



# Guidelines for Peer Reviewing Community Based Research

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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 re URBAN Sociology Node at <http://urbanresearchnetwork.org/>

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## **Executive Summary - Guidelines for Peer Review of Community-based Research**

The URBAN Publication Committee drafted these guidelines to help editors and reviewers identify high-quality community-based research for publication. The guidelines also may help researchers conduct high-quality studies. The full guidelines are posted at [www.urbanresearchnetwork.org](http://www.urbanresearchnetwork.org).

### **Definition – Community-based Research (CBR)**

In broad terms, community-based research (CBR) includes community members at some level in directing, designing, implementing, analyzing, using and/or evaluating research aimed at empowering the community and facilitating social change.

### **Criteria for Evaluating Methodology**

CBR submissions should meet prevailing standards of methodological rigor, such as careful research design, and, if applicable, reliable and valid data sources and coding. How rigor is attained, however, may differ from conventional approaches to research objectivity. In this way CBR highlights epistemological questions at the core of research. For instance, CBR researchers argue that analyzing data with community-based actors representing multiple perspectives and social locations can strengthen rather than weaken reliability and validity. To maintain rigor, CBR researchers (as do all social researchers) should:

- 1) Define terms (e.g., community, participation), and how they are operationalized.
- 2) Describe communities involved (e.g., geographic, socio-economic, ethnographic, etc.).
- 3) Spell out the nature and degree of community involvement in research process.
- 4) Explain why the selected community-based methods suit the study's aims.
- 5) Make explicit strategies and methods of data collection, organization, and analysis.
- 6) Triangulate methods to address characteristic strengths and weaknesses.
- 7) Address all relevant ethical issues such as data use, dissemination, protection of human subjects, etc.
- 8) Specify understandings outside traditional research arrangements (editorial control of presentation, data ownership, etc.).
- 9) Delineate limitations and advantages of the resulting study in design and execution.
- 10) Include community partners in evaluating research's relative and mutual benefits.

### **Criteria for Evaluating Theoretical Contributions**

CBR may generate different forms of knowledge than conventional academic approaches. To evaluate theoretical contributions of CBR, reviewers should assess how researchers:

- (1) Integrate multiple forms and sources of knowledge, including a theoretical orientation that helps address the methodological challenges specific to a research project.
- (2) Enhance knowledge based on its application in practice;
- (3) Develop 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.

## 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 recent high-profile discussions within the discipline, one might expect a significant increase in 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 originally motivated many sociologists are set aside in the interests of secure, living wage employment.

We argue here that community-based research can play a valuable role in an academic social science setting. In addition to advancing social science, we suggest CBR can extend public understanding of and appreciation for the social sciences. It also addresses social sciences' ethical and social commitments.

We developed these guidelines to aid editors and reviewers of sociological journals and conference papers to assess the relative merits and quality of manuscripts that feature community based research. Secondly, these guidelines are intended to support community-based researchers in designing studies for critical reviews. Finally, we hope the guidelines help community-based partners understand better how social scientists organize knowledge production. By grasping the contexts within which university-based researchers operate, community-based organizations can maximize mutual benefits.

This is living document, that is, we hope it will support deepening discussions regarding the value of publishing critically engaged public scholarship in highly visible publication outlets. We have circulated this document to journal editors and incorporated their feedback. We especially thank Pamela Quiroz and John Krinsky for extensive comments on an earlier draft. To share additional comments, write [Charlotte\\_Ryan@@uml.edu](mailto:Charlotte_Ryan@@uml.edu).

6.15.15 The URBAN Sociology Publications Committee



## 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 systematic reflection on 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).

## What is community-based research<sup>2</sup>?

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).<sup>3</sup>

Rather than conducting research **on** a community, CBR involves scholars doing research **with** a community: those who are conventionally the objects of academic research become subjects, actively and co-operatively contributing to research questions, hypotheses, research design, data collection, data analysis, and 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 dialogue, 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 analysis (community as defined by geography, identity, interests, values, or shared social locations and conditions)<sup>4</sup> with recognition of overlapping and diverging communities of interest (simultaneity/intersectionality).
- (2) Recognize communities as complex sets of individuals, organizations, and networks with a range of assets, concerns, and viewpoints. 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 results to address community concerns (Israel et al. 1998:179).” Inclusion does not mean that all participants play the same role, nor do CBR researchers 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).

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<sup>2</sup> Israel et al. (1998) note the similarities among action research (Lewin 1951; Greenwood and Levin 2006); participatory action research (Whyte 1990; Reason and Bradbury 2001), community-based participatory research (Minkler and Wallerstein 2008; Wallerstein and Duran 2010), collaborative interactive action research (Rappoport et al. 2002) and cooperative inquiry (Heron and Reason 1997). These approaches commonly vary in terms of who collaborates, how collaboration is structured, and how results are applied.

<sup>3</sup> Available at [www.pram.mcgill.ca](http://www.pram.mcgill.ca)

<sup>4</sup> No consensus exists on how to define community. Briefly, those who have ongoing relationships 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.

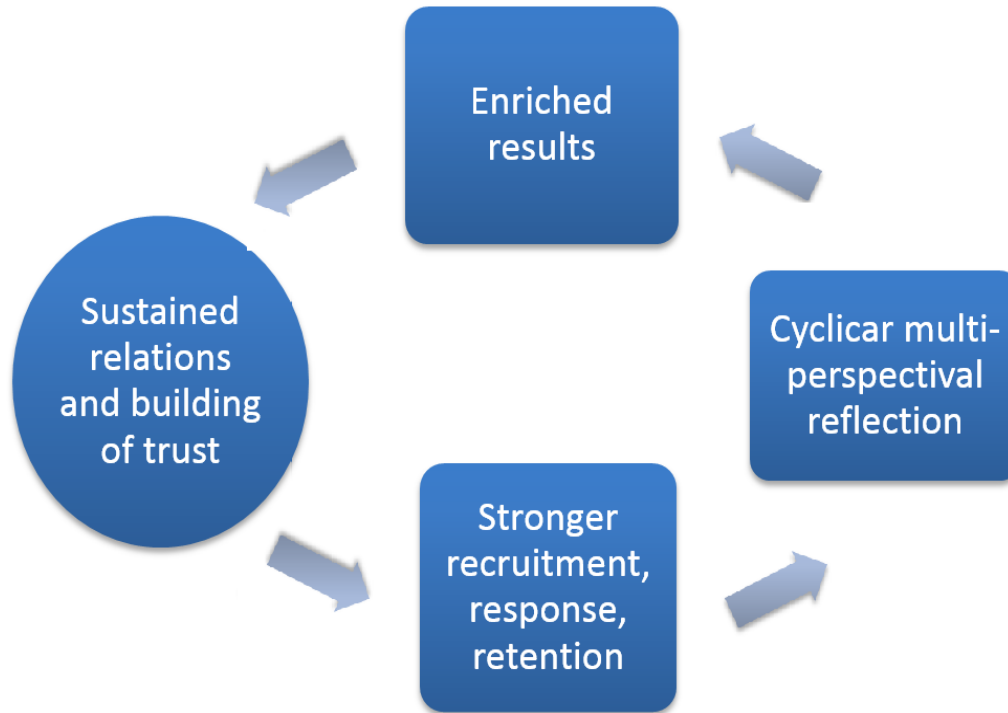
## **Core principles of community-based research, *cont.***

- (4) Link 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 2006).
- (6) Additionally, CBR projects stress sustainability; as learning communities, academic and community partners enter ongoing reflexive collaborations in which learning can accrue.

## ***Advantages and Disadvantage***

As with any research methodology, community-based research has advantages and disadvantages. Its suitability depends upon 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 et al. (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) review 591 CBR studies to identify typical additional benefits including positive outcomes from conflicts successfully resolved and unanticipated outcomes from research questions developed in dialogue. 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 hope to create 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, dissemination, and protection of human subjects.

#### **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.<sup>5</sup>

### **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 rigor is attained, however, often differs from conventional means. CBR scholars have identified several practices that can assist activist-scholar teams in keeping ideological blinkers from 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).

Embracing multi-positionality, community-based researchers employ evidence-based, systematic methods, but question automatic—often taken-for-granted—equations of rigor with disengaged notions of objectivity. Augmenting traditional approaches, CBR researchers include actors representing multiple perspectives and social locations in defining and assessing the social problem at hand, interpreting findings, and reflecting critically on research limitations. So conducted, multi-positional CBR can contribute to greater reliability and validity rather than distort 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**

Augmenting knowledge typically generated by more conventional academic approaches, CBR creates new knowledge, different forms of knowledge, and knowledge that predicts the effects of behaviors. 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 knowledge based upon its application and/or identification in practice; and
- (3) The development of action-based theories with predictive power.

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<sup>5</sup> For more information see: "Guidelines and Categories for Classifying Participatory Research Projects in Health Promotion." <http://www.lgreen.net/guidelines.html>

## Criteria for Evaluating Theoretical Contributions - *continued*

### (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 [e.g., visual presentations], 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 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., a 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 and to the public. 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 multiple research products tailored to distinct audiences. Authors should clarify the role of collaborators in producing and disseminating research.



## Examples of Community-Based Research

Abraham, Margaret and Gregory M. Maney. 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.

Gasior Altman, Rebecca, Rachel Morello-Frosch, Julia Green Brody, Ruthann Rudel, Phil Brown, and Mara Averick. 2008. "[Pollution Comes Home and Gets Personal: Women's Experience of Household Chemical Exposure.](#)" *Journal of Health and Social Behavior* 49(4):417–435.

Authors conducted 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 interpolating 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, Marshall W., Michelle C. Kegler, Karen T. Joseph, Yanique A. Redwood, and Margaret Hooker. 2012. "The impact of implementing selected CBPR strategies to address disparities in urban Atlanta: a retrospective case study." *Health Education Research* 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 (Acht) 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.

Minkler, Meredith, Analilia P. Garcia, Joy Williams, Tony LoPresti, and Jane Lilly. 2010. "Si 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*. 87(5):781-796. <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/4mh367n0>

"Community-based participatory research (CBPR) ...is seen as a potent tool for studying and addressing urban environmental health problems by linking place-based work with ...policy-level change. This paper explores a successful CBPR and organizing effort, the Toxic Free Neighborhoods Campaign...and its contributions to both local policy outcomes and changes in the broader policy environment... After briefly describing the broader research..., we provide background on the Environmental Health Coalition (EHC) partnership and the setting in which it took place.... The authors describe 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. The article also explores the translation of research findings for a policy advocacy campaign, then, compares the EHC partnership experience with other policy-focused CBPR in urban environmental health, emphasizing common success factors and challenges..."

Noy, Darren. 2009. "When Framing Fails: Ideas, Influence, and Resources in San Francisco's Homeless Policy." *Social Problems* 56 (2):223-242. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/sp.2009.56.2.223>

Noy's two-year study of San Francisco's homeless policy field 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 provides multiple views of the field. The investigation's centerpiece was a formal mapping of San Francisco's homeless policy field conducted in the second half of 2003. As defined, the field included all organizations and political offices within San Francisco 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, Noy measured five aspects of the field: (1) organizations, (2) relationships, (3) frames, (4) material resources, and (5) influence.

Ryan, Charlotte, Vanessa Salas, Mike Anastario, and Gabriél Cámara. 2010. "Making Communication Research Matter: Matter to Whom?" *International Journal of Communication* 4:1-10. <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 with limited 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 how U.S. mainstream discourse regarding immigration dominated the web. The article provides an example of democratizing research by building the Internet research around grassroots educators' questions, and by making information from the search available to Mexican teachers and learners lacking routine Internet access. Authors discuss how Internet concerns of large constituencies remain unrecognized.

Ryan, Charlotte, Karen Jeffreys, Jim Ryczek and Janelle Diaz. 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, forged 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 for RICH to review. Theory section describes translating theories of power into a logic model that guided the campaign.

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