Community-Centered Research Series:

Measuring What Matters



CAPITALIZING ON THE POTENTIAL TO EMPOWER AND MOBILIZE

Community-based research (by and for the community) is important in planning for meaningful and positive community change. By providing theory as well as tangible most stops, this sories will get your community excited about moving for ward with commandy conjected costandly



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

INTRODUCTION

mpowerment and mobilization are important concepts in __ community-centered research that are not 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 is this 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. In this sense it is in line with some long-standing traditions in social thought which assert that social research is unfulfilled 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 us in life?" From a different theoretical perspective, Marx (Engels 1970)

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asserted that, "The philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways; the point is to change it." Given these perspectives from historically 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

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> reserved for the findings of research. In the remainder of this article rationales are offered for communitycentered 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 attitudeoriented, respectively. Simply put, mobilization is about behavior to instigate change, and involves people acting to affect issues in their community. Empowerment is about believing 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 enhance 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 communitycentered research. For empowerment and mobilization goals to be achieved this tendency must be avoided, and a collective web 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, a next step is to explore the question of how the research process can help build these

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

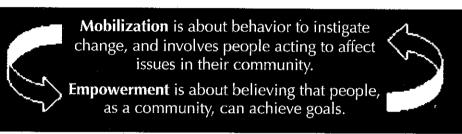
In this stage of the research process the goal should be to attempt to

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 outcome. Guid-

ing the research process and achieving these goals can be facilitated by applying some of the principles of participatory action research (PAR) (Whyte 1991). Par-

ticipatory 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 fostering the belief that the community is capable of such endeavors now and in the future.



generate two shared visions: one of

community, and one of the project's

purposes. Shared visions may build

bridges between previously uncon-

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 com-

munity may have drawn attention and

shifted to other tasks that research par-

ticipants have identified as important.

Bridging divisions does not guarantee

that everyone will agree or that value

differences will disappear. However,

erating shared, community-focused

sentiments, participants can "agree

by reaching common ground and gen-

sapped energy. Once shared vision

is created energy and focus may be

nected segments of a community, and

Figure 1. Mobilization and Empowerment

GENERATING EMPOWERMENT

components within communities.

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Accordingly, following the guiding principles in PAR - to engage community members as completely as possible throughout all stages of the research process - is an important step in conducting empowering community-centered research. To be successful this endeavor must begin as soon as possible in the research development process.

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Ironically, our best successes are when they forget we are even there."

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, goals and outcomes 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 researcher in the Pacific Northwest, "The best projects are those where the community takes hold and we [researchers] fade into the background. Ironically, 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. These 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 is affected by local, as well as larger, social processes. Accordingly a simple list of marginalized groups that exists in all communities cannot be generated and followed like a formula, because local specifics must be considered. In the process, ensure 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. Neglecting input from marginalized groups or failing 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.

Involve Groups from Throughout 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 settings in which their community is situated, and the reasons behind their attachments to them. Reasons residents are attached to their local communities are referred to here as "sense of community." This sense of community may include attachments based on identification with an agricultural or forest identity, some other community ideal, 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 Community

Use questions that clarify common sentiments to develop a shared sense of community. Questions such as, "Why do we like this place?" can be empowering because they reveal shared attachments to community. Sense of community and the motivations for becoming involved in community-centered research can cross divisions within the community. In addition, sense of place in the form of attachments to the landscape in which communities are situated can provide another potential basis for generating recognition 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 Smith and Krannich 2000). 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 of these topics. For example, it is not uncommon for newcomers and long-term residents to be concerned about issues of clean water, or the continuation of an agricultural identity and heritage. Identification of these common ideals will help facilitate the development of a shared community vision that can guide research, and may empower a community by 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.

The guiding rule for empowerment is that community-centered research must engage, not just involve residents.

In the end, the guiding rule for empowerment is that communitycentered 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 fundamental to empowerment. 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 getting things done. Albert Einstein (1936: 270) once said, "The whole of science is nothing more than a refinement of everyday thinking." If this is true, researchers can instill trust by assuring community members that academic and technical language is simply more formal phrasing and rigorous use of commonly accessible ideas.

MOBILIZING COMMUNITIES

Establish Motivation

Community-centered research is driven by a need for action, but getting community members mobilized to take part in the research process can be challenging, as can maintaining involvement. The following points identify some techniques and approaches that may be useful in efforts to mobilize community members.

Most often community-centered research will be undertaken in response to some current need or critical issue that threatens community identity or way of life. While using this flashpoint as a motivating and unifying force can be productive, it has negative consequences for longterm mobilization. While it is true that identifying and publicizing a current and critical issue can bring people to the research process initially, relying on that technique too heavily is likely to result in a "resolve and dissolve" pattern of community action once the immediate threat has been addressed.

To avoid this pattern it is necessary for researchers to clearly communicate that the research project is not just about the current issue. It is also about empowering the community to effectively address both anticipated and unanticipated issues in the future.

Within this focus use PAR principles to ensure that community members are not just participants in the research results, but instead are active participants that determine its goals and direction as well as how its findings are applied. The more widespread the sense of ownership of the research is in a community the more likely it is mobilization will be long-lasting.

Analyzing factors leading up to the current issue often helps community members anticipate and effectively deal with future challenges. Establishing a long-term perspective in the early stages of research can enhance mobilization in two ways. First, it ensures that the people involved in the research process are not just problem-focused, but are also community-focused. This can lead to long-term commitment to community activities. Second, it can engage people that may only be on the fringes of the current issue, but who have a desire to become more involved in addressing future issues. This is especially important in efforts to maintain mobilization, as communitycentered research is most effective if it involves a diverse set of participants in a web of collective activity. The fact that the project is not dependent on a few dedicated individuals if such a web is established means that it is more likely that mobilization can be sustained when individuals' involvement is affected by personal factors.

Use Focus Groups

Even research methods themselves can be selected with mobilization goals in mind. Early stages of community-centered research typically involve identification of 1) social divisions within a community, 2) common understandings of community as well as reasons for attachment to it, and 3) issues the community faces. Focus groups can be an effective research method for collection of this type of social data. The focus group is a popular but poorly understood social research method. Focus group research is a qualitative method of inquiry that uses a predetermined set of topics and open-ended questions. Focus groups are administered by a facilitator to guide discussion among a small group, usually made up of 6-12

to generate consensus, but ratherto stimulate discussion about a topic in an open environment wherein 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 discussions. When 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 when evaluated 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 goal of focus groups is not to generate consensus, but rather to stimulate discussion about a topic in an open environment wherein people can express their views and react to the opinions of others.

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 own words. Focus groups have very strong partnership building effects (Urwin and Haynes 1998), 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

people. The goal of focus groups is not their input given voice and theirideas taken into account, which tends to perpetuate 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 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 flashpoint 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 involvement and the community is more empowered to mobilize in the future.



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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 effectively met 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 those opportunities can be realized. While several means for meeting these goals were outlined here, perhaps the most important message is 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 that can help the community achieve its goals in the immediate project and in future ones.

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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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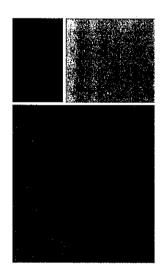
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