

Guidelines for Peer Reviewing Community Based Research

Produced by the URBAN Publications Committee:

Chair: Eric A. Tesdahl – Vanderbilt University
William G. Holt – Birmingham-Southern College
Gregory M. Maney – Hofstra University
Charlotte Ryan – University of Massachusetts Lowell
Gregory D. Squires - George Washington University

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Who we are:

For more information about these guidelines or the Publications Committee of the URBAN Sociology node, please contact Eric Tesdahl at eric.a.tesdahl@vanderbilt.edu.

The URBAN Sociology Node seeks to build upon the wide array of collaborative research and action initiatives already underway by sociologists. These include campaigns to improve the conditions of day laborers, efforts for equitable community development, and strategies for effective community organizing and public education reform, building social movements in the World Social Forum, combating environmental racism, among others. We seek to create a permanent, ongoing network within sociology and across disciplines focused on collaborative research with communities to create new knowledge addressing pressing social justice issues.

More information at: <http://urbanresearchnetwork.org/>

Introduction

Sociologists have long debated the relation between scholarly distance and critical engagement in social problems. Over the past decade, a number of influential sociologists have publicly called for research that directly addresses injustice and inequality, that informs policy debates, and that aids civil society actors in implementing positive social changes. Sociologists conducting community-based research are particularly well positioned to produce this sort of research.

Given the high profile of this discussion of late within the discipline, one might expect significant growth in the number of CBR articles in leading peer-reviewed journals. However, this has not been the case. These journals' hesitation to publish CBR articles hurts community-based researchers since many sociology departments weigh such publications heavily in assessing candidates for employment and/or tenure. The social justice commitments and civil society ties that motivated many scholars to become sociologists are set aside in the interests of secure, living wage employment.

We have the goal of distributing a finalized version these guidelines to receptive editors of sociological journals in order to aid in the process of assessing the relative merits and quality of manuscripts they may receive that feature community based research. As written, this is living document; that is to say, we are currently working to circulate this draft and solicit comment and discussion such that the final product may aid our discipline in publishing more examples critically-engaged public scholarship in highly-visible publication outlets. We welcome your comments. We first provide an executive summary followed by

The URBAN Sociology Publications Committee
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Executive Summary - Guidelines for Peer Review of Community-based Research

The URBAN Publication Committee has drafted these guidelines for evaluating community-based research (CBR). In so doing, we hope to help researchers, editors, and reviewers seeking to identify high-quality community-based research to place in their journals. We welcome responses.

Criteria for Evaluating Methodology

CBR submissions should meet prevailing standards of methodological rigor (e.g., value neutrality, careful research design, reliable and valid data sources and coding if applicable...). How rigor is attained, however, may differ from conventional means. For instance, multi-positionality supersedes the non-falsifiable concept of objectivity as a basis for confidence in the interpretation of results. Researchers should:

- (1) Define terms (e.g., community, participation), and how they were operationalized.
- (2) Explain why the selected community-based methods suit the study's aims.
- (3) Make explicit methods of data collection, organization, and analysis.
- (4) Triangulate methods to address characteristic strengths and weaknesses.
- (5) Address all relevant ethical issues such as data use, dissemination, etc.

Criteria for Evaluating Theoretical Contributions

CBR may generate different forms of knowledge than more conventional academic approaches. To evaluate theoretical contributions of CBR, authors should demonstrate:

- (1) Integration of multiple forms and sources of knowledge;
- (2) Enhancement of knowledge based on its application in practice; &
- (3) Development of action-based theories with predictive power.

Criteria for Presenting Findings

Community-based researchers should:

- (1) Clarify collaborators' roles in conceptualizing, producing, and disseminating research.
- (2) Commit to producing knowledge in formats useful to all collaborators, including activists. This may entail preparing publications tailored to distinct audiences. We distinguish this practice from prior publication.

For more information about the publication committee: eric.a.tesdahl@vanderbilt.edu

To comment on guidelines: eric.a.tesdahl@vanderbilt.edu, charlotte_ryan@uml.edu

For more information re URBAN Sociology Node <http://urbanresearchnetwork.org/>:

Collaborative research with communities to create new knowledge relevant to social justice issues.

Overview – The Argument for Community-based Research

Sociology has long grappled with the relation between scholarly distance and critical engagement in social problems. Social Science Research Council President Craig Calhoun flagged this tension arguing that praising social engagement can be a critical source of scholarship:

That knowledge is vital to social action—as to individual ethics—has long been recognized. Thinkers have been doers (contrary to stereotype). And reflection on successes, failures, and unexpected consequences of social action has been a vital source of new understanding. Yet activist scholarship often seems an unusual or surprising idea. It isn't widely taught in textbooks. Tenure committees are unsure how to think about it. Why should this be so? Three reasons seem especially influential: (1) modern science (and modern epistemology more generally) has developed an ideal of knowledge based on detached, objective observation; (2) the university has come to contain a much larger proportion of scholarship than in the past (though perhaps not as big a proportion as academics believe), and thus scholarship is more contained with "academic" agendas and career structures; and (3) activism is widely understood as directly expressive of individual interests, or emotions, or ethical commitments rather than of a broader, more reflective, and more intellectually informed perspective on social issues (2008, xiii).

Over the last ten years, a growing number of sociologists have called for research that addresses social inequalities, that informs public policies, and that assists civil society actors in achieving positive social changes. Sociologists conducting community-based research are among those particularly well positioned to answer this call. Given the above, one would expect significant growth in the number of CBR articles in leading peer-reviewed journals. Yet this is not the case, with only a handful of such articles appearing over the last decade. This situation clearly affects the decisions of junior scholars—what topics they choose, how they pursue them, and with whom. Typically junior scholars are told by their mentors “CBR will have to wait until after tenure.” As a result, the social justice commitments and civil society ties that motivated many to become professional sociologists are set aside in the interests of secure, living wage employment. This weakens sociology as a discipline since “commitment to social action in pursuit of social change is one of the sources for a commitment to social science” (Calhoun 2008; xxi).

Despite the increasing sophistication of community-based research methods over the last fifteen years, community-based researchers acknowledge recurring challenges (Reason 2006). These include difficulties establishing and maintaining research partnerships, clarifying how to share

control of decision-making, and reconciling partner's motivations and interests (Diaz and Gama 2014). Reasonably well-funded research areas (public health for instance) have more easily amassed sufficient resources to develop CBR, however, sustaining learning communities after funding ends represents an additional challenge.

What is community-based research¹?

In broad terms, community-based research (CBR) projects include community members at some level in directing, designing, implementing, analyzing, using and/or evaluating research aimed at empowering the community and facilitating social change. Here we follow the Centre for Participatory Research at McGill (PRAM) in defining community-based research as “systematic inquiry, with the collaboration of those affected by the issue being studied, for purposes of education and taking action or effecting change” (Green et al. 1995).²

Rather than conducting research on a community, CBR involves scholars doing research *with* a community. Those who are conventionally the objects of academic research instead actively and co-operatively contribute as subjects to developing research questions, hypotheses, research design, data collection, data analysis, the presentation of findings. The research process itself involves the pooling of academic and community knowledge and skills along with knowledge revision and additional skills acquired in iterative cycles of dialog, action, and reflection. As always, well-considered triangulation of methods will maximize data quality.

Core principles of community-based research

- 1) Focus on the community as the unit of identity and analysis (community as defined by geography, identity, interests, values, or shared social locations and conditions)³ with recognition of overlapping and diverging communities of interest (simultaneity/intersectionality).

¹ Israel et al. (1998) note the similarities among action research (Lewin; Greenwood; Whyte); participatory action research (Reason and Bradbury 2001), community-based participatory research (Wallerstein and Duran 2010; Minkler and Wallerstein 2008), collaborative interactive action research (Rappoport, Bailyn, Fletcher, & Pruitt, 2002) and cooperative inquiry (Heron and Reason 1997). These variants in labeling most commonly reflect who is collaborating, how they collaborate, and how results are applied.

² Available at www.pram.mcgill.ca

³ No consensus exists re how to define community. See section re defining community below. Briefly, those who have an ongoing relationship with one another form a community. But having a relationship does not imply mutuality much less equity. Being part of a community is not always empowering to individuals or social groups.

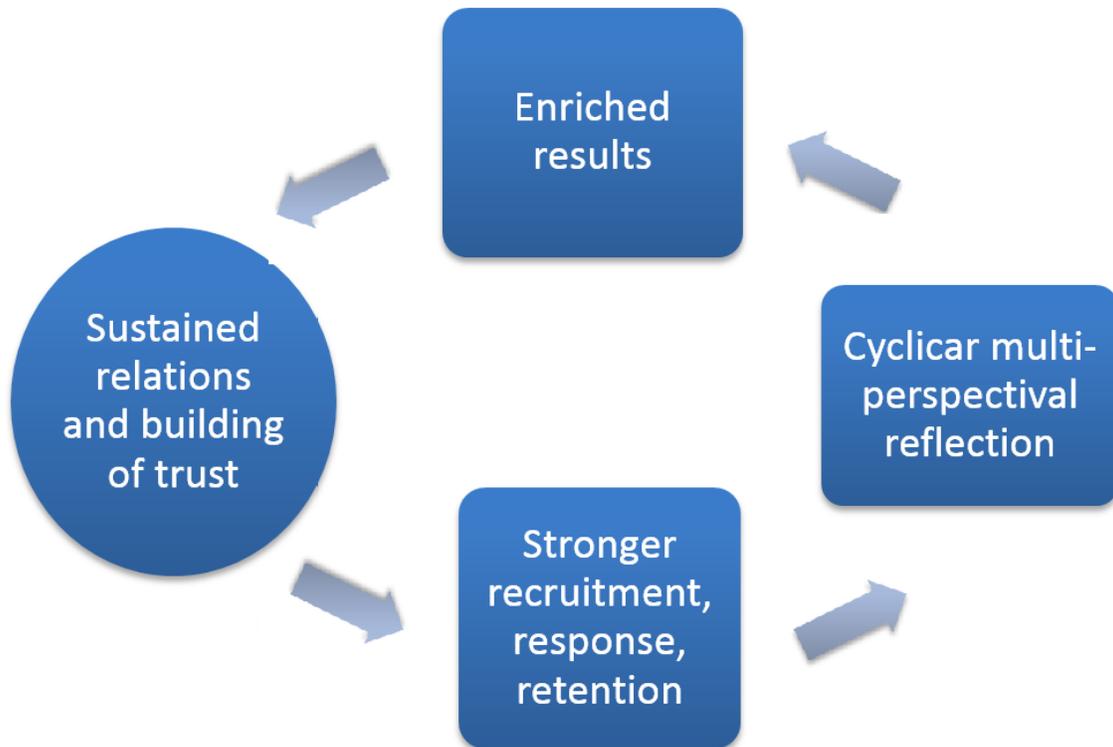
- 2) Acknowledge communities as complex sets of individuals, organizations, and networks with a range of assets, concerns, problems, and viewpoints. Within this, community-based researchers “explicitly recognize and seek to support or expand social structures and social processes that contribute to the ability of community members to work together” (Israel et al. 1998, 178).
- 3) Work for full inclusion of community partners in “all phases of the research process, e.g. problem definition, data collection, interpretation of results, and application of the results to address community concerns (Israel et al. 1998, 179). This does not mean that all participants play the same role, nor does it ignore specialized knowledge. Rather, the assumption is that multi-perspectival cooperative inquiry encourages participation, strengthens the research process and enriches results (Heron and Reason 1997; Reason 2006).
- 4) Links knowledge and action for mutual benefit (Israel et al. 1998, 179). This does not mean that action and knowledge are joined in each instance, but that all parties’ needs are met through a variety of approaches.
- 5) Supports a reciprocal transfer of knowledge, skills, capacity that attends to social inequalities and empowerment. (Israel et al. 1998:179). Academic research partners are exposed to local knowledge and lay sociologies. Community-based research partners are exposed to academic research approaches and bodies of knowledge. Community-based researchers often organize themselves as communities of practice (Wenger 2000) or learning communities (Senge 2005).
- 6) Additionally, CBR projects stress sustainability; as learning communities, academic and community partners enter ongoing reflexive collaborations in which learning can accrue.

Advantages

As with any research methodology, community-based research has advantages and disadvantages, its suitability dependent on researcher goals and context, and on the research question at hand. Resources and time constraints are additional factors. Among the potential advantages is the improvement of data quality due to increased community engagement. Jagosh (2012) explain that increased trust between academics and community members strengthens recruitment and response rates. Additionally, CBR approaches can provide feedback on research process from constituencies directly affected by the issue at hand

(Jagosh et al. 2012). The inclusion of research partners inhabiting distinct social locations also responds to feminist methodologists' calls for researchers to acknowledge their standpoints and include alternative perspectives (Harding 2004, Fonow and Cook 2005). In accomplishing the above, CBR promises to advance the standard that the social patterns and dynamics named by social researchers should make sense to the social actors themselves (Becker 2007).

Chart I The argument for added value in iterative cycles



Jagosh et al. (2012) highlight additional benefits including positive outcomes from conflicts successfully resolved and unanticipated outcomes from research questions developed in dialog. Brown et al. (2012) document increased impact of research findings on communities directly affected by the issue at hand.

Unresolved Challenges

Despite the increasing sophistication of community-based research methods over the last fifteen years, community-based researchers acknowledge recurring challenges (Reason 2006). These include difficulties establishing and maintaining research partnerships, clarifying how to share control of decision-making, and reconciling partner's motivations and interests (Diaz and Gama 2014). Reasonably well-funded research areas (public health for instance) have more easily amassed sufficient resources to develop CBR, however, sustaining learning communities after funding ends represents an additional challenge.

In terms of challenges to research quality, Minkler and Baden (2008) report cases of

“...eliminating or mixing control groups and withholding data from the analysis or dissemination phase because these data were perceived as potentially harmful to the community's reputation... From a pure science perspective, these challenges may be viewed as shortfalls of CBPR. Yet from the vantage point of public health practice, many of these concerns can be recast as ethical issues typically associated with human research” (2008, 253).

In short, new challenges may arise when directly affected constituencies collaborate on problem definition, research design and execution, data analysis and dissemination. But discussion and resolution of these issues can resolve previously under-recognized ethical dilemmas, and strengthen popular appreciation of and demand for social science research. Sandoval et al. (2012) provide a matrix for evaluating process and outcomes of CBPR projects. Mixed-method research designs (Noy 2009; Stewart et al. 2008) incorporate CBR strengths while addressing challenges previously described.

Guidelines for Peer Review of Community-based Research

The following guidelines are intended to assist editors in making informed decisions about whether or not to publish CBR manuscripts. We encourage editors to post these guidelines in their authors' section as well as distribute these guidelines to those reviewing CBR. Below, we define the term and offer different examples. We also present criteria for evaluating the theoretical contributions, methodological rigor, and presentations and uses of the findings of the research. We conclude with a list of scholars specializing in CBR who are willing to serve on editorial boards and as reviewers along with a bibliography of helpful resources.

Criteria for Evaluating Methodology

Researchers should provide adequate methodological justification detailing why the specific community-based methods employed are consistent with the research study's aims. Terms such as community and participation should be defined, and researchers should explain how they were operationalized. Methods of data collection, organization, and analysis also should be described. When viable, researchers should triangulate methods to strengthen data quality. Relevant ethical issues should be addressed including decisions regarding data use and dissemination.

Defining community

Researchers should provide an explicit definition of the community along with a justification for this definition. As with most frequently used terms, there's no consensus on how to define community. Definitions of community are socially constructed and, therefore, unstable, contested, and shaped by power relations. Many sociologists engaged in CBR emphasize constructions of community by those whose voices are marginalized, strengths denied, and human rights violated. While recognizing the importance of differences in collective identities and structural locations, some peace scholars and conflict transformation practitioners focus upon relationships when defining community. Put simply, those who have ongoing relationships with one another form a community. Being part of a community is not always empowering to individuals or social groups.

Defining participation

Since community-based participatory studies vary greatly in terminology as well as in the content and extent of engagement, PRAM developed these general guidelines for classifying participatory research. They provide a standardized format for explaining the extent of community engagement and the stages in which community engagement occurred from problem definition to dissemination of results and planning for future research.⁴

Other standards of evaluation

CBR should meet the discipline's prevailing standards of methodological rigor (e.g., value neutrality, well-thought-out research design, reliable and valid data sources and coding if applicable...). The way that the rigor is attained, however, often differs from conventional means. CBR scholars have identified several practices that can assist activist-scholar teams in avoiding ideological blinkers influencing selection of research methods or interpretations of findings. For example, John Heron and Peter Reason have developed a technique known as challenging consensus collusion where some of the participants formally adopt the role of devil's advocate, questioning the group's reasoning whenever consensus is reached (Heron and Reason 2008). Compared to research conducted by one or a handful of scholars, research projects using such techniques are less likely to be biased because more people (often more diverse) are involved in critical reflection. Multi-positionality supersedes the non-falsifiable concept of objectivity as a basis for confidence in the interpretation of results. Wimpenny and Savin-Baden (2012) propose a process for systematizing collaborative data analysis by researchers and research subjects as well as collaborative meta-analysis of comparable cases.

Criteria for Evaluating Theoretical Contributions

CBR creates new knowledge, different forms of knowledge, and knowledge that predicts the effects of behaviors than typically generated by more conventional academic approaches. We recommend using the following three criteria to evaluate the theoretical contributions of CBR: (1) the integration of multiple forms and sources of knowledge; (2) the enhancement of

⁴ For more information see: Guidelines and Categories for Classifying Participatory Research Projects in Health Promotion. <http://www.lgreen.net/guidelines.html>

knowledge based upon its application and/or identification in practice; and (3) the development of action-based theories with predictive power.

(1) Integrating multiple forms and sources of knowledge-- Academics mainly produce and value propositional knowledge. The propositional knowledge generated by scholars is more helpful to community members when it is integrated with the propositional knowledge that they already possess. Community members theorize about the causes of their problems as well as effective paths to eliminating these problems within a given social context. Moreover, community members often hold other forms of knowledge to a greater extent than scholars such as knowledge derived from direct, personal experience, knowledge of ways to persuasively present findings to targeted audiences, and practical knowledge such as relevant assets, stakeholders, culturally-based variations, and power dynamics within the community.

*(2) Enhancement of knowledge through practice—*Multiple forms and sources of knowledge can be applied in and assessed through practice and/or discovered through the research process itself. Iterative cycles of action and reflection allow for revision of theory based upon lessons learned in practice. Certain CBR methods such as asset mapping, conscientization, interpretive focus groups, participant-action workshops, and policy as process—carefully cultivate knowledge based in the community.

(3) Action-based theories with predictive power-- CBR develops and refines theory through practice with practice understood to involve cycles of dialog, action, and reflection. By generating theories with greater predictive power, iterative cycles of reflection takes us beyond *ex post facto* explanations that currently dominate our discipline and make our theories much less appealing to practitioners than other disciplines such as economics (Jasper 2010). The iterative quality of the research process also reduces the likelihood of researchers becoming overly confident in the external validity of our findings. Further reflection upon unexpected consequences can lead to different actions that more consistently produce expected outcomes. Predictive power requires developing small to middle range theories that are sensitive to contextual variations. In this light, case studies create critical data-points that enable us to identify various combinations of factors that result in the same or similar outcomes when the same action is applied.

Criteria for Presenting Findings

Regardless of a scholar's willingness or ability to conduct collaborative research, knowledge produced by standard sociological methods can be useful to activists provided that scholars develop accessible and context-specific applications of this knowledge (e.g., spreadsheet facilitating the application of criteria for selecting board members). Using simple terms, brevity, visually compelling graphics, and user-friendly applications all make knowledge generated by our field more useful to activists. Per our growing commitment to public sociology, findings should be presented in ways that go beyond scholars in a particular field to speak to multiple audiences, including policy makers, journalists, and above all those who are directly affected by what is being researched. This may mean that researchers prepare distinct research products for distinct audiences. Authors should clarify the role of collaborators in producing and disseminating research

Examples of Community-Based Research

Abraham, M., & Maney, G. M. (2012). Transforming place and belonging through action research, community practice, and public policy: Comparing responses to NIMBYism. *Current Sociology*, 60(2), 178-201.

Abraham and Maney collaborated with two long-standing partner organizations to explore ways to address a recurring but under-developed issue—how community-based organizations representing marginalized (and often recently arrived communities) respond to resistance by pre-existing communities often called NIMBY'ism (Not in My Back Yard). Authors and community partners collaborated in developing five core research questions that guided the research. Methods used include comparative analysis of relative social science literature, as well as the reconstruction of two case studies utilizing organizational archives, focus groups and surveys with key actors in the cases. Through reconstruction of timelines and group reflection on the cases, research collaborators reached shared conclusions that addressed the five research questions regarding how relatively marginalized constituencies could address NIMBY'ism.

Noy (2009). When Framing Fails: Ideas, Influence, and Resources in San Francisco's Homeless Policy, *Social Problems*, Vol. 56, No. 2 (May 2009), pp. 223-242
Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/sp.2009.56.2.223>

Noy conducted a two-year study of San Francisco's homeless policy field. The study "combined frame analysis, network analysis, extensive interviews, media content analysis, examination of campaign contribution data, observation of public meetings, and a participatory action research project with homeless people. This combination of methods gave me multiple views of the field.

The centerpiece of this investigation was a formal mapping of San Francisco's homeless policy field that I conducted in the second half of 2003. I defined the field as including all organizations and political offices within San Francisco that were in some way involved in (1) shaping the city's homeless policy; (2) providing input to policy makers about city homeless policy and programs; or (3) implementing city homeless policy. To empirically map this policy field, I measured five aspects of the field: (1) organizations, (2) relationships, (3) frames, (4) material resources, and (5) influence. Next, I discuss the steps I used to measure each of these elements."

Minkler, Garcia, Williams, LoPresti, Lily, 'Sí Se Puede: Using Participatory Research to Promote Environmental Justice in a Latino Community in San Diego, California," *Journal of Urban Health: Bulletin of the New York Academy of Medicine*. Vol. 87(5); 781-796
<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/4mh367n0>

"Community-based participatory research (CBPR) increasingly is seen as a potent tool for studying and addressing urban environmental health problems by linking place-based work with efforts to help effect policy-level change. This paper explores a successful CBPR and organizing effort, the Toxic Free Neighborhoods Campaign, in Old Town National City (OTNC), CA, United States, and its contributions to both local policy outcomes and changes in the broader policy environment, laying the groundwork for a Specific Plan to address a host of

interlocking community concerns. After briefly describing the broader research of which the OTNC case study was a part, we provide background on the Environmental Health Coalition (EHC) partnership and the setting in which it took place, including the problems posed for residents in this light industrial/residential neighborhood. EHC's strong in-house research, and its training and active engagement of promotoras de salud (lay health promoters) as co-researchers and policy change advocates, are described. We explore in particular the translation of research findings as part of a policy advocacy campaign, interweaving challenges faced and success factors and multi-level outcomes to which these efforts contributed. The EHC partnership's experience then is compared with that of other policy-focused CBPR efforts in urban environmental health, emphasizing common success factors and challenges faced, as these may assist other partnerships wishing to pursue CBPR in urban communities."

Gasior Altman, Morello-Frosch, Brody, Rudel, Brown & Averick (2008).

[Pollution Comes Home and Gets Personal: Women's Experience of Household Chemical Exposure. *Journal of Health and Social Behavior*. 2008 December; 49\(4\): 417–435.](#)

We report on interviews conducted with participants in a novel study about environmental chemicals in body fluids and household air and dust. Interviews reveal how personal and collective environmental history influence the interpretation of exposure data, and how participants fashion an emergent understanding of environmental health problems from the articulation of science and experience. To the illness experience literature, we contribute a framework for analyzing a new category of embodied narratives—"exposure experience"—that examines the mediating role of science. We update social scientific knowledge about social responses to toxic chemicals during a period in which science alters public understanding of chemical pollution. This article is among the first published accounts of participants' responses to learning personal exposure data, research identified as critical to environmental science and public health. Our findings raise the importance of reporting even uncertain science and underscore the value of a community-based reporting strategy.

[Kreuter, Kegler, Joseph, Redwood, & Hooker \(2012\). The impact of implementing selected CBPR strategies to address disparities in urban Atlanta: a retrospective case study. *Health Educ Res*. Aug 2012; 27\(4\): 729–741. doi: \[10.1093/her/cys053\]\(https://doi.org/10.1093/her/cys053\)](#)

To address urban health disparities as complex interactions among social, economic and environmental factors, Accountable Communities: Healthy Together (AHT) used specific CBPR strategies to engage residents, and promote the participation of community organizations serving, a low-income community in urban Atlanta to: (i) identify priority health and social or environmental problems and (ii) undertake actions to mitigate those problems. Three years after funding ended, a retrospective case study, using semi-structured, taped interviews was carried out to determine what impacts, if any, specific CBPR strategies had on: (i) eliciting resident input into the identification of priority problems and (ii) prompting actions by community organizations to address those problems. Results suggest that the CBPR strategies used were associated with changes that were supported and sustained after grant funding ended.

Ryan, C. Jeffreys, K., Ryczek, J., and Diaz, J. (2014). Building the Public Will: The Battle for Affordable—and Supportive—Housing. *Journal of Poverty*, Vol. 18(3) 1- 20. DOI: 10.1080/10875549.2014.923967

Rhode Island Coalition for the Homeless (RICH) advocates and activists representing the homeless and formerly homeless, worked with other allies to forge an inclusive, multi-constituency coalition that reversed state cuts in a highly effective affordable housing program. Of interest to community-based researchers is the method triangulation: authors gathered data via direct participant observation by RICH staff; systematic review of RICH archives (political and communication strategies and work plans; media advisories and resulting coverage; increases in web traffic; and a post-campaign public review session. Ryan (academically-based sociologist) and Jeffreys (embedded sociologist) analyzed data, which additional RICH staff reviewed and discussed. Also of interest is the theory section: RICH requested that scholar Ryan translate existing theories of power into a model with predictive value. Jeffreys and Ryczek, then, used the theory to construct a logic model that informed the campaign.

Ryan, C., Salas, V., Anastario, M., and Cámara, G. (2010). Making Communication Research Matter: Matter to Whom? *International Journal of Communication*, Volume 4 (2010), pp. 1- 10. <http://ijoc.org/ojs/index.php/ijoc/index>

U.S.-based researchers (faculty and undergraduates) collaborated with México-based Freirian educators working in 29 rural states without stable Internet access. Mexican collaborators provided an extensive list of questions asked by Mexican students contemplating immigration. U.S. sociology undergraduates searched the world-wide web for 200 hours attempting to address the Mexican students' questions. The article describes U.S. students' reactions and findings regarding the domination of the web by mainstream U.S. discourse immigration. The article provides an example of democratizing research in that grassroots educators' and students' questions became the central focus for Internet research. Secondly, the study democratizes research by making findings available to Mexican teachers and learners lacking routine access to the Internet. Authors discuss how the concerns of large constituencies remain unrecognized and unrepresented in web content.

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For more information about these guidelines or the Publications Committee of the URBAN Sociology node please contact Eric Tesdahl at eric.a.tesdahl@vanderbilt.edu. The URBAN Sociology Node seeks to build upon the wide array of collaborative research and action initiatives already underway by sociologists. These include campaigns to improve the conditions of day laborers, efforts for equitable community development, and strategies for effective community organizing and public education reform, building social movements in the World Social Forum, combating environmental racism, among many others. Those in the Sociology Node seek to create a permanent, ongoing network within sociology and across disciplines that is focused on collaborative research with communities to create new knowledge relevant to addressing pressing social justice issues.

More information at: <http://urbanresearchnetwork.org/>