

DOING COMMUNITY-BASED RESEARCH:

Perspectives from the Field

Greg Halseth, Sean Markey, Laura Ryser, and Don Manson
Montreal, Canada: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2016. 333 pp.
paper, ISBN: 978-0773547285

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There is no lack of academic research on marginalized or socio-economically stressed communities. The problem is that many struggling communities rarely see the results of the research conducted on them. And even if they do, it usually does not offer tangible or constructive recommendations for improvements in the community. Traditional research approaches do much for the careers of the researcher but foster apathy towards the research process in the places that could benefit the most from well done community based research (CBR).

One important challenge is that most researchers are not trained in how to conduct community based studies. *Doing Community-Based Research: Perspectives from the Field* is one of the best books that I have read that begins to fill that gap. Halseth, Markey, Ryser, and Manson offer an excellent guide to those interested in learning how to do CBR in a meaningful and respectful manner. They offer a practical nuts-and-bolts guide to the principles and practice of CBR. Their approach is based on decades of experience doing community development CBR in rural communities in Canada. However, I found much of what they present applies equally well to the United States' urban context.

The authors make clear from the beginning that doing CBR well requires greater focus on the needs and goals of the community in which the research is being conducted than traditional research. Good CBR should create direct benefits to the community under study. This cannot be done without close attention at every stage of the process to respectful relationships, flexible approach to design and implementation, and frequent and effective communication.

To start, unless there is a pre-existing relationship with the community, preliminary engagement with all possible stakeholders is necessary. It is required if working with an indigenous community. These early conversations will help the researcher determine the readiness of the community to engage in CBR. Should all go well, the CBR research team will also need to make the time to engage in deep learning about the history and local politics of, as well as conditions in, the community. The authors provide suggestions, as well as necessary cautions, on how to do this successfully.

During the relationship building process, the researcher establishes a partnership that involves shared control. Through a process of negotiation, decisions are made about how the research will be governed, how data collection and analysis will be done, how changes will be made to the process, what role the community plays in what part of the research process, what

capacity building can or needs to be done, how conflict will be handled, what forms of communication will work best for all parties, and how to share power. Maintaining good relationships requires that the researcher be sensitive to and open about community power dynamics. The authors' literature review and discussion about power should be required reading even for those who conduct traditional research in communities.

Researchers cannot shortchange or rush the relationship building process. It is needed to create a foundation for trust. Especially in small communities that have been over-studied or have good reason to be suspicious of outsiders (e.g., indigenous communities), trust will be needed for successful field work as well as when there is conflict within the partnership. Throughout this book, the authors provide guidance on relationship building in the text and through vignettes written by experienced CBR researchers.

Respect is the foundation of trust. Researchers need to respect both the relationship with the community and the individuals within the community. Respect is not simply an attitude one holds; it must manifest in actions. Signals of respect include, but are not limited to: prompt reimbursement of community partners, providing honorariums to elders in indigenous communities, scheduling appointments and keeping them, awareness of and sensitivity to local seasonality (especially employment seasons), sending thank you notes after field research is complete, providing childcare and transportation to community meetings, and making good on promises made as well as not making promises you cannot keep.

From a design perspective, researchers conducting strictly qualitative or mixed-methods research should also make time for member checking. This is the process of going back to participants to verify that your assessment of their contribution adequately represents their experiences and perspectives. Methodologically, it is simply good research practice. In addition, ensuring that you "got it mostly right" demonstrates respect to community members.

Respecting a community's way of knowing is particularly important when working with indigenous communities. This will obviously require time to learn if you are an outsider. More importantly, it requires "checking the ego of expertise and status, seeking to treat people as the teachers, and seeing one's role ... as their student" (107). For example, traditional ecological knowledge in indigenous communities is understood and communicated differently than in Western science. Doing research that respects a community's way of knowing will also require flexibility in the design and implementation of the study.

Methodological congruence, the idea that a given study's research design is determined by the research purpose and question, is the driving factor in all good research. However, congruence becomes more complicated when the research purpose must accommodate both the community's and researcher's goals. The best way to achieve congruence in this context is through methodological flexibility. CBR researchers need to be open to innovative approaches to data collection that might be a better fit for needs, goals, and context of the community. In addition, CBR researchers need to be prepared to change the method of data collection if it is not working. At the same time, researchers should be cautious about methodological fads, especially those that are technology based. The community should be able to replicate the data collection on their own. The authors provide a helpful list of innovative data collection approaches to consider with community partners.

In addition to design, there are other areas in which flexibility is needed. Researchers need to be prepared to work with anyone in official roles, even as the individuals in those roles change over time. Researchers should be ready to go to where the community is at the times they are available. Neither relationship building nor data collection is a Monday through Friday, 9-5 type of endeavor in CBR. Researchers need to be willing to learn the languages spoken in the community and be willing to hire translators if this is not possible. Finally, researchers need to be open to reporting back to the community in the ways that work best for the community. Publishing the study's report on the university website is simply insufficient. The authors provide many useful suggestions in this regard.

Good communication is another part of the foundation of a respectful relationship. The communication issue is more than avoiding jargon or being willing to print reports for community partners. Different communities have different expectations, norms, and modes of communication and researchers need to be prepared to accommodate them. In many communities, especially the rural areas where these authors primarily work, face-to-face communication is the only acceptable way; an e-mail or phone call will not suffice and videoconferencing may not even be feasible. Whatever the preferences are, CBR researchers need to budget time and money to do regular reporting on the project's progress to partners and stakeholders.

Of course, good communication starts during the relationship building phase. Open communication is critical when negotiating what research will be done and how. A full and frank conversation about what is the problem or issue to be addressed is critical. Once this is achieved, it is also important for the researcher to consistently present what the research is about to all community stakeholders. Careful attention to this will help reduce conflict during the research process as well as minimize unwanted entanglements in local politics. The authors point out that sometimes good communication requires saying nothing at all. Researchers should be careful to keep their opinions about local conflicts to themselves. They should also decline to share "early results."

There is much that this book has to offer to both new and experienced CBR researchers. I appreciated the discussion around the institutional, political, and personal challenges to doing CBR. It is important to acknowledge the balance that must be struck between the needs and goals of the community and the needs and goals of academic researchers. The authors are frank that modern research universities are not structured to support CBR, especially for early career researchers. CBR involves a much longer time commitment than traditional research and often involves products that are not valued by tenure committees. Overcoming this challenge requires pushing for change within each institution.

My experience with CBR is strictly in the urban environment. Nevertheless, I found that much of the principles and practices described here apply almost equally to that setting. There are safety issues that are definitely unique to rural areas. As an urban researcher, I do not need Bear Aware training to do my research.

I also do not have to justify the need for research in urban neighborhoods. Unfortunately, the authors are compelled to make an argument for the value of rural research. Apparently, some people hold the absurd belief that rural places are not worthy of study or are blind to the opportunity to develop knowledge in places that are experiencing significant social, political, and

economic change. The authors provide a solid argument for rural research that should be useful for those who might need it.

The authors also provide a comprehensive literature review on many aspects of the research enterprise and how it relates to CBR. What I would have liked to have seen is more critical reflection on the problematic assumptions that derive from standard, mostly quantitative, research approaches. In particular, the authors uncritically accept novelty and theory building as essential characteristics of research. This is in tension with the applied, action focused, decolonizing orientation that is infused throughout the book. I would have also liked to have seen a more critical reflection on the assumptions in the critiques of CBR presented. For example, the authors point out that the legitimacy of CBR has been questioned because the researcher shares control with the community. In responding to this critique, they do not challenge or deconstruct the claim that control is fundamental to good research. That would have added value to future researchers who might need to make this argument.

Overall, this is an excellent book that provides much value to the CBR enterprise. I particularly appreciated the assets based research approach they champion. For too long, social science researchers have gone into communities to describe what is wrong with them. These authors argue, rightly, that in order to contribute to the needs and goals of a community, it is more useful to look for community strengths that can be built upon.

Scholars new to CBR or who are struggling with doing it well will find this a very useful guide. Graduate students interested in pursuing a CBR agenda, or even simply doing respectful community engaged research, will also find this book helpful. The authors also provide excellent guidance for seasoned CBR scholars who are transitioning to leading teams that include students. This book is brimming with concrete recommendations making it a valuable resource that deserves to be part of a comprehensive methods library.