

Successful Process in Community-Based Participatory Research

National Institute of Environmental Health Services

There are numerous examples of successful community-based participatory research (CBPR) projects. These projects have accomplished their research objectives and shown research productivity, while maintaining a positive working relationship among community and scientific collaborators. While there are successful projects, there is not a single “model” for success. Rather, the CBPR process entails several components, stages or elements that must be considered if we are to understand the features of success. These components include (1) the formation and ongoing maintenance of community relationships; (2) developing a focus and defining research problems; (3) understanding the ideological background and political nature of CBPR; and (4) documenting and communicating CBPR results. There are also some problems that can arise in the CBPR process, and gaps in our understanding of the CBPR process that need to be addressed. Finally, we need to understand the features of CBPR process that are important for the institutionalization of this research paradigm within schools of public health and public health departments.

Formation and Maintenance of Community- Scientific Institution Relations

CBPR requires a working relationship between a community or community-based organization and at least one scientific institution. The scientific institution is usually a college or university, but may also be a non-profit research corporation or hospital. The formation and maintenance of relationships between communities and scientific organizations involves understanding community infrastructure, and building inter-organizational as well as inter-personal relationships.

Understanding the community infrastructure: Successful projects take the time to explore or map the structure that exists in the community. Such an exploration discloses the different groups in the community, community leaders, and the resources and skills available in the community. It also delineates how other communities share social space with a specific community. Understanding community structure is an ongoing process as communities are dynamic and change over the life of a collaboration. Academic organizations are also dynamic social units (e.g., deans leave, presidents change, department chairs resign). Individual investigators and community organizations must continue to be aware of this part of the structure with which they must deal.

It is important that the collaborators measure the community’s current characteristics -- demographic, social and political. Accepting old information on face value can lead to mistakes and misunderstandings. In some instances, community members have requested that researchers assist them in developing more accurate portraits of community characteristics. For example, in North Carolina, farmworker have changed over the 1990's from the majority being native African Americans, to large numbers being Haitians and other Caribbean Islanders, to the majority being Mexicans. The composition of the Mexican worker population is changing to a higher

proportion of Indigenous Peoples. The 1990 population census, and estimates based on this census indicate that there are few Latinos in North Carolina, while the actual population now numbers in 100,000s.

An unexplored (or unreflected upon) element in the development of relationships for CBPR projects is that of the community's social ecology. How does rurality or urbanity affect relationships between community members and scientists in CBPR projects? In some situations, rurality may ease the CBPR relationship where the staffs of formal service organizations (county health departments and social service departments, county administrators) are members of effected communities and share common histories with the members of community-based organizations. A shared common history may not be present for the staffs and officials of formal and governmental organization, and community groups in metropolitan areas. Metropolitan formal organizations that serve local communities draw their staffs from a much larger pool. A shared history can also be detrimental to CBPR relationships. In some rural areas, those who administer and staff formal and governmental organizations have different backgrounds from the members of groups experiencing environmental injustice or health disparities. For example, often those who provide services in rural counties are related to (i.e., are the spouses, siblings and children of) the employers of farmworkers, the operators of intensive livestock operations, and the operators of the strip mines.

Among successful CBPR projects, experience shows that even when a significant effort is made to map a community, there will be un-anticipated or not fully appreciated elements of the community. This lack of community knowledge or understanding can result in difficulties for individuals, organizations and collaborations. While these occurrences are often learning experiences, to those who experience them they are akin to the learning experience for the child who puts a finger in a wall socket – it is unclear if the new knowledge is worth the pain.

Building and Continuing Relationships: Building person-to-person relationships is extremely important for conducting successful CBPRs. These relationships entail individual scientific investigators working with and developing the trust of community members and community organizations. Building these collegial relationships between community members and scientists takes time. The time invested to build mutual understanding is essential if a CBPR project is to flourish, because the investment in person-to-person relationships is translated into the flexibility and trust necessary for those stressful aspects of collaboration such as building project agenda and preparing grant applications.

It is also important to establish organization-to-organization relationships between academic and community organizations that extend beyond the person-to-person relationships. If the success of community-academic partnership is based solely on the positive relationship of an individual from an academic organization with the members of a community, then this relationship can be easily disrupted. Community organizations need to have a sense that academic institutions are reliable partners; that the scientific organizations are not ready to withdraw when political pressure is applied. There are several mechanisms that increase academic institution reliability. First, efforts should be made to educate the university's upper level administrators about the CBPR project and the health issues that it addresses. If

administrative leaders are educated about the full scope of a CBPR project, they will be able to respond to external questions and pressure in an informed manner. For example, University of Iowa faculty members investigating the community and economic consequences of intensive hog production facilities educated the university president about their research program. When representatives of the hog industry tried to pressure the president, she was able to respond appropriately and continue university support of the research.

Involving students in projects is another mechanism for increasing academic organization reliability in CBPR projects. The primary mission of universities is training students. A cadre of students who have had a positive experiences in a CBPR program is a foundation for support within a university.

Finally, scientists involved in CBPR projects should seek academic colleagues to involve in these collaborations. Increasing the number of faculty members who participate in CBPR project has several benefits. First, there is a greater number of potential investigators to work on new project ideas as they arrive through university-community interaction. Second, there is a pool of support if university administrators threaten to remove support for a specific project. Finally, it allows individual scientists to move from a university without precipitating the collapse of a CBPR collaboration. Scientists involved in CBPR projects need to be aware of colleagues who have important research skills and who already have the ideology that will make them amenable to working in CBPR.

There are obstacles to building inter-organizational relationships between community and academic organizations. Many academic institutions have checkered histories in their relationships to local communities; and some have acknowledged racist histories in their dealing with minority populations. The dominant research paradigm within academic institutions continues to be intellectually elitist, often idealizing “pure” research and denigrating “applied” research. Therefore, the occupational and professional promotion of those who engage in CBPR can be jeopardized. While this jeopardy varies by discipline, those in the senior ranks of the professorate have substantial power over promotion no matter the discipline of the CBPR researcher. Finally, the current realities of academic employment severely limit the time academics have to build community relationships. Junior faculty in particular need support in these efforts. As community members often have full-time jobs, the time for community relationship building is often in the evenings and on weekends. The academic researcher who is involved in evening and weekend CBPR activities is often investing family time and is not given release time from other professional duties.

Developing a Research Focus and Defining Research Problems

How a research focus is selected and how research problems are defined are important aspects of success in the CBPR process. The development and continuity of relations between community members and university scientists feed into how research problems are defined and projects are focused. The chances for success are greater if the research focus and problem reflect real issues for community members. For example, childhood asthma is real to a community with many sick children. Genetic differences in allergy susceptibility may make a

greater contribution to asthma attacks than does in-door air quality. However, community members can be given help to improve air quality, and therefore see the results of their efforts in reduced hospitalizations. They cannot do anything about their children's genes. For scientists to pursue "less theoretically interesting" but more immediately effective problems is facilitated by a firm relationship with community members.

Greater success is also related to who raises the research question to be addressed by a CBPR project. Research questions initiated by community members are more successfully addressed than questions initiated by outsiders. For example, community members will be more willing to support and participant in research on the effects of diesel exhaust fumes on lung disease among community residents when they perceive it as a community health issue, and less willing to collaboration with an academic scientist who simply wants to specify the fraction of air pollution made of diesel fumes.

Specific problems that have tangible results are more amenable to success in CBPR projects. A CBPR project can successfully remove lead, or learn ways to reduce the amount of lead to which children are exposed. Delineating the causes and implementing the procedures or interventions to eliminate all of the factors resulting in health disparities are much more difficult undertaking that may require a radical restructuring of the society.

Understanding the Ideological Background and Political Nature of CBPR

A successful CBPR process is dependent on all participants, academic and community acknowledging the roles of ideology, politics and policy. Participation in a CBPR project by community members and scientists requires that they share an ideology about the importance of community participation in society and in problem solving. The science that is conducted as part of a CBPR project must meet the same standards as that of any research project. However, collaborating on a CBPR project is a statement by community members and academics that mutual respect and work is democratic and enhances the benefits of research for local communities.

CBPR is a political process and a political statement. Acknowledging this simple fact will frighten some members of the academic community; particularly those who still operate under the illusion that science is value-free and that politics is separate from research. However, all research is a value-based activity. We should all be conscience of the influences of the political process on how governments allocate research funding, and that "pure" scientists are eggar to apply for that funding when it is available.

In the process of CBPR we must address political realities. In all CBPR projects we are working on issues that affect societal elites – politicians, industries – with political power. Ignoring political (and legal system) pressure is detrimental to CBPR projects. The entire domain of SLAPP suits has been one legalistic response to CBPR projects.

CBPR must deal with advocacy and policy. The groups involved in CBPR are advocates for their communities. For the process of CBPR research to succeed, participants need to

provide a constructive process to translate scientific results and advocacy into policy at the local, state, national level. The willingness of academic researchers to engage in advocacy and policy enhances credibility in the community and build further trust. There is a need for the CBPR researcher to educate his or her institution about the issues being addressed.

Documentation, Dissemination and Communication of CBPR Results

Making research results accessible to communities and community members is fundamental to a successful CBPR process. Results need to be published in many forms to ensure that the entire partnership benefits from reporting project results.

Results published for the community must be disseminated in appropriate venues (local newspapers, newsletters, circulars) and in appropriate languages for community members. Efforts must be placed on methods of dissemination and communication that meet the special needs of community members. In communities with a history of inferior educational resources and limited educational attainment, the communication of CBPR results need to make use of media other than print. For example, direct oral presentations to groups of community members, local radio and television broadcast (e.g., using local access channels), and making videotapes available through community organizations are all ways to disseminate study results to those with limited literacy. Among some immigrant communities, particularly those from Mexico and Central America, the photonovella and comic book formats are culturally appropriate media for communicating study results. Community dissemination can be a full-time job, and project resources must be allocated for this purpose.

It is also important to disseminate CBPR project results in professional journals. Publication in peer-reviewed journals makes the results of CBPR projects more powerful influences for policy change. Publication of CBPR results in referred journals not only records what was found, but also validates results among other scientists. Seeing the results of CBPR projects in professional journals will improve the evaluation of CBPR among professional colleagues, and among university leaders.

Disseminating CBPR results is not an activity to be left to the end of the project. It must be an ongoing activity of successful CBPR projects. The active dissemination of CBPR results is an important mechanism for providing a progress report to community members. Reporting results in progress can be a ticklish issue for the scientific aspects of a CBPR project. Preliminary results are often incorrect. Releasing results while still collecting data or evaluating interventions can “contaminate” or influence the project results.

Finally, dissemination and communication of CBPR results is an important avenue for influencing policy. Solid, defensible scientific results are more difficult for entrenched political powers to ignore than are the “undocumented” opinions of community residents.

Gaps and Problems

In addition to problems already discussed that can damage process in CBPR, there are several additional gaps and problems that need to be considered. The first of these is researchers over promising what science can deliver. A single project, no matter how well designed and executed, can seldom result in a cure for long-term community problems. Developing culturally appropriate health education materials and processes is important for improving general health in a community, but health education cannot alone cure social injustice or health disparities.

From the other perspective, community members should not blame scientists for not finding what the community wants them to find. It is often said by community advocacy groups that community members already know the answers, they are only waiting for scientists to prove them right. Unfortunately, sometimes community members are wrong. It is better to learn from projects that do not prove community members beliefs and look for other causes, than it is to blame researchers for lacking skills or sincerity.

Too often in CBPR projects the collaborators do not address the real end-game: policy. More attention must be paid in the development and implementation of CBPR to producing and disseminating results in a manner that can directly affect policy.

Finally, in CBPR there is a tension between process and product. A great deal of effort is invested in the process of CBPR, in building relationships and ensuring participation. On occasion, projects fail because no resources remain for actually completing the research after the investment in the process.

Institutionalization of this Research Paradigm

The ultimate success of CBPR process will be the institutionalization of this paradigm within schools of public health and public health departments. However, both of these institutions must be convinced that CBPR is beneficial to their meeting their primary missions – educating public health professionals and improving the public health. CBPR must be seen by these institutions as a process that better enables them to these ends.

CBPR projects:

- Build stronger relationships with the local community

- Educate students in real world situations

- Explicitly state the importance of class and race differences to project success