselves. The first stage is diagnosis, where the group figures out what the issue is. The second stage is prescription, where the group determines what to do about the issue. The third stage is implementation, where they put their chosen intervention into motion. The fourth stage is evaluation, where the group determines whether its prescription is working (Stoecker 2005).

Each of these four stages can involve research. At the diagnostic stage, various forms of needs or issues assessments help find out who has a certain issue, what causes it, and how important it is to how many people. For the neighborhood community organizer, this is often implemented as doorknocking, where the organizer goes door to door asking people what they like, and what they want to change, about their neighborhood. At the prescription stage, asset assessments help determine what resources a group can bring to bear on an issue; comparative case studies can show what has worked in other places; and policy research can help determine how to change laws. At the implementation stage, groups doing murals or community theater can use research to develop the story that the art will portray. At the evaluation stage, which often starts simultaneously with the implementation stage so the group can adjust the implementation along the way, the group can collect information to make sure they are doing the implementation the way they said they would and begin to look for signs of change.

It is very easy to see from this perspective just how limited the research itself is. Research can only offer knowledge to support action at any one stage of the four-stage community change project. If an action strategy does not guide what research

is done and determines what will be done with the findings, then the research will be useless. Any researcher who goes into a participatory and action-oriented research project thinking that the research is the action could be sorely disappointed and their community partner could be thoroughly disillusioned.

Simultaneously, it should be clear how important good research is to social change. Many community groups do little or no formal research at any of the stages of diagnosis, prescription, implementation, or evaluation. Even when they have the skills, they lack the resources. So they go into action with little detailed knowledge of the issue, and even less knowledge of the possible interventions. Any evaluation is often cursory and is written to satisfy the demands of a funder rather than to find out if the group is moving the needle on an issue. Consequently, very little changes.

At its basis, then, linking participatory and action-oriented research to community organizing can improve community action because it focuses the research on serving a specific social change campaign. It questions the belief that research by itself can achieve change. Community organizers, and the members of the organizations they help build, know much better than most professional researchers how to create social change. Linking our research work to such efforts helps assure its usefulness. Even more important, however, connecting participatory and action-oriented research to community organizing also helps us with the second form of social change.

PARTICIPATION

Participation is the more abstract form of social change, but is no less important. For we can think about the best participatory and action-oriented research as not just supporting action on specific issues, but more broadly transforming the social structures controlling who produces knowledge, who influences public knowledge, and who controls the knowledge-production process.

Here again, a weak theoretical and conceptual foundation can hinder the value of our work. For participation has become an end in itself, and participation can too often be token participation designed more to get buy-in for the *researcher's* agenda than to build the *community's* agenda. Sherry Arnstein (1969) established long ago that real participation occurs when the community participates in developing the agenda, not simply responding to officials' already-drafted plans. The concern about token participation has been echoed ever since (Whelan 2007).

Why is participation important in participatory and action-oriented forms of research like CBR? One theoretical basis is inspired by the work of Foucault (1975, 1980) encompassing the concept of power/knowledge. I will not attempt a

definitive interpretation of Foucault's work here, but only an interpretation that informs the participatory aspect of participatory and action-oriented research. Think of power and knowledge as mutually-reinforcing constructs. Those with more power can act in ways that produce more knowledge to enhance their power, and so on. Those with less power lack the ability to act effectively, hindering their ability to gain knowledge from action, and thus hindering their ability to gain power. Thus, action, knowledge, and power can become mutually reinforcing. Action, of course, is its own component. Research intervenes in this relationship through the component of knowledge. Participation intervenes in the relationship through the component of power. When participation is weak, people have less power to influence decisions made about research and action. Still, when participation is strong, people have more power to shape the research and the action.

Participation becomes important because structures of participation do not influence one research project, or one action, but can maintain their influence broadly. To understand this second form of social change rooted in participation and occurring at a macro level, we need to understand the concept of the social relations of knowledge production, developed by John Gaventa (1993). The concept parallels Karl Marx's ([1867] 1999) idea of the social relations of production—roughly, the way that people are organized to produce things. Here we are talking about the way that people are organized to produce knowledge. Marx's goal was to theorize a way for the people who did the work of producing things – the working class – to organize and control the way things were produced. This second form of social change in participatory and action-oriented research is similar, but must take a different route. It is relatively easy to see the path from a large oppressed wage labor force to organized workers who take over the production process (though, of course, implementing that path is difficult). However, ending domination in the knowledge production process is much different. Consider for a moment that the actual paid knowledge production workforce is small. Yes, there are lots of people who produce actual books, CDs, etc. However, they are producing books and CDs, not knowledge. Those of us who produce actual knowledge (including lies that pass for knowledge) for a living comprise a small group. We are, like it or not, a privileged group. So organizing us will not do much to transform the social relations of knowledge production.

Our task, then, is to organize the people who have been subjected to the knowledge we produce, and to support *their* development as independent and empowered knowledge producers. That is a hugely different task from organizing

a wage labor force, for we are trying to organize people to produce their own knowledge on their own time voluntarily.

Here again, community organizing offers us a framework from which we can develop a strategy. Here we are informed by the debate between Saul Alinsky and Myles Horton, cofounder of the Highlander Folk School that was so important in the Civil Rights Movement and other struggles. Horton was concerned that Alinsky focused too much on action, and not enough on helping the people understand what they were doing. In contrast, Horton concentrated on participatory processes for people to educate themselves on issues, believing that by doing so they could engage in more effective action (Horton, Kohl, and Kohl 1997). This form of *popular education*, also practiced by Paulo Freire (1974), provides a concrete strategy to inform the knowledge component of the knowledge-power-action model.

Sohng (1995), for example, has said that we should view research itself as a site of resistance and struggle, and described the researcher's role very similarly to the way community organizers describe their work. The effective participatory action researcher, according to Sohng, needs to:

- Deeply understand the community
- Establish trust with its members
- Engage community members in critical dialogue about their condition
- Use the research process to develop community leadership
- Jointly form the research focus and strategy with the community

We can add to this list, *"Promote full participation and influence by community members throughout all stages of the research process, including: forming the focus of the research, developing the methodology, collecting the data, analyzing the data, and acting on the results."*

We must remember that the first goal of the overall participatory and action-oriented research process is to support action on a specific issue—the first form of social change. Yet just like the community organizer's task is not just to help the community win an issue, but to build a powerful organization that can win on subsequent issues, the researcher's task is not just to provide research data on an issue but, through using a fully-participatory process, to develop the people's capacity to bring a research strategy to bear on subsequent issues.

The effect of the second form of social change, then, is to transform the social relations of knowledge production so that people who have only been passive

recipients of knowledge become participatory knowledge producers whose knowledge can inform action and build power. This point is important to understand. The old adage that "knowledge is power" is simplistic and dangerous. It is not enough to have knowledge. Lots of people have knowledge about what is good, right, and moral. That does not prevent them from being subjected to oppression, torture, and genocide. The participatory and action-oriented researcher's task is to build up people's capacity to both create knowledge, and to put knowledge into practice in ways that enhance their power to win on issues and influence the course of world events.

Our participatory and action-oriented research practice is not fully pursuing such goals. It appears that only a minority of such research projects involve community members, or organizations controlled by them, throughout the five research steps of choosing a question, designing methods, collecting data, analyzing it, and reporting and action on the findings. Instead, community members are involved mostly at the data collection stage (Stoecker 2009). It is intriguing how much of the consternation directed at university institutional research ethics review boards is a result of the requirement that all people collecting data, including community members, be trained and held accountable for ethical standards of research. That means that community members who may lack formal education, and may not be literate in written English, have to take a grueling training course and test on research ethics that they may never pass. Still, if we stop thinking of community members as research labor, and start thinking of them as research leaders, their role shifts. Now community members are part of the research design team, learning about how to design research and manage the research process from beginning to end, while the researchers (and perhaps their students), do the research labor. Not only does such a strategy eliminate the onerous training requirement for community members, but it changes their status from laborers serving the researchers to guides leading the research process.

In a recent project with Community Shares of Wisconsin, for example, a graduate student and I worked with the organization's leadership to develop a series of research questions about their fundraising strategies, and then collaboratively designed the best methods for obtaining data to answer those questions. Yet then the student and I did all of the data collection – we interviewed donors, donation campaign organizers, and member groups of Community Shares that received the donations. We also analyzed the Community Shares donation database. We then provided summary findings back to Community Shares and engaged them in a conversation about what the data meant to them. That

discussion then informed the final report we wrote that Community Shares is now using to influence its fundraising strategies. Community Shares co-controlled the major decisions over the research process and the researchers then carried out the design (Willis, Anders, and Stoecker 2011).

NEXT STEPS

When we succeed at supporting communities to create powerful knowledge and action informed by that knowledge, we help them to win on specific issues while simultaneously transforming the social relations of knowledge production. We achieve both forms of social change. Communities will be heard in ways they were not, will influence policy in ways they did not, and will become self-determining in ways they had not. When that happens, everything is possible.

The question is, what does participatory and action-oriented research look like if we develop the practice around the two forms of social change? Here are three ways that we can think about better specifying our current practice. We know that some of these things happen already, but we often do not make them part of our planning.

The first way that we can better develop our current practice is through the process of choosing participatory and action-oriented research projects. Choosing a good project could be accomplished according to the same criteria that community organizers use for choosing a good issue. There are many criteria for choosing a good issue (Staples 2004), but the easiest for me to remember are *precise, organizable, winnable*. A participatory and action-oriented research project to study global warming may not be very effective, but one supporting a precisely-focused campaign to reduce the smokestack discharge of a local factory could have much more impact. Second, the project needs to be organizable – one about which lots of people care. If no one thinks they are affected by that factory before the research project, research is not likely to convince them to care. Finally, the project needs to be focused on a winnable goal. Trying to shut down the plant may be impractical, but designing research to identify practical remedies could get the factory to clean up their act.

The second strategy for better developing current practice involves designing a participatory and action-oriented research project to support leadership development. Using a participatory and action-oriented research project to build community leadership means much more than simply getting some people to tell other people what to do. It is about building people's skills to become confident creators and communicators of knowledge. That means considering whether the

participatory and action-oriented research project itself can develop people's skills. Can they benefit from skills in how to make judgments about what is valid knowledge, or how to create knowledge that can stand up to the opposition's critique, or how to express knowledge orally or in written or multimedia form? Consciously designing the participatory and action-oriented research project to support people in developing those skills – not participation for participation's sake but participation to build people's leadership capacity and knowledge skills – can produce not just a win on the issue but a community with overall greater capacity.

The third way in which researchers might better develop current practice is by designing a participatory and action-oriented research project to support organization building. Closely connected to leadership development is organization building. Building an organization is about organizing the leadership into a sustainable collective. Here there is a balancing act. On the one hand, we need to look for ways in which the research can give organization members tasks to complete, as we know that one way to keep people involved in an organization is to make sure they always have something to do. On the other hand, it is important to make sure that the research does not take time away from the other very important tasks that people have to complete to win on the issue. In addition, organizing the research is important so that the organization builds its *own* capacity to effectively decide about how to do research, hold professional researchers accountable, challenge the opposition's research, and integrate research with its overall social change strategy.

Thinking about participatory and action-oriented research in this way has some important implications for those of us who identify ourselves with the academy. Those of us who have direct contact with communities, who think of ourselves primarily as researchers, need to either be superb social change strategists ourselves, get trained in the craft, or allow ourselves to be guided by those who are. We need knowledge about how to organize people to choose issues, develop leaders, build organizations, choose tactics, and develop other relevant community organizing skills so that we, minimally, understand how those things fit into both forms of social change. This means understanding the relationship between a participatory action research process and member recruitment, organization building, leadership development, tactical strategy, and popular education. None of the participatory and action-oriented research courses with which I am currently familiar provide such orientation and training, or require it from other sources. We also need to make sure that those social change components are in place for any participatory and action-oriented research project that we undertake. Thus, if we

do not have the expertise or capacity, ourselves, to do the community organizing part of the process, we need to make sure that there are such experts available for the project.

Higher education administrators – whether upper-level administrators or service learning center staff – need to become comfortable supporting those faculty and students who deploy participatory and action-oriented research toward the two forms of social change. That means handling the calls from the economic and political elites who may feel threatened by it. When the students are testing the water downstream from the factory, and the factory complains, there needs to be a supportive institution standing with them. For it would not be the first time that researchers were threatened for producing knowledge that others would prefer to remain undiscovered (Gedicks 1996).

I am fortunate to work at the University of Wisconsin (UW), where the culture of academic freedom related to such engaged forms of knowledge production is known through the persecution of Professor Richard Ely at the close of the nineteenth century. The threats to his career because of his research on labor organizing and community issues led to an official investigation by the UW Board of Regents, and his ultimate exoneration was accompanied by the Regents' statement affirming academic freedom recited regularly across campus and the city (Herfurth 1949):

> We cannot for a moment believe that knowledge has reached its final goal, or that the present condition of society is perfect. We must therefore welcome from our teachers such discussions as shall suggest the means and prepare the way by which knowledge may be extended, present evils be removed and others prevented. We feel that we would be unworthy of the position we hold if we did not believe in progress in all departments of knowledge. In all lines of academic investigation it is of the utmost importance that the investigator should be absolutely free to follow the indications of truth wherever they may lead. Whatever may be the limitations which trammel inquiry elsewhere we believe the great state University of Wisconsin should ever encourage that continual and fearless sifting and winnowing by which alone the truth can be found.

Developing participatory and action-oriented research to pursue the two forms of social change is, for me, the ultimate form of truth seeking. For it is not only an act of truth seeking, it is an act of liberation. We live in an era where, because of

discriminatory and oppressive pedagogies, hegemonic corporate control over public knowledge, and inaccessible and irrelevant academic knowledge, the overwhelming majority of the population, even in this country, is not free to seek truth. If we are to fully sift and winnow knowledge to remove present evils and prevent future ones, it can only be through the full, fully-developed, and fully-knowledgeable participation of those who most suffer from present evils and are most at risk of future evils. May we be their partners.

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