



## **Community Psychology Values and Community-Based Participatory Research**

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Conventional research involves participants primarily as sources of data (Wallerstein & Duran, 2006), relies upon a positivist tradition wherein researchers are seen as neutral, objective observers (Bhawuk, 2008), and is not necessarily concerned with the application of findings to improve the social conditions of those involved. In many places around the world, this has led to distrusting relationships between communities and researchers, and has also likely limited the potential for research to help ameliorate social problems (Smith, 1999). In this article, action research is presented as an alternative to conventional research practices, and is examined in relation to four community psychology values. A brief history and the main principles of action research are described, followed by a discussion of its evolution to participatory, or community-based participatory research (CBPR), and connection to four values identified by Bond (2016). These include: 1) empowerment, 2) promotion of social justice, equity and social change, 3) attention to diversity in its various forms, and 4) adoption of an ecological perspective and multilevel analyses. Each value is discussed in terms of theoretical alignment as well as challenges and successes in application to research and practice. This work deepens the rationale for the use of action research in community psychology, and may be used as a lens to evaluate practice and research.

### Introduction

The Society for Community Research and Action highlights participatory community research as one of the core competencies for community psychologists (Tebes, 2016). However, community psychology literature lacks an explicit examination of how participatory research aligns with or departs from community psychology values. To fill that gap, four values of community psychology are used to examine the appropriateness of action research for community psychology, and to describe some of the challenges inherent in that form of research and practice. Bond (2016) identified these themes while editing the most recent APA Handbook of Community Psychology, and they resonate with other expressions of community psychology values (Rappaport, 1977, 1981; Tebes, 2016). First, a brief introduction to the main principles and history of action research are outlined, followed by a discussion of each value, including challenges and successes in application through action research.

### *History of Action Research: Northern and Southern Roots*

The term “action research” was coined by Lewin (1946), a social psychologist who studied discrimination against minorities in labor and neighborhood settings. Beginning in the 1930s, Lewin’s work focused on intergroup relations, and he noticed that labor organizing based on participation rather than coercion led to greater productivity, reduction in stereotype biases, and better relationships across minority groups (Adelman, 1993). Lewin’s emotional connection to the lived reality of the people he was working encouraged him to critically evaluate his own research methods, process, and impact. In 1943, Lewin published a landmark paper on action research in which he states simply, “Research that produces nothing but books will not suffice” (p. 34). Instead, scholars should dedicate themselves to research that led to, or incorporated, social action. Lewin critiqued the notion that

communities required outside expertise to understand their own situations, and posited that researchers had as much to learn from communities as communities had to learn from them (Adelman, 1993; Lewin, 1946).

The principles of co-learning and emphasis on social action were also fundamental to social movements that were developing independently in Latin America not long after Lewin's paper on action research was published (Reich et al., 2007). These social movements were informed by Marxism and liberation theology. They were based on the premise that those who were poor and disenfranchised by colonialism had equal worth, and that communities should reclaim power through cooperative enterprises, education, and land ownership (Comas-Díaz et al., 1998). Again, it was not only the end goal of liberation that was important, but the process. In the case of education, Paolo Freire (2000) argued that knowledge was power, but he made clear in his landmark work, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, that the purpose of education was not to fill the minds of those involved, but to engage them in critical inquiry – to uncover the knowledge they held from experience. Explaining his stance on process, Freire (2000) stated, “No pedagogy which is truly liberating can remain distant from the oppressed by treating them as unfortunates and by presenting for their emulation models from among the oppressors” (p. 54).

These two traditions can be referred to as the Northern and Southern theoretical roots of action research (Wallerstein, Duran, Oetzel, & Minkler, 2017). They have differences that reflect these histories. The Northern tradition tends to focus on utilizing collaboration to improve existing systems and to inform interventions, while the Southern tradition tends to focus on the damages of colonization, and emancipatory research aimed to challenge political domination and internalized oppression (Wallerstein et al.,

2017). However, both are rooted in the principles of co-learning, collaboration, reciprocity, and social action.

#### *Core Principles of Action Research*

Several decades later, the principles at the heart of action research remain unchanged, but there has been a multiplication of terms that embrace the same ethos and philosophy. Some examples include participatory action research, community-based participatory action research, partner-based participatory action research, emancipatory research, critical action research, popular epidemiology, and street science (Wallerstein et al., 2017). Several scholars have reviewed these approaches and found certain disciplines favor certain terms, and certain terms indicate application to a specific context (for example, tribal participatory research, or industrial action research), but the core philosophies remain the same (Jason, 2004; Wallerstein et al., 2017). Here, community-based participatory research (CBPR) is used interchangeably with participatory action research (PAR) or action research, which is in keeping with several recent reviews and books on action research (Israel, Parker, & Becker, 1998; Jason, 2004; Nueces, Hacker, DiGirolamo, & Hicks, 2012; Wallerstein et al., 2017). The core tenets of CBPR include: 1) an emphasis on co-learning, 2) development of trusting, collaborative relationships between researchers and practitioners, 3) involvement of participants in all phases of research from question development to dissemination, and 4) intention and attempts to utilize the research to improve social conditions (Israel, Eng, Amy, Schulz J., & Edith Parker, 2013). In sum, the defining features of CBPR are that the dynamic between researcher and participant is changed so participants are engaged in the inquiry, and that practice is seamlessly integrated with research process (Wallerstein et al., 2017, p. 28).

In conventional research, practice (or application) is downstream of research findings. It is an eventual hope. In CBPR action is part of the research process. Developing meaningful relationships is the first and most important step, and it requires time, skills, and ongoing effort. Relationship development is action and community practice. Particularly in communities that have distrusting relationships with researchers based on prior abuses, this can be a long and difficult process. Without this interpersonal work, however, there is no potential to do research collaboratively, to develop priorities as a team, or to implement changes based on research findings. This shift in perspective from subject as source of information to subject as actor aligns with four core values in community and cultural psychology, which individually examined below.

## **Action Research and Community Psychology Values**

### *Empowerment*

An important distinction between conventional research and CBPR is that empowerment is viewed as essential to the process as well as the outcome. Empowerment has both subjective and objective elements; i.e. the feeling of being empowered and having power (Wallerstein, 1992). CBPR aims to increase both of these aspects of empowerment by involving participants as co-researchers rather than participants. Unfortunately, claims of empowering research participants are made sometimes injudiciously, without any evidence of assessing empowerment outcomes among the participants (qualitatively or quantitatively) (see Crawford Sheare, 2008; Skår, Folkestad, Smedal, & Grytten, 2014). This is problematic because even the most egalitarian process can be manipulated, and words like “empowerment” are often used without

theoretical clarity or critical self-reflection.

However, a growing body of CBPR research has evaluated process outcomes specifically. For example, a retrospective ethnographic analysis of a Photovoice project among African Americans in Texas found that over the five week project, photographs and elicited stories moved thematically from stories of disenfranchisement and feelings of helplessness, to a desire and sense of capability to act (Carlson et al., 2006). Researchers interpreted this as increased in critical consciousness and perceived efficacy that emerged from the group process. Similar findings are reported in qualitative CBPR process research with indigenous Yupik communities in Alaska (Rasmus, 2014), youth engaged in HIV/AIDS prevention research (Flicker, 2008), low-income graduate students (Foster-Fishman et al., 2005), and individuals with severe and persistent mental illness (Schneider, 2010). These findings illustrate how CBPR blurs the lines between practice and research. By empowering community members through the process of CBPR the research is itself a type of intervention. It is a way of interacting with community members to promote a sense of empowerment, and also to develop power.

Jason and colleagues (2004) assert that CBPR can increase actual power by reducing or eliminating power differentials between academic and researcher. While power sharing is an important goal of CBPR, Wallerstein et al. (2017) and others have argued that there is never a completely equal power balance. Researchers may have power in certain ways and community members in others. Furthermore, despite good intentions, researchers may unwittingly reproduce unequal power dynamics between university and community groups (p. 36). Instead of aspiring to an unrealistic goal of erasing power differentials, power sharing and power shifting can be promoted in the following ways: making power differentials and positional privilege transparent (Curry-

Stevens, 2012), developing lasting relationships based on trust, attempting to understand community power dynamics (Wallerstein et al., 2017), and using guiding documents, such as collaboration evaluation tools and codes of conduct created by the community to assess equitable partnerships (Andrews, Cox, Newman, & Meadows, 2011; Israel, Parker, & Becker, 1998). Developing empowerment through partnerships is part of the practice aspect of CBPR, as is developing increased power through the promotion of social justice.

### *Promotion of Social Justice, Equity and Social Change*

The second community psychology value, promotion of social justice, is at the heart of CBPR, and was an organizing principle in both Northern and Southern lineages of action research. In addition to creating a democratic and inclusive process Lewin (1946) envisioned action research addressing external, systemic problems based on discrimination, economics, housing, and law. Promoting social justice and equity is fundamentally tied to empowerment through the process of CBPR, but it also extends to the outcomes of CBPR research in communities and systems. Although empirical comparison of social change outcomes of CBPR versus conventional research are difficult to find, theoretically, CBPR is more likely to produce social change from research findings than conventional research. This is because a) it engages people who are experiencing a problem in understanding it and trying to change it, thereby increasing ecological validity and engaging participants as change agents (Jason, 2004), and b) desire for social action determines what is studied, how it is studied, and how it is disseminated (Balcazar et al., 2004).

Myriad examples exist of CBPR projects that have informed or changed community programs and interventions. Pruitt et al.

(2018) outlined how the Photovoice research influenced transformative change at the individual, program, community, and policy level among Housing First clients in Honolulu, Hawai'i. The CBPR process created opportunities for Housing First clients to redefine narratives on homelessness, countering those that were prevalent in the local media. Collecting and amplifying these narratives as part of the CBPR process had inherent merit because it contradicted dehumanizing narratives about individuals experiencing homelessness, and it may have influenced policy decisions. The Housing First Photovoice exhibit was followed by an announcement that the program funding would be extended for another year, and that it would be extended to more Hawaiian Islands.

### *Attention to Diversity in Its Various Forms*

Diversity is an organizing principle within CBPR as well as community psychology, because both are based on a social constructivist viewpoint that asserts multiple realities have worth and are essential to developing a complete picture of any situation, problem, or solution (Bess, Fisher, Sonn, & Bishop, 2002; Gallimore, Goldenberg, & Weisner, 1993; Wallerstein et al., 2017). This inclusion of diverse voices and experiences in the research process helps to promote epistemic power, which Dutta (2016) defines as "the authority to construct what is considered legitimate and valid knowledge" (p. 329). A diversification of epistemic power, among people who may face discrimination based on race, class, geography, ethnicity, gender, ability, age, etc. allows a more complete picture to emerge, for social action to become more grounded in local realities, and for diversity experiences to be contextualized.

To illustrate this point, I draw on an example from a CBPR process in a federally qualified health center in O'ahu: Kokua Kalihi Valley

(KKV). KKV serves primarily low-income Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander clients. Many do not speak English as their first language, and many are first-generation immigrants from Pacific Islands. As part of an ongoing CBPR process, KKV held a series of listening circles where they asked the simple prompt, "Share a story about the last time you felt healthy" (Odom, Jackson, Derauf, Inada, & Aoki, 2019, p. 4). As they listened to the responses, the researchers learned and redefined the purpose of the work. Based on several iterations of listening circles, they found that their clients defined health using four overlapping connections which they called *Pilinahā*: connection to past and future, connection to place, connection to community, and connection to better self (Odom et al., 2019).

When these connections were shared with the medical professionals at KKV, they began to reframe and understand their interactions with their patients in new ways. For example, a doctor who had learned about *Pilinahā* reflected on an interaction with a Samoan patient with uncontrolled diabetes. He had advised her on all of the things that could happen to her if she did not control her illness. In response, she showed a photo of her grandson and expressed her pride that he was graduating high school and would be the first to go to college. He described, "At the time, I interpreted this abrupt change in topic as the patient's denial of the seriousness of her disease. Now I understand that she was trying to share what was important to her, what she valued, and her source of meaning and health" (p. 19). This reflects how diversifying epistemic power can affect how communities are perceived and responded to by people in positions of power. This shift in perspective also illustrates how research and practice are entwined in CBPR to promote social justice. Currently, KKV is working to integrate *Pilinahā* into their health system evaluation more broadly. It can provide a framework of how staff should be trained and

engaged and what health actually means within this community.

#### *Adoption of an Ecological Perspective and Multilevel Analyses*

This community psychology value is addressed last, because achieving an informed, locally-relevant, ecological perspective rests upon incorporating the three prior values into the research process. This work of relationship building and understanding dynamic, changing cultures is never finished. As communities evolve and change, CBPR can be instrumental in promoting justice across ecological levels by employing a wide diversity of methods. For example, Leung, Yen, and Minkler (2004) describe strategies for shaping and modifying epidemiological research to incorporate CBPR principles. They argue that combining population health data with experiential knowledge increases the likelihood that their research can meaningfully inform community development, programs and policies. This has come to be described as participatory epidemiology, and is as a growing trend in population health research (Bach et al., 2017). Other examples of methodological diversity in CBPR include application to randomized-controlled trials (Nueces, Hacker, DiGirolamo, & Hicks, 2012), social network analysis (Lightfoot et al., 2014), participatory mapping (Israel et al., 2013), and a wide variety of qualitative methods (Castleden, Garvin, & First Nation, 2008; Israel et al., 2013). This methodological diversity enhances our ability as community psychologists to capture some of the ecological complexity of the environments we work in, and to use those findings immediately to promote social change.

#### **Conclusion**

This work outlines the core principles of action research (CBPR), describes the historical origins of those principles, and

applies those principles to core community psychology, while highlighting challenges and successes in their application. By explicitly examining the relationship between CBPR and community psychology values, the importance of utilizing CBPR to inform practice and to guide community psychology research is underscored. There are limitations to this work. For one, this list of values is not exhaustive. Other commonly cited community psychology values include a focus on prevention, mutual and informal support, a strengths-based focus, and even inclusion of participatory methods (Rappaport, 1977, 1981; Tebes, 2016). Some community psychologists argue against unifying values or principles in community psychology, stating they pose the risk of causing division among community psychologists with a different philosophical or value orientation (Dutta, 2016). Another limitation is that there are several challenges to CBPR that are not addressed, such as confronting neocolonial aspects of the research process and historical trauma (Fisher & Ball, 2003; Smith, 1999), determining what counts as meaningful participation in participatory research (Flicker, 2008), and reconciling sometimes antithetical priorities between research funders and community priorities (Yonas et al., 2006). Despite those limitations, this work contributes novel perspective on how the four common values of community psychology are inter-related building blocks for action research, and how action research can be utilized to put into practice the values and aims of community psychology.

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