

“But I Don’t . . .”

1



“But I Don’t Do Research”

A number of years ago I attended a workshop at the Highlander Research and Education Center in the Tennessee mountains. Highlander, if you are unfamiliar with it, is a famous place in American history. It was a primary influence in the development of a racially integrated labor union movement. It was centrally important in the civil rights movement, having spread the song “We Shall Overcome” throughout the world and provided education and training that impacted such luminaries as Rosa Parks and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Most important, it has been a place where grassroots people come together to do the education and research necessary to win battles for social justice and equality.¹ Grassroots community activists and leaders travel from far and wide to this inspiringly beautiful rural setting to learn how to study,

research, and tackle the important social issues of the day so they can return to their communities and make a difference.

To get to Highlander, if you fly into Knoxville as I did, you travel through the city and then out of town into the countryside. Eventually you turn onto a dusty gravel road that connects the main buildings of the Center, including the central meeting room, remodeled from an old round barn and furnished with a large circle of rocking chairs in the upstairs. It was in this meeting room, in our rocking chairs, where our group of academic researchers and community people met. For two days we talked, drew pictures representing our work, and developed models of how to conduct research that empowered grassroots communities. About halfway through the weekend, it became clear that the academics in the room were very comfortable using the word “research” to describe what we did. But the community members and community workers regularly prefaced their statements with “Well, it’s not research, but . . .” or “It wasn’t scientific, but . . .” After each “but” would come amazing tales of careful, sophisticated, sometimes unorthodox research practices that won victories in legislatures, courts, and communities.²

As I have grown to work with and know many more community activists since that time, I have come to learn that it’s not just an issue of people in communities not giving themselves credit. It is also about them not trusting the idea of research and the academics who do it. This distrust, which we will explore more in Chapter 2, comes from a long history of outsider academic researchers using research more to promote their own influence and prestige than to empower the communities they researched. In some cases those outsider researchers even did harm, using research to portray communities in ways that the actual residents found humiliating, insulting, or otherwise just plain inaccurate. An increasing number of communities closed themselves off from both academics and from research as a consequence. In many Appalachian communities, indigenous communities, and poor urban communities, the word *research* has an ugly sound. What has been lacking is an alternative model for those communities to use so that research can be a helpful tool rather than a hurtful one.³

Convincing students of the value that research holds in a community setting is challenging in a different way. I have had the honor of working with two kinds of students. The first are the students who are rooted in their local communities, often communities that have been oppressed and exploited by racial and class systems not of their own choosing. The second group are the committed intellectuals, often coming from a background of privilege and wholly comfortable in a university setting. Many of the first group of students are community workers of various stripes—social workers, nonprofit managers, activists, community organizers, and community development professionals. When I ask them about their career aspirations, most of them plan to work “on the ground” in the nonprofit or government sectors, and some of them are there already. But very few can imagine doing any research in those professions. I have heard the phrase “But I don’t do research” enough that it sounds like a mantra. Yet, when I probe, I find that many of them have to collect data on client outcomes, do case histories, conduct investigations, and engage in a wide variety of other things that are fundamentally research activities. Others have to write grant applications that require them to gather needs-assessment data or conduct an evaluation. Our textbooks and syllabi, however, don’t speak to these forms of research and thus don’t prepare people entering the nonprofit and community organization world to do this kind of research. Instead, our textbooks speak narrowly to the second group of students—who are being trained as traditional academic researchers so resented in many communities. And while the first group can’t imagine doing “research,” the second group can’t imagine doing “community work.”

“But I Don’t Do Community Work”

I recently had an enlightening experience. I was the professor for a graduate level sociology research methods class. I was trying to get them to see research from the research subject’s perspective. So I was talking about how communities in so many places were reacting to traditional research. For me, it is perhaps the most important topic in research methods, but the PhD students sat there stone-faced. Eventually one student asked, “Why do I need to know this? I’m never going to be out in the community anyway.” It gradually became clear, as I listened more to these students, that they not only couldn’t imagine doing community-engaged research, many of them couldn’t even imagine collecting their own data. They knew next to nothing about the communities of the city they lived in and saw no connection between being a sociologist and being socially embedded. These students have incredibly nimble research minds. But because we don’t nurture them and train them to cross the cultural moat surrounding campus, we short-change their education and the communities they could do research with rather than on.

Those of us who are faculty often model this disengagement. The knowledge we cite in our classrooms is knowledge that is framed through textbooks and journal articles, and whatever lived experience was scooped into the academic blender in the production of those materials has lost most of its heart and soul by the time it reaches the print queue. And while many of us faculty do spend time “in the field” (though a shocking number do not), it is often to collect data rather than to build relationships with the people and other living things that make up the local social and ecological systems of which we are a part. We often leave less behind than we take, whether it is in the form of soil samples or stories that go with us back to the academy rather than becoming part of a community development process.

Even among those scholars who claim to do what is variously called community-based research or community-based participatory research or action research or other labels that promote the idea of engaging with communities, very few understand how the research relates to the community. I was recently with a group of scholars who claimed the label of community-based research. When we asked how many people understood the practice of community development, very few hands raised.

This separation of research from its community context, and from community change strategies, has consequently led to a popular-culture framing of academic research as being at best useless and at worst a distraction from doing real work that matters for real people. Saul Alinsky, one of the 20th century’s most famous community organizers, was fond of saying that “another word for academic is irrelevant.”⁴ Such a cynical perspective is borne out in research showing that when people are offered research that contradicts their beliefs, those beliefs are more likely to become stronger, not weaker.⁵ It is then an even greater travesty that research by community workers and community members on the ground does not get recognized as producing legitimate knowledge.

What is the research done on the ground in communities? Perhaps one of the most important examples of research that was only much later recognized as such comes from the very earliest stages of the modern women’s movement. Suburban women, comparing experiences about their feelings of isolation, their interactions with Valium-obsessed physicians, and their lack of self-fulfillment, were some of the very first practitioners of the research and education practice of consciousness raising that would coin the term “sexism” and transform American culture.⁶

Somewhat more recently, one of the most important stories comes from the small community of Yellow Creek, Kentucky, where residents became concerned about the health of their livestock and even themselves. They began with a basic and admittedly unsophisticated public health survey of their community that found higher-than-expected levels of cancers and other afflictions. They began to suspect the upstream tannery of poisoning their drinking water but lacked the credibility to make the case stick. Needing assistance, they were able to enlist the services of faculty and students from Vanderbilt University, who helped them conduct a more detailed study. Together they established a link between the illnesses and the tannery, and they eventually won their case in the courts.⁷

Neighborhood planning is another area where research occurs and often goes unrecognized. In the 1980s the Cedar-Riverside neighborhood of Minneapolis had just won an important battle preventing their community from becoming a victim of urban renewal that, in this case as in so many others, was literally urban removal. As a result of their victory, they attained the unenviable position of having to rebuild their dilapidated single-family housing, which had been left to atrophy by the original urban renewal plan. To rebuild the housing they had to do a complete housing study, determining which structures could be rehabbed with limited funds, which were too far gone to save, and where new homes could be built. To deal with the cold Minnesota winters, they did a sophisticated study of superinsulation, passive solar construction, and other cold-weather construction designs from around the world. Today, the neighborhood remains an important role model for neighborhood-based redevelopment and winter weather resistance.⁸

The arts provide another important source of unrecognized research practices. In Harlan County, Kentucky, a group of residents worked with Robert Gipe at Southeast Kentucky Community and Technical College to produce the play *Higher Ground*. Harlan County is part of an economically impoverished and culturally rich region of Appalachia, and those two incongruous forces collided to produce both the reason and the forces for the play. And it couldn't have happened without research, in this case a lot of research. The play was built on more than 200 oral history interviews with area residents and focused on the pain and death caused by prescription drug abuse prevalent in impoverished rural areas across the country. With a cast of community residents, the play sparked a very local and very personal community discussion about this previously unrecognized issue. And then its power went beyond the local to become a full-blown community performance complete with original music by local musicians. It ultimately became so influential that it was produced as a Kentucky public television performance in 2008 and has grown into a regional program organizing community theater around other social issues.⁹

“So What Is Research?”

That gravel road leading up to the Highlander Center is symbolic of so many of these examples, for none of them was clean and easy research. They often challenged established political and cultural bases of power and developed new ways of doing research not readily accepted by established scientists. And the process of doing and using the research in making social change did not go off without problems and challenges. In many ways, the entire

process traversed a path of loose gravel. And it is on that loose gravel that much of this book will concentrate.

In contrast to the clean smooth pavement of traditional research portrayed in most research methods textbooks, real research in real communities that matters to real people does not follow the steps in the textbook. All of the projects mentioned earlier began with the needs of real people trying to understand what was happening to them and what they could do about it. In some cases the people themselves did the research. In other cases they enlisted skilled outsiders to assist them. And in every case the research served a goal—addressing a public health hazard, rebuilding a neighborhood, educating to combat discrimination, and achieving emotional health. On the face of it, these research processes are not that different from traditional academic research. They all began with a practical question: Why are our livestock getting sick? How can we save our housing? How is drug abuse affecting our community? Why do we feel emotionally unhealthy? Those practical questions had to be refined to make them researchable. But most importantly, the results had to be usable by community members, and this is where the research begins to differ from traditional academic research. In contrast to what academics call *basic research*, this form of research is often referred to as *applied research*. And it is in traversing the gully between basic and applied research that you first begin to notice that you are journeying on loose gravel.

What are the differences between basic and applied research? Applied research has historically been seen as research whose question comes from a practical problem that someone wants to solve. It typically involves working with some corporation, government, or other organization. Basic research has historically been seen as research with no immediate application, though of course having potential applications. In basic research the researchers are mostly in control of the research questions.¹⁰ Think of research testing HIV/AIDS drugs as applied research and research to map the human genome as basic research. HIV/AIDS drug research is directly tied to helping people with the disease or in danger of contracting it. Human genome research may have all kinds of benefits down the road, even potentially for treating HIV/AIDS, but the research is not driven by a specific practical concern.

The belief among traditional academic researchers is that basic research is more *objective*, or less subject to being contaminated by the biases of the researcher. It is too easy, they fear, for researchers trying to solve a problem to *bias* the results—set up the research to get the data they want to prove their point rather than find out what is really happening. Thus, they believe, basic research in which the researcher is *objective*—emotionally separated from those being researched and not hoping for any particular outcome—is actually more useful in the end, even if it doesn’t generate immediate benefits. In addition, because basic research isn’t tied to a particular set of circumstances, it is seen as more *generalizable*—applicable to a wide range of situations. Hence the common perception that people doing real research in real settings on immediate and pressing human problems are not really doing research—a belief that many community-based practitioners have bought into.

Over the past few decades, however, we have discovered both of these beliefs to be problematic. First, a number of people have shown that the standard of *objectivity* is a confused and self-contradictory concept. It is confused because objectivity was never meant to be more than a method for achieving accuracy. The approach of objectivity was to achieve as much emotional distance as possible between the researcher and the person being researched. This is the source

of the famous “double blind study” so popular in drug research, where neither the patient nor the physician knows whether a patient is receiving the treatment or the placebo. By not knowing the research subject, proponents of objectivity believed, you could get more accurate information.¹¹

But scientists gradually forgot that objectivity was but a means to accuracy and increasingly saw it as an end in itself. By distancing yourself from the research question, and consequently from the people you were researching—i.e., practicing objectivity—objectivity could be assured. What practitioners, particularly feminist researchers, showed was that the creation of emotional distance in fact often made the research less accurate. Because the researcher refused to build trust with the research subject, the research subject withheld information from the researcher, essentially spoiling the results. These feminists and other critics were able to show objectivity’s self-contradictory nature and break forever the assumed link between objectivity and accuracy.¹²

Second, a number of research methodologists have called into question the assumed *generalizability* of basic research. Generalizability is closely related to objectivity. The idea here is that good research will be applicable to a wide variety of similar situations. If, for example, you want to know whether police foot patrols reduce property crime, you should design your research so the findings can apply in a variety of places. That is why so many traditional researchers rely on statistical studies involving large data sets. They believe that, if the data is gathered randomly from a wide variety of situations, the chances are greater that the findings will also apply to a wide variety of situations.¹³

As statistical studies took precedence over research involving fewer cases but more detail, the belief in the generalizability of statistical studies grew. But an important work by Andrew Sayer¹⁴ showed the illogic of that assumption. He stood the usual distinction between *qualitative research* and *quantitative research* on its head. Qualitative research has typically involved interviews or document research or observation that a researcher then interprets rather than counts. There are usually only one or a few cases involved. Communities, organizations, families, and other social groups are favorite objects of those defined as qualitative researchers. Quantitative research typically involves counting characteristics of something and then conducting a statistical analysis to see if there are any patterns. Surveys, such as one to test whether level of education and amount of income are related, are a favorite tool of quantitative researchers. It is even possible to take qualitative data, such as interview transcripts, and turn them into quantitative data by counting the occurrences of specific phrases and thus turning a few interviews into a large data set. This form of research is also often called *positivistic*, since it tries to eliminate interpretation in favor of strict, predefined hypotheses and measurements.

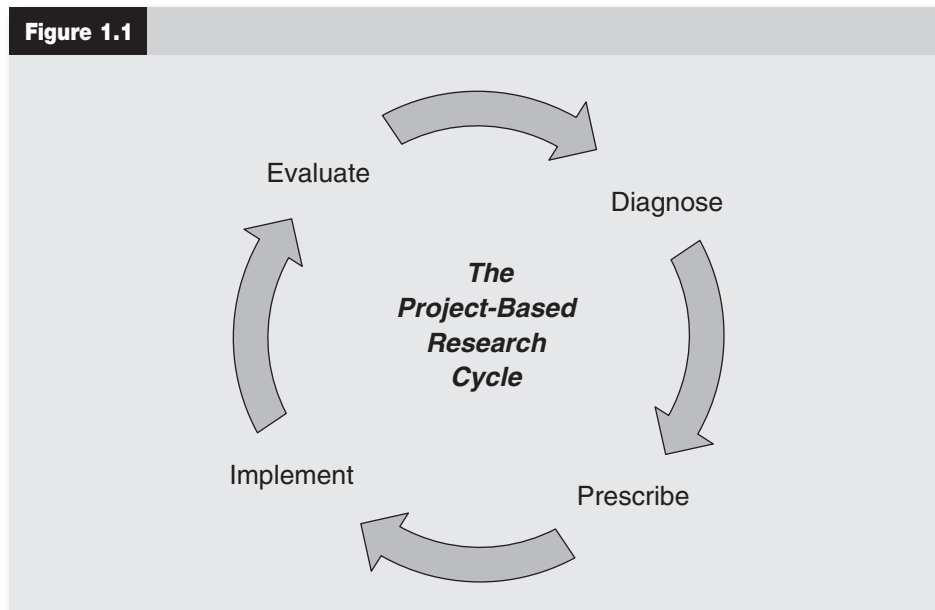
Traditional positivistic researchers had assumed that qualitative research was only good for generating tentative cause-and-effect hypotheses that could then be tested by more sophisticated statistical research on large samples. Sayer, however, showed that *intensive research*—focusing intensively on one or a few cases—was better suited for studying cause and effect than *extensive research*—studying superficially a large number of cases. He argued that intensive research allows the researcher to actually follow a cause-and-effect trail in a specific situation, similar to how a criminal investigator follows a crime trail or how a physician diagnoses an illness. Extensive research, on the other hand, is particularly good for mapping the characteristics of a population. Consequently, large-sample extensive studies are useful for suggesting cause-and-effect relationships that can then be tested in real-world settings, much the same

way that large-sample epidemiological studies are used by physicians in diagnosing an individual’s illness. The research that community workers do is more in line with this division of labor between intensive research and extensive research than the division between qualitative and quantitative research maintained by traditional academics. Academic researchers have often seen qualitative research on a few cases as good only for suggesting variables that can be better studied by large-scale quantitative survey research. But community workers trying to find out what is causing a real community problem are more likely to use the general results obtained by such large surveys to suggest things to look for in tracing the causal path of crime or housing deterioration or teen pregnancy or other problems in their own community using an intensive research model. Community workers also conduct their own extensive model large-scale surveys when they are trying to understand neighborhood residents’ perceptions or opinions or trying to ascertain the extent of housing deterioration in a community.

The research model used in this book will employ these distinctions between basic and applied research, and intensive and extensive research, as a basic foundation. But it will also go beyond them. For most research in community settings is not simply applied, but *project-based*. A project-based research model is one in which the research becomes an integral part of some social change project. The change focus can be an individual, an organization, a community, a region, or even a society. The important point is that the project is trying to create some difference in real people’s lives, and the research exists in the service of that effort.

What is project-based research? If you consider how a typical social change project works, it begins with *diagnosing* some problem or issue. The change agents then develop a plan, or *prescription*, for intervening in the problem or issue. The next step is putting the plan into action, or *implementing* it. Then, those involved need to *evaluate* it to determine whether the

Figure 1.1



desired change is occurring.¹⁵ That could lead to a new round of diagnosing-prescribing-implementing-evaluating and so on, until we have achieved a perfect world. So our work is cut out for us.

As the subsequent chapters will show, it is possible that there will be research at every stage of this process. In the beginning stage of diagnosing, the research might be a needs assessment. At the prescribing stage, there might be a survey of the best practices available. At the implementation phase there might be a community history study. At the evaluation phase there will likely be an evaluation that, surprisingly, could actually begin at the diagnosing stage, as we will see in Chapter 8.

Because so much of this community practitioner research is project-based, it is often invisible, further contributing to its lack of respect in the research world. It doesn't get published. It doesn't get in the newspapers unless it is specifically designed to. It doesn't get presented at conferences. One of my goals for this book is to make visible the forms of project-based research being conducted in so many community settings today and to develop those forms of research to be more effective, better support their associated projects, and ultimately better serve the people they are intended to impact.

Basic Research

- Driven by researcher interests
- Unrelated to immediate practical issues

Applied Research

- Driven by community/organizational interests
- Closely related to immediate practical issues

“Okay, So I Do Research Already. Why Do I Need to Learn About It?”

While it is true that many community practitioners are doing amazingly high-quality research, it is also true that many others are not. And the research has real consequences. Community Shares of Wisconsin is a coalition of social change groups that come together for the purpose of raising money through workplace donations. There are Community Shares groups around the country, but Wisconsin's was the first. They recruit workplaces to solicit their employees for donations on an annual basis. In that regard they may sound like the United Way, but Community Shares has a social change emphasis rather than a social service emphasis and is governed by their member social change groups, rather than a board of community elites. Community Shares of Wisconsin also has an intriguing

method for adding new member organizations. Rather than adding organizations one at a time, a few years ago they added an entire bloc of organizations—24 to be exact—expanding their members from 38 to 60. Now, you can imagine that if you suddenly and dramatically increase your membership, your existing donation pie will have to be split that many more ways. But the Community Shares staff believed that, by growing the number of organizations, they could also grow their donation base. And darned if they weren’t right. After only a slight dip in the year after those new organizations signed on, donations leapt up and continued climbing. But it was a gamble, and while the staff had done their research, they weren’t 100 percent sure. And then when they found out they were right, they still weren’t sure why.

That’s when they contacted me. The Community Shares in-house researcher, I, and a graduate student pored through their donations records and produced a very sophisticated data set that we subjected to a rigorous statistical analysis. We added to that analysis a set of qualitative interviews with representatives from their member organizations. And while this was research after the fact, it was actually designed to help Community Shares prepare for its next bloc recruitment—they were going to add a dozen more organizations for the 2010 campaign. Would a strategy that worked in a healthy economy also work in the context of economic collapse that characterized 2010? Our research uncovered some important findings that helped Community Shares prepare for the new bloc of organizations. Perhaps most important was the finding that, if Community Shares were going to add a bunch of new organizations to their coalition, it was also critically important to recruit a significant number of new workplaces in which to raise funds.¹⁶

The Community Shares approach to fundraising provides only a small portion of most member organizations’ budgets. Most community organizations need to search out funds through other sources, especially grants. Community organizations, and increasingly even government agencies, only survive if they can find outside sources of funding. And research is just as crucial to succeeding at the grant funding competition. Those community workers who have pulled an all-nighter writing a grant proposal, wishing they had access to data on the poverty levels of their county, or the median income, or the crime rate, or any of a myriad of statistics that would strengthen the proposal, understand the importance of good research. Because maybe they didn’t get that grant. And maybe if they had been able to do the research, they would have.

Good research is more necessary for more groups than it has ever been before. Just as the rise of word processing made “white-out” an unacceptable garnish on final drafts, the rise of Internet-based data has made “lots of poverty” an unacceptably superficial measurement in a grant proposal. Today there is online Geographic Information Systems, or GIS, data that can map and display the characteristics of your neighborhood, city, county, or beyond. There is an amazing collection of online databases covering everything from census data to toxic sites.¹⁷ And in contrast to just over a decade ago, when you had to get in your car and go from one government office to another, and then the library, and still not get everything you needed, today you can start up your web browser and find nearly everything at your fingertips.

Of course, it’s not nearly as simple as it sounds. Being able to just find the sources is challenging enough (though I hope Appendix D of this book will help). But knowing how to use

the existing data and judge its accuracy, its relevance, and the effects of age on its applicability are also important. If you use the county-level poverty statistics for your grant proposal, and the target neighborhood for your grant is the poorest in the county, then county-level poverty statistics may not make your case. You might have to go to smaller census tract boundaries instead. Being able to design your supporting research for that grant proposal is as important as the information you ultimately get.

But this is perhaps not exactly the kind of “research” you were thinking about. For it sounds so much like college library research papers that seem to maintain an aura of boredom through the generations. It is research that doesn’t really have a hypothesis, doesn’t really have a data test, and doesn’t really have findings. But wait. Rather than think of it as one of those what-am-I-gonna-write-about undergraduate research papers, think about it as a project proposal that uses research. The subsequent chapters and Appendix C will address this in much more depth. What is important here is that, when you are writing a project proposal, you are asserting that certain conditions exist in your community and that some intervention will change those conditions. Writing the proposal means doing the research necessary to convince the funder that your “experimental design” is well supported.

All this has been about the importance of doing research before the project even begins. What about research as part of the project itself? So much of the time, just doing the project takes up all of the staff time available in a small community organization. But funders are increasingly insisting that the project includes research, usually in the form of evaluation research, and are providing extra funding to support it. In the 2002 funding round for the federal government’s Weed and Seed program, which is designed to combine local law enforcement with community development goals, groups could apply for extra funds to evaluate their work. As we will see in Chapter 8, a number of funders are even supporting what is variously called “empowerment” or “participatory” evaluation that is specifically designed to help program participants improve their practice rather than to just grade their mistakes.

There are a wide variety of other research activities that occur in the midst of a program and on whose accuracy the program depends. When the small rural town of Brookfield, Missouri, first tried to get a state grant to revitalize its downtown, they were turned down. At least part of the reason was the lack of research supporting their application. But they became involved in a University of Missouri Extension program, which led to a connection with the architecture program at Drury University. By hosting the architecture students overnight on four occasions to help them learn about the community (the students slept on cots in the volunteer firehouse that residents generously equipped with wi-fi), the townsfolk were able to give them just enough orientation. The students were able to provide the foundational research for a downtown development plan that became the basis for success in the next grant competition.¹⁸

Another important form of research that requires absolute accuracy occurs in the midst of an advocacy campaign. As we will learn in Chapter 5, when a community group goes into battle against a government or corporation, their facts need to be airtight. The ability of governments and corporations to hire expensive research consultants far outstrips the meager funds of community groups. But what groups lack in funding they can make up for in accuracy. As the Yellow Creek story early in this chapter notes, it took a partnership with an area university to ultimately win their battle, but it was a partnership they were able to achieve.

To win in the competition for grant funding, to win in the advocacy arena, and to win in designing and implementing programs that actually work, good research is central. We live in an era where torrents of information have become part of our daily lives. Good research is no longer a luxury but a necessity. It is always important to keep in mind that the project neither begins nor ends with research and that research is not even the largest part of the project. Research is often a necessary condition to success, however, and those working on the ground need to find ways to make it happen.

Intensive Research

- Focuses on one or a few cases
- Strives for detail and depth of analysis
- Is good for causal analysis

Extensive Research

- Focuses on large number of cases
- Limits analysis to a few characteristics
- Is good for mapping population properties

“I’m Already Running Full-Out Managing Our Programs. How Can I Do More Research Too?”

Those who work in the community sector have learned, like the rest of us, that they need to do more with less. And while we all know there is a breaking point where there is so much less that our only choice is to do less, funders and policymakers seem to pay little heed to the sounds of economic strangulation heard regularly in the nonprofit world. Good research is a way to help do more with less because it helps assure better outcomes. It is also a way to help get more because it provides better support for funding proposals. But it has real up-front costs. Someone has to actually do the research. I have worked with a variety of nonprofit and community-based projects over the past couple of decades, and, when push comes to shove, doing the work has to take precedence over doing the research. So what’s a stressed-out community worker to do?

One strategy is to find ways to work research into the organization’s staff time and even the volunteers’ activities. Staff often are not trained in doing research, so doing it takes even more time. Spending time educating staff in doing research can ultimately save time. So make sure every staff member has a copy of this book! Volunteers, particularly in impoverished communities, can also gain employable skills through research training and experience. And when research becomes part of the project, as we will discuss in Chapter 6, there is no longer a trade-off between doing the work and doing the research. A community-needs assessment,

conducted door to door by community volunteers, builds community relationships at the same time that it builds programming.

Creating in-house or in-community research expertise, however, is also time and resource consuming. And it can be another barrier to effective research, especially if you have to go out and find training. But the bright spot on the horizon of community research these days is the increasing interest being shown by college and university faculty and students. Over the past decade, higher education faculty and students have ventured further and further into their local communities. They did it first as *community service*, using students as a volunteer labor force for staffing soup kitchens, poverty painting programs, literacy programs, and other similar projects. Then, the practice expanded into *service learning*, which provided entire classes of students doing community service linked to their course topics. Most recently, these student-based activities have been linked up with a much older practice of *participatory research*, which has historically involved expert researchers working collaboratively with community groups around a community cause.¹⁹ As we will see in the next chapter, the combination of academic expertise, emphasizing abstract broad-based knowledge, with community expertise, emphasizing in-depth experiential knowledge,²⁰ is proving a powerful formula for success.

This new practice of community-academic collaboration can go a long way toward serving not just the immediate research needs of community organizations, as we will see in Chapter 2, but also serving community research training needs. The Trent Centre for Community-Based Education (TCCBE) in Peterborough, Ontario, Canada, and its sister organization U-Links, about 90 minutes farther north in rural Haliburton County, are unique organizations. Both are community-based nonprofit organizations whose purpose is to link the resources of the area higher education institutions with community organizations. They help find researchers for research projects and student volunteers for other projects. But even more importantly, they help community organizations conceptualize research projects and shape volunteer projects to maximize their chances of fitting with university resources and maximizing community outcomes.²¹ In an era when most universities try to operate their own community engagement centers while still remaining isolated from the local community, TCCBE and U-Links are located in their respective communities, and the results are research and service projects that are more community directed. But across North America are a growing number of colleges and universities that are attempting to provide this type of powerful collaboration.

Who Can Do Research?

- Organization staff
- Community volunteers
- Students
- Faculty

“I’m Still Not Convinced. But Just In Case, Where Do I Start?”

I understand how difficult it is to believe that research will be helpful for people already devoting all their waking hours to just getting the project work done. Even when I am working with academics engaged in project work, I have a difficult time getting them to free up time in their schedules to do the research that will help their projects succeed. But if you’ve stuck with me this far, then I’m hoping it’s because maybe you think all this research stuff isn’t just snake oil. So your next question might be, “Okay, how do I do it with the least amount of disruption?”

Perhaps the best place to start is by thinking like a researcher. If you’re not used to thinking that way, it’s actually not all that difficult. There are five basic steps to any research process: choosing the question, designing the research methods, collecting data, analyzing data, and reporting the results.

Steps in Project-Based Research

- Choosing the question
- Designing the research methods
- Collecting the data
- Analyzing the data
- Reporting the results

Choosing the Question

This can actually be the most difficult part of the entire process. Not just any question will do. It has to be focused enough to actually generate good data. Asking a question that is too general, such as “How do people feel about our community?” carries the danger of eliciting answers that are all over the place. Some people may feel something about their neighbor next door, others may feel something about the corner liquor store, and yet others may feel something about the parish priest. Some questions may seem specific but actually are not. For example, to ask “How much crime is there in our neighborhood?” requires asking what kinds of crime, during what times of the year or even what times of the day, with which victims, and a variety of other potential qualifiers.

Another problem with choosing a question is to be careful of not having the answer already implied, or asking a “second-step” question. Asking “What is the best education program for reducing teen pregnancy?” already assumes that an education program will reduce teen pregnancy. It may be helpful, instead, to ask how different programs to reduce teen pregnancy work in different contexts and then compare the results to the context of your community. It is possible that, in a particular community, a recreation program will work better than an education program. Likewise, asking “What are the best ways to reduce crime in our community?” may be a second-step question that depends first on answering the questions “What kinds of crime do we have in our community?” and “Which of those is most important to reduce?”

A useful strategy for developing a research question in a community setting, odd as it may seem, is to work backward. Remember, this is *project-based research*. As we will emphasize even more in Chapter 3, the outcomes of the project, not the results of the research, are most important. The research is important, but only in the context of the project. So if you are at the very beginning stages of the project, start thinking about what you want at the end of the project, ideally in a meeting of as many people as possible who will be affected by the project. Maybe the initial answer is “a better community.” Working backward, you can specify what characteristics a better community would have. If the answer is more locally sourced food, you may work backward to research where your food currently comes from and what locally sourced alternatives are available.

Designing the Research Methods

This is the step where that undergraduate research methods course can really help. For designing the actual research methods is both technical and artistic. The technical part comes in understanding what type of research methods fit what type of research questions. Some questions will be highly technical. For example, if you are concerned about the relationship between air quality and patterns of illness in your community, you may be looking at an advanced statistical study requiring expensive equipment and sophisticated data collection techniques. The research techniques and equipment can vary enormously from research involving childhood developmental testing, to environmental testing, community data collection, Geographic Information Systems mapping, structural engineering assessments, and almost anything else imaginable. The details of these techniques are beyond the scope of this book and are the points at which you may need to seek outside expertise or training. What we will consider here are ways for choosing research methods.

It is in choosing and adapting the research methods that the art comes in. Art is about emotion and meaning and intuition and those other intangible things. It is about understanding that, when your sinuses ache, it may be a sign of a change in the weather. It is about channeling your love, or anger, through a creative process and representing it in some unique form that communicates with others. It is easy to write a survey. It is extremely difficult to write a survey that is just the right length, with just the right tone in the questions, with just enough captivating language to pique the respondents' interest, and with just enough relational qualities to convince them that their response really matters. That is art, because it is about deeply connecting with the community and creatively connecting the technique of writing the survey with *knowing* the community. In contrast to traditional academic research, in project-based research the research directly matters, and that connection is crucial. And while that may seem rather New Age and abstract, for those people who are truly connected with the community the artistic side is often much less challenging than the technical side, as we will see.

Keeping this art/technique integration in mind, one of the first steps in designing the research methods is to decide whether you will be doing intensive research or extensive research. If you remember back to earlier in this chapter, intensive research involves studying one or a few cases intensively to trace causal patterns. Extensive research involves determining

the characteristics of a population. In general, “why” questions imply intensive research methods, and “how many” questions imply extensive research methods. Asking “How many people are getting cancer in our community?” requires doing a health survey of the community and may be a necessary first step to determine whether there is a cancer cluster. The “why” question, such as “Why are people getting lung cancer in our community?” may only be possible after first determining the extent and types of afflictions. Answering this “why” question may involve conducting intensive water and air testing or detailed case histories of individuals.

Once you’ve decided whether you are trying to determine “how many” or “why,” it is time to look at specific research methods. Here is where art and technical knowledge combine. If the goal is to find out what the important issues are in the community, as a first step toward determining what kinds of programs people want, then an extensive research method is probably appropriate. The easy, quick method to employ is a survey, perhaps a one-pager that could be mailed out to residents with a stamped return envelope. Some technical expertise on survey design will be very helpful. But what if the community has a number of members who lack the level of written literacy needed to complete the survey? It may be better to do a phone survey, unless the poverty level of the community limits phone availability. This is another case where working backward may be helpful. If the goal is to get people involved in a voluntary effort, and the research is to determine what kind of things people may want to get involved in, then the best way of conducting the survey may be to go door to door to both get information and build relationships that can be mobilized in the volunteer effort. And that brings us to collecting the data.

Collecting the Data

Once the research methods are in place, it’s time to go out and get the data. And I must admit, most of what I have learned about collecting data has not come from academic researchers but from community organizers. Doing a lot with very few resources is one of the hallmarks of a good community organizer. Before they go out to collect data, they ask what data is already available, what data they need to create themselves, and how much work it will be to use the data. It may be that, in some cases, there is already a government agency responsible for compiling certain kinds of data. In many cities, groups who want to know which housing is owned by absentee landlords can get an electronic database of all the properties in the area, already compiled on CD-ROM or downloadable. Other government agencies may be responsible for water and air quality testing. There may be public health data already collected on such things as food-related illnesses, sexually transmitted diseases, and other topics. There may also be university or college researchers who have compiled at least some of the data needed.

There are times, however, when those who have the data may be less than willing to share it. This is once again where the work of community organizers and advocates is instructive. For federal government data, the Freedom of Information Act, or FOIA (pronounced “foya”), is one way of getting information. Various other government levels provide laws that can force reluctant public agencies to cough up information they are not entitled to withhold.²²

When the information is not available, however, the issue becomes “Who should go get it?” There are four options available, and this is once again where art and technical expertise combine. The first option is to have an outside expert gather the data. That may be a necessary strategy in cases involving medical testing, or sometimes even environmental testing that requires strict sampling and measurement techniques. But those situations are relatively rare. In most cases, nonexperts with appropriate training can collect the needed data, and they comprise the other three options. Organization staff are often an obvious choice because they may have some training in research methods through undergraduate degrees. But as we have already seen, staff are often already stretched to the limit in their jobs, and squeezing in data collection may do more harm than good. Those still receiving their undergraduate- or graduate-level training—students—are another option, particularly through some kind of formal service learning or community-based research program. They can do the work and receive credit for it, making it a lot easier to work into their schedules. But because they are students, having some kind of supervisory quality control process is important. The third option is using community members, and it has the potential benefit of building skills and relationships among individuals that we’ve noted earlier.

Analyzing the Data

Data analysis can be a deceptive step in the process. On face level, it seems like it’s just a matter of dumping all the data into a computer and spitting out findings. But interpreting data is also as much art as it is science. Statistical associations are the most befuddling. People often overinterpret what are really meager and tentative relationships. This is once again where Andrew Sayer’s distinction between intensive and extensive research is useful. Too many researchers are using extensive research, which is best for determining the descriptive characteristics of a population, to do causal analysis. But the statistical causal relationships that those researchers find, except in rare cases, are often quite weak. When you read in the newspaper that researchers have found a “causal relationship” between stress and hair loss, for example, they are likely basing that finding on a statistical analysis that shows a small percentage difference in hair loss between highly stressed people and less stressed people. But that does not prove that stress causes hair loss. What is needed is intensive research to trace the causal sequence between stress and hair loss to see what else may be going on. Furthermore, because the data are usually collected at a single point in time, it is very difficult to tell for sure what is cause and what is effect. Is fear of crime a consequence of crime (people fear it because there is so much) or is crime a consequence of fear (because people are too afraid to report crimes they witness, the people committing the crimes are not caught)? If you collect a lot of data on crime and people’s fear level all at the same time, you don’t know which came first.

If the data are coming at you in statistical form, it is hopefully because you needed some descriptive data on your community. Be careful of trying to interpret the data as causal. Think of it as suggesting relationships that you can then use for digging more deeply. For example, if your data show both high joblessness and high crime, concluding that joblessness causes

crime is overly simplistic. First, you don’t know whether there is higher crime because jobless residents can afford less protection or because jobless residents need the extra income. And even if your statistics can show that jobless residents are more likely to be victimizers than victims, there is a long and torturous path from losing your job to committing a crime, and only a few people follow the entire route. And here is where intensive research is important. Bringing together a group of people who have lost their jobs and turned to crime to talk about their life courses can much more deeply inform the causal pattern. For it may be that job loss leads to family stress or self-esteem issues or substance abuse, and those things may variously lead to violent crime or property crime. And it may be that the paths that people go down in your community are not the same as in other places. The program you design to break the relationship between joblessness and crime may then provide quite specific interventions for the family, the self-esteem of the individual, and other things. This is a far cry from the job program that a simple statistical relationship would recommend.

And, similar to collecting the data, there are strategic choices to be made in analyzing the data as well. Certainly, it can be very efficient for an outside expert with access to students and computers and statistical analysis software to take a set of surveys and crunch the numbers out. But unless those outsiders know the community well, they may not be able to interpret the data. What if the data show a higher-than-average incidence of pediatric medical problems? Is it because of household hygiene deficiencies, lead paint, smog-choked air, poor prenatal care, or something else? Community members will be able to suggest, if not outright know, which of these things are most important for interpreting the data. It may, in fact, be useful for community members to be integrally involved at the data analysis stage so that they can add their interpretations to the analysis. This is another way, as we shall see, of building community relationships and skills.

Reporting the Results

This is the most deceptive stage of the entire process, particularly if you are an academic researcher. For academic researchers have been trained to write formal reports of research findings for professional journals, which too often end up on people’s bookshelves, becoming “shelf research.” But project-based research is different. Project-based research may never be written down at all. It may be presented as community theater, as *Higher Ground* was. It may be presented in photographic form. It may even be presented in a march on city hall. That doesn’t mean it shouldn’t be written down, only that there are many creative ways beyond words on paper to present the findings. Those of us in academia who do project-based research often need to retrain ourselves to write in an entirely different style, work with community coauthors, or use more interactive methods of presenting research findings.

Determining how to report the data once again involves working backward. The goals of the project will to a large extent determine the form of the research report. If the goal is policy change, written material is very important, but community education sessions and protests may also be an important part of the strategy. If the goal is community building, then a community event with oral or visual reporting may be the most useful form of reporting.

Compiling and presenting the report is yet another area where doing research combines with building community relationships and skills. People who have had no community speaking experience, when they have been integrally involved with the research and are confident in their knowledge, can have their lives changed by getting up in front of a group. Community organizers know this and seek out every opportunity to have community members take leadership roles whenever possible. That can be a good rule for project-based research as well.

“So Where Do I and My Community Fit In?”

This book is intended as a resource for those who are already engaged in community work or see such work in their future. It is designed for those of you who are, or will become, professionally paid staff as well as volunteer neighborhood and other community leaders. And it is also designed for those researchers and researchers-in-training who will find themselves working with communities and their organizations.

We will spend more time in the coming chapters talking about communities and organizations, but it is helpful here to lay out some definitions. When I speak of *community*, I am using the term much more narrowly than is popular today. I even heard a national TV news anchor talk about the “athletic community” the other day, as if somehow everyone who exercised more than once a week belonged to a community. I hear other commentators talk about the “Black community” or the “disabled community.” That is not accurate either. There are African American communities and disabled communities, especially in particular places where members of those communities can interact face to face, trade favors, or attend meetings together. But to call a category of people a community just because they share a certain culturally defined characteristic makes the term meaningless. Likewise, the phrase *online community* is also becoming popular. Yet a group of people who only meet each other through the Internet for a very specific purpose, while they may gain a lot of support and good feelings from each other, rarely act together as a group for a collective purpose. The one distinction might be those computer coders who interact on the Internet to improve the Internet itself. The coders that produce all the free software that runs so much of the Internet, and that we use to access the Internet, function in some ways as a *community of practice*. A community of practice is a group of people that come together around their collective professional interests.²³ Acknowledging this one hybrid form, when I otherwise use the term *community* I am talking about a face-to-face group of people who have similar cultural characteristics, share resources, occupy the same geographic space, and interact with each other on a regular basis. Examples include neighborhoods, local identity communities like an urban gay community, and even coalitions of like-minded groups like Community Shares of Wisconsin that also have some characteristics of a community of practice.

I will also use the terms *group* and *organization*. An organization is at least semiformal, with some kind of specified leadership and a structure that is sustained over time. This can range from a formally established nonprofit organization with a board of directors to an ongoing neighborhood association with no legal standing. A group is generally informal and less sustained. It may

be a collection of people who suddenly come together to deal with a crisis or to manage a single project or event and then disband.

The lessons in this book apply to all of those levels of activity because, ultimately, all of them will be directed at the community in some way. Some groups or organizations will be more representative of a particular community than others. But all of them will be attempting to do projects in, on, or with one or more communities. And all of them will need research information to support the success of those projects.

The lessons in this book are also meant for you, whether you are a student, professor, community practitioner, or even a funder of community change efforts. At times it will seem like I am talking to only one of those possible “yous.” I hope, however, that the rest of you listening in will still gain something from the conversation. What can each group take away from this book?

Community practitioners who have seen research as impractical, unproductive, or distracting can begin to see how research can help them and how students, faculty, and funders can help support their research needs. The project-based research model, emphasizing not research but social change projects, is written for the practitioner. All projects begin with a diagnosis, are derived from a prescription, eventually become implemented, and then are evaluated. This book will show how research is integral to all four of these steps and will show the wide variety of research practices that can be used at each step.

Students who have never imagined themselves moving into a career doing research can begin to see how research will be part of the career they imagine themselves moving into. In contrast to most of the research methods texts out there, this book emphasizes the integration of research and action, showing how research can improve the real work that real people in real communities do. I hope it will also give students ideas about research projects they can help with while they are still students and get valuable job training from at the same time.

Professors who have been providing valuable research methods training to their students, and have been frustrated at how little students seemed to care, will now have one means to help students better connect research and action. In addition, those professors just starting out in working with community change efforts, or wanting to make the leap, will hopefully find some useful material on the challenges facing community change efforts and the adaptations academics make to conduct research successfully in a community setting.

Finally, those who fund research, on the one hand, or community change efforts, on the other, will hopefully find some ways to consider funding more integration of the two activities. Too often, funders have lacked good models by which to judge proposals that bring research and action together. This book will provide a diversity of project-based research examples that they can use to consider the future proposals they receive. It may also help them consider ways of filling the current gaps in research resources needed by community organizations that have made so many grant proposals less than stellar.

Whatever your standpoint and experience, my main hope is that this book will help you to think more openly and creatively about the research process and how it can be put to use in a wide variety of community change efforts. For I am continuously haunted by the fear that “another word for academic is irrelevant,” and I write this book partly to convince myself that I am still relevant.

Conclusion and Coming Attractions

With any luck I have left you with some ideas and lots of questions. This chapter has been but an overview of some of the possibilities and a way of thinking about project-based research. It has introduced the following ideas:

- Basic versus applied research
- Intensive versus extensive research
- The project-based research model: diagnosing, prescribing, implementing, evaluating
- Reasons to do project-based research: reduce waste, compete for funding, win on advocacy issues
- Ways to get research done: staff, volunteers, academics, students
- The steps in research: choosing the question, designing the methods, collecting the data, analyzing the data, reporting the results
- Definitions of community, organization, and group

The subsequent chapters will delve more deeply into the project-based research model and specific forms of project-based research. They will help you understand where you are in a project-based research cycle and the kinds of research that can further a particular cycle stage. In the next two chapters we will talk about the importance of a community-based participatory process and relationship building, which will provide the foundation for everything else that follows. Chapter 4 will go into depth about understanding the project-based research model and how to use it in your own work. Chapters 5 to 8 each take one step in the project-based research model, discussing how research can help with diagnosing, prescribing, implementing, and evaluating. The final chapter tries to bring it all together, illustrating how to integrate research into the daily work of a community organization. Those of you interested in more information on the strategic planning process that I bring up in some of the chapters, research ethics and the institutional review board (IRB) process in community settings, guides to writing grant proposals, and preexisting data sets that you can use in community work will not want to skip the appendices, where all of those things can be found.

The coming chapters will also cover some of the controversies in conducting project-based research. As you have probably already noticed, I do not subscribe to a cookbook model of research. Research is not a clean process, nor is it a linear process. It is far messier than the average textbook presents it and messier than even this book will present it. Particularly when the research is combined with a social change project, the social change itself can occur unpredictably, with unforeseen consequences that require changing and sometimes even scrapping the research part of the project.

You will consequently find this book outlining processes of research—ways to organize people to do research or models of research for particular situations. You will not find detailed information on how to collect or analyze data. Those are skills best learned from more traditional research methods texts. Project-based research, as a model, is unique.

But techniques of data collection and analysis are common across all forms of research. In addition, because the road to good research is not smooth, you will find the controversies and challenges impacting various forms of project-based research covered in the “loose gravel” sections.

You may have also noticed my emphasis on community participation sneaking into this chapter. You will see it even more in subsequent chapters. That comes partly from my own research work with community organizers, for whom everything is participatory. It also comes from the benefits I’ve seen as community members have become engaged in project-based research. So if you are a public health professional, or a social service professional, or an academic who has been trained to do things to or for people rather than with them, I will push you through this book to rethink your training. For the greatest contribution we as professionals can make is to literally work ourselves out of a job—to create opportunities for those normally shut out of access to skills, leadership, and self-confidence to achieve those goals so that we are no longer central or controlling.

Such a process builds community and democracy because it redistributes both power and responsibility, spreading it out, making us much more interdependent. Shame on us that we have not done more of this sooner, because without it we lack the collective capacity of even “lower” life forms. We can learn a lot from a flock of geese, and we will in the coming chapters.

The Goose Story²⁴

Next fall, when you see geese heading south for the winter, flying along in V formation, you might consider what science has discovered as to why they fly that way: as each bird flaps its wings, it creates an uplift for the bird immediately following. By flying in V formation the whole flock adds at least 71% greater flying range than if each bird flew on its own.

People who share a common direction and sense of community can get where they are going more quickly and easily because they are traveling on the thrust of one another.

When a goose falls out of formation, it suddenly feels the drag and resistance of trying to go it alone and quickly gets back into formation to take advantage of the lifting power of the bird in front.

If we have as much sense as a goose, we will stay in formation with those who are headed the same way we are.

When the head goose gets tired, it rotates back in the wing and another goose flies point.

It is sensible to take turns doing demanding jobs with people or with geese flying south.

Geese honk from behind to encourage those up front to keep up their speed.

What do we say when we honk from behind?

Finally, and this is important, when a goose gets sick, or is wounded by gunshots and falls out of formation, two other geese fall out with that goose and follow it down to lend help and protection. They stay with the fallen goose until it is able to fly, or until it dies. Only then do they launch out on their own or with another formation to catch up with their group.

If only we could have as much sense as a goose.

Resources

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