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

By providing clarity as well as tangible next steps, this work will put your community on solid ground moving forward with evidence-based strategies.
CAPITALIZING ON THE POTENTIAL TO EMPOWER AND MOBILIZE

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INTRODUCTION

Empowerment and mobilization are important concepts in community-centered research that are typically linked with the research process. These ideas are more often associated only with the outcomes of research when findings are applied to meet community needs. However, empowerment and mobilization can also occur during the community research process. This phenomenon is an important, but subtle and often overlooked, possibility. This article highlights ways in which community research can capitalize on its potential to mobilize and empower, thus making the research process more meaningful for the community.

Social researchers are well aware that the research process may have effects upon those involved. Concerns usually focus on potential impacts on the validity of information collected. Traditional approaches to social research asserted that becoming too close to the subject of inquiry can result in bias, and even conventional community research was designed from the outside looking in. Researchers often went to great lengths to dissociate themselves from study participants and outcomes in order to prevent bias. This separation resulted in "objective" knowledge, but it also perpetuated limitations on how and to what extent academic results directly affected or benefited local communities. More recent theory advocates making research more community-driven and ensuring that research results are readily available to communities so they can make informed decisions. But this is the full extent of the empowering and mobilizing potential of community-centered research? In fact, there are a variety of positive outcomes that can result from community involvement in the research process itself.

In contrast to the traditional perspective on research, community-centered research should be thought of as action-oriented throughout all its stages because it is performed first and foremost to achieve outcomes, rather than to simply advance academic thinking. Community-centered research should be thought of as action-oriented throughout all its stages because it is performed first and foremost to achieve outcomes, rather than to simply advance academic thinking. In this sense it is in line with some long-standing traditions in social thought which assert that societal research is unfilled if it does not have a tangible effect on its subject. Durkheim (1964) asked, "Why strive for knowledge of reality if this knowledge cannot serve in life?" From a different theoretical perspective, Marx (Engels 1970) asserted that, "The philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways; the point is to change it." Given these perspectives from history, prominent social thinkers, people involved in community-centered research may wonder how the research process became so divorced from action. If community-centered research is intended to work with and affect communities, it is logical to ask how the research process might be designed with an action orientation similar to that traditionally reserved for the findings of research. In the remainder of this article, rationales are offered for community-centered research and ideas and tools to aid in developing an approach that can empower and mobilize are discussed.

WHAT DO WE MEAN BY "MOBILIZATION" AND "EMPOWERMENT"?

Mobilization and empowerment are lofty terms, and therefore sometimes difficult to link directly with tangible experiences. It helps to classify the terms as action-oriented and attitude-oriented, respectively. Simply put, mobilization is about behavior to instigate change, and involves people acting to affect issues in their community. Empowerment is about beliefs that people, as a community, can address issues and solve problems. Often the belief that community members can change things (empowerment) must come before action will be taken by a community; there must be empowerment in order to mobilize.

The relationship between these two concepts also flows the other way; increased awareness of community mobilization can make the sense of empowerment in a community. Figure 1 represents the relationship between these two concepts. In order for communities to be affected by these concepts, a necessary element is that the sentiments must be widespread among members of the community. All too often a few motivated and exceptional individuals are the ones primarily responsible for community-centered research. For empowerment and mobilization goals to be achieved, this tendency must be avoided, and a collective wave of activity must be developed in which more than a few individuals are involved in the research. Once it is recognized that these ideas are important, the next step is to explore the question of how the research process can help build these components within communities.

GENERATING EMPOWERMENT

Community-centered research should be inclusive of different social groups within a community. In order to perform reliable, valid, and ethical research, diverse social groups must be included in the process, regardless of traditional divisions. This is an important part of any effort to develop research that empowers and mobilizes because it can help contribute to the development of a process that expands to involve many community members, rather than just a few individuals. Bringing a diversity of groups to the table is one of the most challenging parts of the process, but also carries the greatest potential for empowerment.

Bring People to the Table

In this stage of the research process the goal should be to attempt to generate two shared visions: one of community, and one of the project’s purposes. Shared visions may bring bridges between previously unconnected segments of a community, and can empower community members involved in the research. Bridging long-standing divisions generates an awareness of the potential within communities, as new allegiances are forged where fractures once existed. In the past, divisions within the community may have drawn attention and sapped energy. Once shared vision is created energy and focus may be shifted to other tasks that research participants have identified as important. Bridging divisions does not guarantee that everyone will agree or that value differences will disappear. However, these common ground for generating shared, community-focused sentiments, participants can “agree to disagree.” In doing so, community members can devote their energy and attention toward “getting it done,” rather than taking uncooperative or competitive stances. Building upon shared vision may enable community members to see each other in a new light, and can result in the recognition that all segments of a community usually share at least some common ground in their community visions. Building on this common ground can extend the breadth of local community involvement, and in the process of addressing common concerns community members see that different perspectives and strengths can be pulled together to meet goals. This is not only an empowering realization, but also constitutes empowerment as an act. Guiding the research process and achieving these goals can be facilitated by applying some of the principles of participatory action research (PAR) (Wlyte 1991). Participatory action research approaches move beyond conducting research to achieve outcomes in a community, or simply involving community members in research, and instead forward a model in which community members are involved throughout the research process. This includes setting the goals of research, determining how it will be conducted, analyzing data, and applying the findings. Through involvement in all the stages of research community members can assume ownership of the processes involved, and that ownership may create a sense of empowerment by virtue of facilitating the belief that the community is capable of such endeavors now and in the future.
Accordingly, following the guiding principles of PR to empower community members as completely as possible throughout all stages of the research process - an important step in conducting an empowering community-centered research. To be successful this endeavor must begin as soon as possible in the research development process.

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A forward-looking focus in the early stages of the research process can also enhance the sense of empowerment among community members. As important issues facing the community are identified, the conditions for success based on an emergent vision of the community's future are established. Empowerment occurs to the extent that community members take ownership of the research, believe in their ability to extend it, and recognize that they themselves can direct and play important roles in it. As stated by one community leader in the Pacific Northwest, "The best projects are those where the community takes hold and we [researchers] fade into the background. If done correctly, our best successes are when they forget we are even there."

If researchers express confidence in the ability of community members to organize and conduct research, community members will be more confident in their ability to confront, rather than ignore, future issues. This confidence may lead to future mobilization and empowerment needed to address as yet unidentified community issues.

Develop a Shared Vision
How can a shared community vision be achieved? There is no surefire or easy process to follow, and success is never assured, but perhaps the most important part of the process is to make a concerted effort to strive for this goal. Given the goals of this view of community-centered research a few places to start this process can be identified.

Project Goal Design
When designing project goals, make sure that all possible interests in the community are represented and involved, particularly the groups that are traditionally marginalized. Those groups may include minorities, the economically disadvantaged, women, or those participating in an industry that is historically not included in community participation efforts. It is important to acknowledge that in truly community-centered research it must be recognized that marginalization and power are important factors and that the process of involving all community members will vary. The simple list of marginalized groups that exist in all communities cannot be generated and followed like a formula, because local specifics must be considered in the process, ensuring that as much input as possible is heard and respected. It is not always possible to engage every group in a community, but the most important factor for community research is to initiate and carry out an open and inclusive process. Noting input from marginalized groups or falling to reach out to them has numerous negative effects, including perpetuation of existing divisions within the community that make it more difficult to undertake community-wide efforts that benefit from high levels of acceptance and involvement.

Involving Groups from the Community
In addition to crossing the important divisions that exist across ethnic, social class, and other lines, it is necessary to make an effort to involve groups that may not be at the forefront of community planning and change. For example, in a community experiencing rapid population growth due to the in-migration of retirees the newcomers are typically highly motivated to become involved in community affairs and may have the time to do so. Attempting to stimulate and obtain the involvement of young families, who may have a different sense of place but may not be immediate volunteers in these efforts, is also important. Involvement of previously marginalized groups fosters a shared community vision that is empowering because groups who previously felt that their views and desires were outside the future direction of the community sense that their opinions matter. This not only brings more participants to the table, but also enhances the perception that change can happen because it is truly a community-wide desire.

Community and Sense of Place
Perhaps most importantly, be alert and sensitive to residents' reasons for attachments to their community and their "sense of place". The idea of sense of place embodies the sentiments and perspectives people have about areas in the world, including the natural environment, their cultural identity, and the reasons behind their attachments to them. Reasons are attached to their local community and are referred to here as "sense of community". The idea of sense of community may include attachments based on identification with an agricultural or cultural or forest identity, some other community identity, and/or bonds with a place based on family roots or social attachments to others within the community. If what motivates people to become involved in community-centered research is understood, articulating shared values and vision can be more effectively facilitated.

Develop a Shared Sense of Concern
Use questions that clarify common sentiments to develop a shared sense of community. Questions such as, "Why do we like this place?" can be used to explore the reasons people reveal shared attachments to community. Sense of community and the motivations for becoming involved in community cross-cut economic, social, and ethnic divisions within the community. In addition, sense of place in the form of attachments to the landscape in which communities are situated can provide a sense of identity and understanding of the meaning of shared values.

Identify Issues of Common Concern
When diverse groups are brought together to work on community issues they often realize that their reasons for being attached to their community are more similar than they might believe (for a discussion of this issue see Katz and Laumann 1990). Trying to identify the issues of common concern among diverse groups and making these the focus of the research process can be a starting point for discussions. Even when it is not uncommon for newcomers and long-term residents to be concerned about issues of clean water, or the continued cultural heritage and identity. Identification of these common ideas will help facilitate the development of a shared community vision that can guide research, and may empower a community to be more successful in revealing that it is not as divided as some may perceive.

Experience the Community Together
Some of these tasks may be accomplished in a community center meeting room or the like, but building a common sense of place and community by experiencing the community as a group helps forge social connections. Together, visit the farms that contribute to community character. Walk in the forest lands that represent residents' values. Visit the specific places people call home and the local landmarks they treasure. These concrete and place-specific experiences help bond people involved in community research and contribute to connections that can empower.

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In the end, the guiding rule for empowerment is that community-centered research must engage, not just involve residents. It is critical to work with community members throughout the process, as this allows the community to assume ownership of the project and develop skills that can be used in the future. Involving as many members of the community as possible to avoid relying on the efforts of a few individuals is an important part of realizing this empowerment goal. Identifying the expertise, skills, identities, personalities, cultural capital, and other community resources among community members is fantastically important. Recognition of these elements creates a shared belief within a community that "we can do this," and that it is not just one person that is fixing things done. Albert Einstein (1946: 270) once said, "The whole of science is nothing more than a refinement of everyday thinking." If this is true, researchers need to be careful about ensuring community members that academic and technical language is simply more formal phrasing and rigorous use of commonly accessible ideas.
The goal of focus groups is not to generate consensus, but rather to stimulate discussion about a topic in an open environment where people can express their views and react to the opinions of others. The conversations are recorded and the data are analyzed using content analysis techniques to identify common themes, significant differences, and important insights that emerged in the discussion. Data designed and conducted well this data collection method approximates normal social interaction, and thus produces information with very high face validity (Morgan 1996), which simply means that the ideas generated represent community members' understandings accurately used by them. While other forms of validity are important to consider, this form of validity is especially vital for efforts to empower and mobilize communities through research.

The high face validity of focus group data exists, in part, because the techniques for reporting results allows participants' direct input to appear in the final report. This fosters participant ownership of the project and its findings through the direct use of ideas and opinions expressed by community members in their words. Focus groups have very strong partnership building effects (Urwin and Haynes 1996), and can be useful as a preliminary stage in questionnaire design. For these reasons, using focus groups in the early stages of community-centered research can have mobilizing affects. Participants see their input given voice and their ideas taken up, which is important to their involvement and may even stimulate the involvement of other community members.

Decide Roles and Responsibilities

It is not uncommon to find that community groups focused on a change are heavily influenced, and primarily lead, by exceptional and dedicated individuals. Reliance on a single "charismatic leader," as these individuals are sometimes referred to, may be the path of least resistance for mobilizing action to achieve change. However, this pattern may have serious consequences for long-term mobilization because if community members come to depend too heavily on just one person, empowerment does not truly occur at the community level. In addition, the demands on this type of active individual are often so extreme that they cannot maintain their critical role once the focalpoint issue is resolved; they usually experience "burnout." To sustain mobilization, community-centered research must ensure that tasks and duties are shared and well-distributed. A collective web of activity is more likely to perpetuate mobilization than reliance on the outstanding efforts of a few individuals. As more tasks are distributed throughout a community by the constant expansion of the research network, sharing of duties becomes the norm governing community commitment and the community is more empowered to mobilize in the future.

CONCLUSIONS

The basic goal of community-centered research is two-fold: to learn more about communities and the issues they face, and to achieve action-oriented outcomes. Truly community-centered research also requires that community members themselves are engaged and involved throughout the research process, as active participants in designing and achieving these goals. This need is most acutely felt when a collective web of action is developed through efforts to involve representatives of diverse constituencies. Traditionally, the terms empowerment and mobilization related only to what was done with the findings of community research. While efforts to use information generated by community-centered research are necessary and critical, the research process can also have empowering and mobilizing effects on those involved. The primary goals of this article have been to demonstrate that the research process itself provides opportunities to promote empowerment and mobilization, and to share ideas on how these opportunities can be realized. While several means for meeting these goals were outlined here, perhaps the most important means to keep empowerment and mobilization in mind as you work with communities to design and conduct research that is important to community members. Doing so will enhance the community-centered nature of research and a community's sense of its own capacity, and can help the community view its goals as important to the immediate project and in future ones.

REFERENCES


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

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