

Community-Centered Research Series:

Measuring What Matters

TRUTH, ETHICS AND CREDIBILITY IN COMMUNITY-CENTERED RESEARCH

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



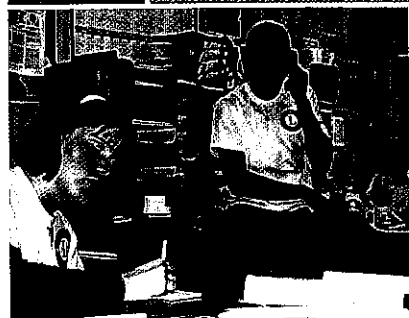
This type of research is not only desirable, it is feasible.



By providing theory as well as tangible next steps, this series will get your community excited about moving forward with community-centered research.



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TRUTH, ETHICS, AND CREDIBILITY IN COMMUNITY-CENTERED RESEARCH

by Dr. J.D Wulfhorst and Dr. Brian Eisenhauer

INTRODUCTION

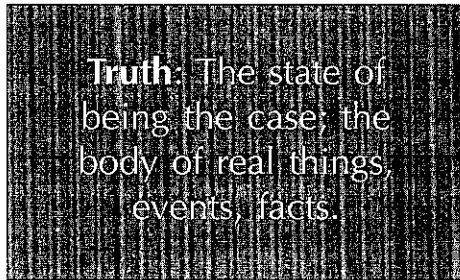
Scientific research is investigation or experimentation aimed at the discovery and interpretation of facts, revision of accepted theories or laws in the light of new facts, or practical application of such new or revised theories or law. For most of the 20th Century the norms that defined scientific 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?

TRUTH

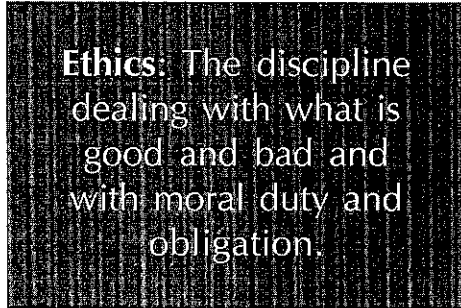


Truth: The state of being the case; the body of real things, events, facts.

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).

ETHICS



Ethics: The discipline dealing with what is good and bad and with moral duty and obligation.

Science cautions 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.

In a more collaborative research effort in which communities are involved in deciding which questions they want to ask, the biases of outside researchers are minimized and counterbalanced. As community members become involved in the research process their values, needs, and concerns are honored. This is an ethical responsibility for the community-centered researcher, just as is minimizing bias. A positive side effect is that community-centered research results in more meaningful outcomes.

The best research projects are those in which we act as facilitators, not directors. The “experts” fade into the background and the community takes the lead, in a sense forgetting the researchers are there. With that level of community ownership, as long as the process is inclusive and quality research methods are used, credibility is assured. Good researchers provide structure and guidance to community-centered research, but should not manipulate the process or outcomes to meet their own needs or expectations. They should not become overbearing in guiding the research; to do so would be unethical. In this context, researchers must question their traditional roles and relationships to communities.

CREDIBILITY

Credibility: The quality or power of inspiring belief.

From a community perspective, research credibility is established throughout the process of designing, gathering, interpreting, reporting, and using information. This includes how researchers interact with and treat

local people, including the acknowledgement of *their* credibility. Community representatives *do not* inherently trust those who “ride into town to save the day.” Some research subjects express concern that data will be misinterpreted, misunderstood, and misused in contexts outside the local parameters of where, how, and why it was collected.

We offer several generic scenarios to illustrate how something can go wrong when researchers employ conventional research styles in the context of community research:

- ✦ Representatives from a federal land management agency come to town for a public hearing they have planned. They gather input, leave, and are never heard from again.
- ✦ A zealous researcher comes to town with a sizeable new grant, which falls on deaf ears when presented to an underserved, disenfranchised group. The group is very deserving of the opportunity but remains uninterested.
- ✦ Community members who agree to participate in a project are not included in the data analysis and reporting. As a result, they oppose and dissociate from the results—and planned project outcomes backfire.

Common to each scenario is that projects were either not initiated or designed locally, or perhaps what began locally had no follow-through to maintain local direction and input, or as we outline here, *community-centered*. Research designed without the community, and perhaps even more importantly, *for* the community, often gets off to a bad start simply because it fails to gain input in the planning stages and establish clear goals for how the research will help the community. This gives the impression that researchers do not

have the community’s interests at heart or even in mind at all in some cases. Do these situations happen? A story from community research illustrates the point. When conducting survey research in a rural community in the Intermountain West a graduate student went to a residents’ door and asked for their participation. Upon answering the door and hearing a description of the study the resident responded, “Well, why should I do this? This is the second or third time I’ve filled something like this out, and if all it’s going to do is sit on a shelf, collect dust, and get some academic person tenure, I’ll pass.”

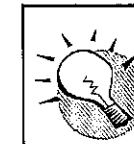
Another way in which communities lose in the traditional research model is that important local knowledge is rarely incorporated into research design. Externally designed research relies on academic expertise and externally focused mechanisms to elicit information, and this information is too often not locally grounded.

Local knowledge is community specific. It includes a full set of contexts—positive and negative—that accompany information collected for research. The full array of contexts enhances the ability to sort through complex community-level dilemmas (Nisbet 1990).

Community-centered research offers an alternative in which communities are not just subjects of inquiry, but researchers themselves.

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 outside expert who arrives with an already developed plan. Instead, it offers an alternative in which



Minimize the role of the “expert researcher” and expand the roles of community members.

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 has much in common with the 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 academic level 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 than 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 systematic and guided by one or more methods derived from scientific practice. Research-based knowledge emphasizes empirical observations as a part of a “testable model for 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 thing that is grounded in a real context—which did not occur through the “testing” of ideas. As such, experiential knowledge has an intuitive base 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* make research matter, or count as something relevant and applicable at the local level? Perhaps it 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:

Keys to Conducting Meaningful Community-Centered Research

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. Widely 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.

Figure 1. Advice to Researchers

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 meaning-fully 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 discover 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.

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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.

We encourage you to collect the entire series. Each issue is three-hole punched for easy storage in your own resource binder. Other *Measuring What Matters* issues include:

- *Take the Plunge! An Overview of Community-Centered Research* (CCR 1)
- *Using the Internet for Community Analysis: Sources of Western Data* (CCR 2)
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