

CBR and the Two Forms of Social Change

Keynote Address Prepared for Learn and Serve America: Higher Education National Community-Based Research Networking Initiative Subgrantee Meeting · October 25-27, 2007, St. Paul, Minnesota

Randy Stoecker

It is really daunting to be asked to try and say something of value to a group of people who themselves already have so much of value to say. Not to mention the fact that I am speaking after dinner on a day when so many of you have been traveling. So I hope you can sympathize with my task here.

In fact, the last time I spoke to a group of people committed to community engagement after dinner, nearly a decade ago now, it was to ask for their participation in a project to research the CBR they were all doing. It was a tough house, as people challenged the project on the grounds that it had been developed without their involvement. And they were absolutely correct. I, and many of you, have learned much about the importance of power in these kinds of relationships over the past decade. And I find myself still learning. So what I'd like to talk about this evening is what I am still learning, and I apologize in advance if you have already learned these things.

I'd like to start with labels since, as each label becomes popularized, its definition becomes more and more diffuse. CBR and CBPR, for example, have come to include everything from research that is controlled by the community to research that is simply located in a community. Sometimes it includes action and sometimes it does not.

So I want to temporarily go to a label that is a bit more conceptual and talk about "participatory and action-oriented forms of research." I only do that to clarify the two parts of CBR that I want to focus on—the participation and the action. It is these two things that will lead us to an understanding of the two forms of social change and, for me at least, a better understanding of how to achieve both of those forms of social change.

Action

I want to begin with the more concrete of the two forms of social change that relates to the action component of CBR. Now, it is important to note that I am drawing on the CBR tradition that extends the social change vein of service learning, in contrast to the charity model (Marullo and Edwards, 2000). Most of us already understand that distinction, but it is important to emphasize here. Because, as you understand, the list of possible research projects within the social change variant are primarily conflict-oriented (Stoecker, 2003). The social change here is not about changing individuals but about changing systems and particularly about changing power structures.

Many of us, me included, dutifully carry out our community-based research projects in this vein, hoping that they will matter. Too often, however, it is not clear what they accomplish. We write the report and the group takes it, and then the community organization carries on the same way we suspect they would have even without the research.

This produces two questions. The first question is, what kind of action should we expect from a CBR project? The second question is, what is required to get such action?

These questions point us to the first kind of social change. This first kind of social change is about the change that a specific CBR project is designed to produce, and we might think about it as the first test of a good CBR project. But should we think about it that way? I worry that we place too much burden on

the CBR itself to produce change. Do we even know what the theoretical mechanisms are by which CBR is supposed to produce social change? So we do a study of Black-white school achievement gaps. How does that study change those achievement gaps? We can certainly imagine a variety of ways that it might be used to change those achievement gaps. It could become part of a student-parent advocacy effort. It could inform the development of tutoring programs. It could influence curriculum reform.

But the research itself will achieve none of those things. I sit on the board of the Sociological Initiatives Foundation, which funds CBR. And all of us on the board have been sobered by the lack of concrete strategy presented by applicants about how the research will effect change. The bulk of the proposals say they will produce a report or a website or a presentation. Only a minority talk about how the research will be used in a broader strategy.

And therein lies the key to achieving the first form of social change. Successful CBR projects are part of successful social change campaigns. And thinking that way produces an entirely different kind of logic. When I'm not doing CBR, I am hanging out with community organizers. Community Organizing is a very specific vein of community work, and I am increasingly being convinced of the necessity of community organizing for CBR.

What is community organizing? As defined by Dave Beckwith (1997) community organizing is:

...the process of building power through involving a constituency in identifying problems they share and the solutions to those problems that they desire; identifying the people and structures that can make those solutions possible; enlisting those targets in the effort through negotiation and using confrontation and pressure when needed; and building an institution that is democratically controlled by that constituency that can develop the capacity to take on further problems and that embodies the will and the power of that constituency.

The goal of community organizing is to both win on issues and build powerful community organizations that can better influence the public and private policies that impact its members.

And that often requires careful research. Because CBR attempts to do research that is *community-based*, community organizing is a better fit than other forms of social action such as external advocacy where the strategy is controlled by people other than those experiencing the problems.

An increasing number of community organizers are writing about the relationship between research and action. It's interesting reading, because community organizers are all about action. Will Collette (2004: 226-228) lists very specific purposes for research in community organizing:

- Target the best neighborhoods for organizing
- To pick your shots
- To pinpoint your target's vulnerabilities
- To determine available sources of money
- To establish the legal basis and precedents for what your group wants
- To compare the living conditions of your group and your opponents
- To unearth sources of financing behind your opposition

- To find people who share an interest in the group's issue
- To uncover hidden connections
- To investigate scare tactics used by opponents

Rinku Sen (2003) devotes a chapter of her book on community organizing to the use of research, focusing more on the process than the specific types of research, but suggests similar broad purposes.

My own application of the model, adapting Strand et al. (2003), emphasizes thinking about a social change process as having four stages. The first stage is diagnosis, where you figure out what the issue is. The second stage is prescription, where the group figures out what to do about the issue. The third stage is implementation, where the group does what it decided. And the fourth stage is evaluation, where the group determines if its prescription is working.

At its basis, then, linking CBR to community organizing can improve community action because it focuses the research in serving a specific social change campaign. Community organizers, and the members of the organizations they help build, know much better than most professional researchers how to create social change. Linking our CBR work to such efforts helps assure its usefulness.

Even more importantly, however, connecting CBR to community organizing also helps us with the second kind of social change.

Participation

Participation is the more abstract form of social change, but may ultimately be more important. For we can think about the best CBR as not just supporting action on specific issues, but more broadly transforming who produces knowledge, who influences public knowledge, and who controls the knowledge production process.

To understand this second form of social change, we need to understand the concept of the social relations of knowledge production, initially developed by people like John Gaventa (1993), but not followed up on as much as it should have been. Those of you who have read your Karl Marx will understand the idea of the social relations of production—roughly, the way that people are organized to produce things. Here we are talking about the way that people are organized to produce knowledge. Marx's goal was to theorize a way for the people who did the work of producing things—the working class—to organize and control the way things were produced.

The second form of social change in CBR is similar, but must take a different route. It is relatively easy to see the path from a large oppressed wage labor force, to organized workers that take over the production process (though, of course, it is difficult to implement that path). But ending domination in the knowledge production process is much different. Consider for a moment that the actual paid knowledge production workforce is relatively small. Yes, there are lots of people who produce actual books, CDs, etc. But they are producing books and CDs, not knowledge. Those of us who produce actual knowledge (including lies that pass for knowledge) comprise a relatively small group. And we are, like it or not, a pretty privileged group. So organizing us won't do much to transform the social relations of knowledge production.

Our task, then, is to organize the people who have been subjected to the knowledge we produce, and to support their development as independent and empowered knowledge producers. That is a hugely different task from organizing a wage labor force. For we are trying to organize people to voluntarily produce their own knowledge on their own time.

And here again community organizing offers us a framework from which we can develop a strategy.

Sohng (1995), for example, says that we have to view research as a site of resistance and struggle, and describes the participatory action researcher's role very similarly to the way community organizers describe their work. The effective participatory action researcher, according to Sohng, needs to:

- deeply understand the community
- establish trust with its members
- engage community members in critical dialogue about their condition
- use the research process to develop community leadership
- jointly form the research focus and strategy with the community

We can add to this list full participation and influence by community members over all stages of the research process beyond forming the focus and the strategy or methodology: collecting the data, analyzing the data, and acting on the results.

Remember that the first goal of such a process is to support action on a specific issue. But just like the community organizer's task is not just to help the community win an issue, but to build a powerful organization that can win on subsequent issues, the participatory action researcher's task is not just to provide research data on an issue, but to develop the community's power to bring research data to subsequent issues.

The second form of social change, then, is to transform the social relations of knowledge production so that people who have only been passive recipients of knowledge become active knowledge producers whose knowledge has power. And this point is important to understand. The old adage that "knowledge is power" is simplistic and dangerous. It is not enough to have knowledge. Lots of people have knowledge about what is good, right, and moral. That does not prevent them from being subjected to oppression, torture, and genocide. The participatory action researcher's task is to build up people's capacity to both create knowledge, and to put knowledge into practice in ways that enhances their power to win on issues and influence the course of world events.

Here again we are, as a practice, not fully pursuing such goals. Going back to my experience with the Sociological Initiatives Foundation, we see only a minority of proposals that involve community members, or organizations controlled by them, at the inception of a CBR project. Instead, community participation is recruited mostly at the data collection stage.

Next Steps

When we succeed at supporting communities to create powerful knowledge, we begin to win on specific issues while simultaneously transforming the social relations of knowledge production. Communities will be heard in ways they were not, influence policy in ways they did not, and become self-determining in ways they had not. Governments, corporations, and churches will be less able to deceive and manipulate. When that happens, everything is possible.

The question is, what does CBR look like if we develop the practice around the two forms of social change? Here are three ways that we can think about better specifying our current practice. We know some of these things happen already, but we often don't make them part of our planning.

1. **Choosing CBR projects:** Choosing a good project could be done according to the same criteria that community organizers use for choosing a good issue. There are many criteria for choosing a good issue (Staples, 2004), but the easiest for me to remember are "specific, realizable, organizable." A CBR project to study global warming may not be very effective, but one focused on the environmental effects

of a local industry could have much more impact. Likewise, the project needs to be focused around an achievable goal. Trying to shut down the industry may be impractical, but designing research to identify the worst offender could get them to clean up their act. And finally, the project needs to be one that lots of people care about. If no one thinks they are affected by that industry prior to the research project, research is not likely to convince them to care.

2. Designing a CBR project to support leadership development: Using a CBR project to build community leadership means much more than simply getting some people to tell other people what to do. It is about building people's skills to become confident creators and communicators of knowledge. And that means considering whether the CBR project itself can develop people's skills. Can they benefit from skills in how to make judgments about what is valid knowledge, or how to create knowledge that can stand up to the opposition's critique, or how to express knowledge orally or in written or multimedia form? Consciously designing the CBR project to support people in developing those skills—not participation for participation's sake but because it will build people's leadership capacity by building knowledge skills—can produce not just a win on the issue but a community with overall greater capacity.

3. Designing a CBR project to support organization building: Closely connected to leadership development is organization building. Building an organization is about organizing the leadership into a sustainable collective. Here there is a balancing act. On the one hand, we need to look for ways that the research can give organization members tasks to complete, as we know that one of the ways to keep people involved in an organization is to make sure they always have something to do. On the other hand, it is important to make sure that the research does not take time away from the other very important tasks that people have to complete in order to win on the issue. In addition, it is important to organize the research in such a way that the organization builds its own capacity to make effective decisions about how to do research, hold professional researchers accountable, combat the opposition's research, and integrate research with its overall social change strategy.

Thinking about CBR in this way has some important implications for those of us who identify ourselves with the academy. Those of us who have direct contact with communities and who think of ourselves primarily as researchers, need to be superb social change strategists or allow ourselves to be trained or led by those who are. We need training in how to choose issues, develop leaders, build organizations, choose tactics, and other relevant community organizing skills. This also means thinking through the relationship between a participatory action research process and member recruitment, organization building, leadership development, tactical strategy, and popular education. None of the CBR courses I am currently familiar with provide such orientation and training, or require it from other sources.

Those of us who support the faculty and students working in the trenches need to become comfortable supporting those faculty and students who deploy CBR toward the two forms of social change. That means handling the calls from the economic and political elites who may feel threatened by it.

I am extraordinarily fortunate to be at the University of Wisconsin, where the culture of academic freedom is known through the trials of a participatory action researcher, Richard Ely, at the close of the 19th century. The threats to his career because of his work with labor and community organizations led to official investigation by the UW Board of Regents, and his ultimate exoneration led to the Regents' statement affirming academic freedom that is recited regularly across campus and the city:

We cannot for a moment believe that knowledge has reached its final goal, or that the present condition of society is perfect. We must therefore welcome from our teachers such discussions as shall suggest the means and prepare the way by which knowledge may be extended, present evils be removed and others prevented. We feel that we would be unworthy of the position we hold if we did not believe in progress in all departments of knowledge. In all lines of academic investigation it is of the utmost importance that the investigator should be absolutely free to follow the indications of truth wherever they may lead. Whatever may be the limitations which trammel inquiry elsewhere we believe

the great state University of Wisconsin should ever encourage that continual and fearless sifting and winnowing by which alone the truth can be found (in Woodbury, 1949).

Developing CBR to pursue the two forms of social change is, for me, the ultimate form of truth seeking. For it is not only an act of truth seeking, it is an act of liberation. We live in a society where, because of discriminatory and oppressive pedagogies, the overwhelming majority of the population, even in this country, is not free to seek truth. If we are to fully sift and winnow knowledge to remove present evils and prevent future one, it can only be through the full, fully developed, and fully knowledgeable participation of those who most suffer from present evils and are most at risk of future evils. May we be their partners.

References

- Beckwith, D. with Lopez, C. (1997). *Community Organizing: People Power from the Grassroots. COMM-ORG Papers*, <http://comm-org.wisc.edu/papers.htm>
- Collette, W. (2004) *Research for Organizing*. in Staples, L. *Roots to Power*, 2e. New York: Greenwood Publishing
- Gaventa, J. (1993). The Powerful, the Powerless, and the Experts: Knowledge Struggles in an Information Age. in P. Park, M. Brydon-Miller, B. Hall, & T. Jackson (eds.) *Voices of Change: Participatory Research in the United States and Canada*. Westport, Connecticut: Bergin and Garvey.
- Marullo, S., & Edwards, B. (2000). From Charity to Justice: The Potential of University-Community Collaboration for Social Change. *American Behavioral Scientist* 43: 895-912.
- Sen, R. (2003). *Stir it up*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass
- Sohng, S. (1995). *Participatory Research and Community Organizing*. A working paper presented at The New Social Movement and Community Organizing Conference, <http://www.cdra.org.za/articles/Participatory%20Research%20And%20Community%20Organizing%20by%20Sung%20Sil%20Lee%20Sohng.doc>
- Staples, L. (2004). *Roots to Power*, 2e. New York: Greenwood Publishing
- Stoecker, R. (2003). Community-Based Research: From Theory to Practice and Back Again. *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning*, 9:35-46.
- Strand, K., Marullo, S., Cutforth, N., Stoecker, R., and Donohue, P. (2003). *Community-Based Research in Higher Education: Methods, Models and Practice*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Woodbury, C. (1949). Richard T. Ely and the Beginnings of Research in Urban Land and Housing Economics. *Land Economics*, 25:55-66.