Community-based research (by and for the community) is important in planning for meaningful and positive community change.

This type of research is not only desirable, it is feasible.

By providing the skills as well as feasible next steps, this series will encourage community residents to be excited about moving forward with community-centered research.

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TRUTH, ETHICS, AND CREDIBILITY IN COMMUNITY-CENTERED RESEARCH

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INTRODUCTION

Scientific research is investigation or experimentation aimed at the discovery and interpretation of facts, revision of accepted theories or laws in the light of new facts, or practical application of such new or revised theories or law. For most of the 20th Century the norms that defined scientific inquiry were objectivity, distance from subjects, and value-neutrality. These norms do not apply in a contemporary type of research called “community-centered” research, which is done by and for communities. The subjects of community-centered research include the researchers themselves, and subjects are encouraged to articulate their individual values so that the larger community can be better understood.

It is not our intent to abandon or dismantle the scientific method, which has many appropriate research applications. It is an important part of our heritage as researchers, but we find ourselves also examining new ways of doing things. With regard to community-centered research, communities stand to gain or lose the most; researchers and institutions come and go but communities go on— with collective values, traditions and identities.

Even well-intentioned researchers sometimes neglect to incorporate community input in research design. As they evaluate ways to gather, analyze, and interpret information, an interesting conundrum emerges:

- Under what conditions is useful research also credible?
- Under what conditions is credible research also useful?

ETHICS

Science caution us not to mix ourselves in our work. We are taught that we must keep our own assumptions and reasoning (bias) from influencing our interpretations because to do so would be professionally unethical and would skew results.

To be sure, this seems logical and ideal. In all of life’s activities it is difficult to avoid making assumptions based on our own bias. It is precisely for this reason that community research centered outside the community, such as that designed and administered by “experts,” runs the risk of going awry. Outside experts can easily make incorrect assumptions about the values, concerns, and goals of a community they study, or allow their bias to influence what research finds.

Community research can and should have impacts that continue long after research activities cease. Because they are highly invested in research outcomes, communities deserve an opportunity to coach—as well as play—their own game. Their collective experience is their truth, and often, their greatest asset. As such, it is a rich source of data that must not be overlooked or minimized. In efforts to address community issues, actively involving community members in research design can often facilitate the use of, and enhance the value of, such local knowledge (Brown 1997).
DESIGNING ETHICAL AND CREDIBLE COMMUNITY RESEARCH

In light of these concerns, efforts to design credible community research should be guided by the community-centered research model. Community-centered research does not assume that the best research involves an outsider expert who arrives with an already developed plan. Instead, it offers an alternative in which communities are not just subjects of inquiry—but researchers themselves. In addition, the goals for research products are not just academic goals; they are identified by the community to address community needs. This perspective on research builds on common principles of Participatory Action Research (PAR) (Whyte 1991). PAR principles can be applied in community settings to address concerns about credibility and ethics. By focusing on subjective aspects of research that are often neglected, these principles stand in contrast to principles of traditional, externally-focused community research.

First, the role of "expert researcher" should be minimized and the roles of community members expanded beyond simply providing data to include formulating research goals and design. This not only moves the research focus from external to internal, but also frames the entire research process as community-owned and centered. In light of these ideas, research can and should be action oriented. If projects are inherently focused on community-level action, rather than academia for the production, communities perceive the project to be important—and credibility is enhanced. Finally, community-centered researchers should reject the idea of distancing themselves from the topic of investigation, and instead actively engage the subjects of inquiry. Doing so involves placing value on the use of "non-traditional" knowledge and local contexts. The use of non-traditional data (e.g., from sources other that scientific research methods) can further boost credibility.

To clarify this point, it is important to understand the difference between research-based knowledge and experiential knowledge. The former is structured and guided by one or more methods derived from scientific practice. Research-based knowledge emphasizes empirical observations as a "part of a testable hypothesis and discovery." In contrast, experiential knowledge comes from everyday interaction and experience that is not systematically organized. Also referred to as "local knowledge," knowing something as true through experience gives one a basis for certainty of an action, event, or filing that is grounded in a real context, which did not occur through the "testing" of ideas. As such, experiential knowledge has an intuitive bias that benefits community-centered research through familiarity and confidence in social interaction. Along with these strengths come the weaknesses associated with casual observation, so the information must be treated carefully.

What Makes Research Credible?

Sadly, a great deal of completed research matters little to the communities to which it relates. What then does research matter, or count as something relevant and applicable at the local level? It perhaps appears too simple to say that initiation and ownership of research make it matter. On a symbolic level, however, initiation and ownership amount to control over outcomes.

Advice to Researchers:

1. Enlist the support of local leaders and officials, such as the head of a local civic organization, to coordinate a public meeting to discuss research ideas and community needs.

2. Widenly publicize and hold a meeting(s) to explain your purpose, and brainstorm ideas for collecting data. Be open to alternate methods, such as video and audio recording.

3. Form citizen committees to have them define the local issues as well as the type and magnitude of importance each of these has locally.

4. Hold regular meetings to answer questions, debrief, and adjust the research plan as necessary.

5. Publicize and hold a meeting(s) to discuss research results. Make the presentation of results a partnership between you and the community. Continue to solicit feedback throughout this effort because for community members, the real work has only just begun. Clarify how the information can address the needs the community identified.
Many local people suspect that researchers look for a good story to tell—something that is interesting, appealing, and intriguing enough to constitute “worthy research.” Grand discovery matters little to locals if it is perceived as irrelevant or non-applicable. Without perceived relevance, community members are not likely to pay attention to outcomes.

It is also important to note that community members are more likely to accept research results that contradict their previously-held assumptions (or personal preferences) if they were meaningfully involved in the research process. They are also better able to “negotiate” any researcher biases they perceive if researchers demonstrate ethical and credible interactions and intentions (O’Brien 2000). Figure 1 offers helpful advice for making research meaningful to community members.

Summary

Communities are empowered when they are encouraged to discover their own truth, assess what they value, and act upon their own unique sets of experiences. Community members actively construct and prioritize what is most important at a local level through actions (Wilkinson 1991). In a relative sense, ethics of a given situation must also stem from the local context that helps define that situation from a community-centered perspective.

Discovery remains genuinely emergent if the discovery process is open, inclusive, and dynamic. As such, a collective research endeavor does not predetermine, stack, or bias results and outcomes. Credibility largely rests on believability that comes from trust, integrity, inclusiveness, forthrightness, and having a relationship (Luhmann 1979). Therefore, truth, ethics, and credibility have everything to do with local involvement.

References


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About This Series

The Measuring What Matters series provides encouragement, support, and tools for communities engaged in self-assessment. It is a comprehensive road map for understanding 1) what community-centered research is, 2) what forms it might take, and 3) what it might accomplish.

The series consists of an overview (CCR1, Winter 2003) and subsequent articles written by university faculty from across the West. The authors have experience working with rural communities, knowledge of self-assessment principles and techniques, and a good sense of the issues rural communities face.

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