

Community-engaged Research Approaches: Multiple Pathways To Health Equity

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The last few decades have seen growing acceptance and use of research approaches involving non-academic partners. As reflected in the two recent special issues/sections of this journal addressing community-based participatory research (CBPR; Suarez-Balcazar et al., 2020; Wallerstein, 2021), these approaches have moved fairly rapidly from the fringes of scholarly conversations to their current position in multiple disciplinary mainstreams, particularly in public health and community psychology. Termed variously (e.g., CBPR, participatory action research; PAR; and community–university partnerships), community-engaged approaches to research (CEnR approaches) now appear in wide range of academic funding mechanisms and research programs, many of which target conditions associated with health inequities.

With the benefits and validity of CEnR becoming more established in the mainstream, we are seeing scholarly conversations focus increasingly on the training, funding, incentivization, and evaluation of these collaborative and partnership approaches. The *Engage for Equity: Advancing Community Engaged Partnerships (E2)* project, for example, has advanced a science of CBPR (Wallerstein et al., 2020), providing a conceptual foundation and model for linking partnership contexts and dynamics to intermediate and long-term health equity outcomes (Kastelic et al 2018; Wallerstein et al., 2008). Developed empirically from two large surveys of research partnerships and community consultations (Belone et al., 2016), their conceptual CBPR model identifies a range of factors including communities' and universities' capacity and readiness, historical context of collaboration, formal agreements, and congruence of partners' core values that may predict positive system and capacity outcomes. This framework provides a strong, unifying foundation for the growing field of CEnR, capturing much of what has been learned about effective partnerships in the last few decades.

Surveying this special section (Wallerstein, 2021), the recent special issue on CBPR approaches to health equity (Suarez-Balcazar, et al., 2020) and the broader landscape of CEnR literature, however, we are struck by the breadth of collaborative structures, partner roles, group processes, research methodologies, and types of actions being employed in these projects. While rooted in the values that are often considered fundamental to CEnR (challenging dominant assumptions about who holds and creates knowledge; Wallerstein & Duran, 2018; involving actions that benefit all partners; Israel et al., 1998), these projects are otherwise remarkably diverse in their strategies. We question, therefore, whether unifying language and frameworks will continue to support this growing discourse.

Over time, various terms have emerged to describe certain CEnR approaches. Some, such as Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR), have provided a platform for researchers to discuss the specific assumptions, strategies, and challenges of engaging youth in research. Others, such as CBPR and CEnR, are widely used and recognized but are applied with such inconsistency that any specific meaning has diminished over time. CEnR, for example, is often described as a “spectrum” encapsulating a range of approaches including CBPR (Brenner & Manice, 2011; McCloskey et al., 2011). In this depiction, CBPR represents one end of the spectrum, distinctive for its emphasis on maximizing the involvement of those affected by the issue under study and for its goal of ameliorating inequitable social conditions (Brenner & Manice, 2011; Sánchez et al., 2021). Others, however, use the term CBPR simply because it is the term used most often in their field (Drahotka et al., 2016), and recent studies have suggested that the high levels of community involvement characteristic of CBPR are not necessarily practiced in all projects (Spears Johnson et al., 2016). This lack of intentionality in the use of certain terms represents a lost opportunity to begin systematizing the differences between various approaches and to support the development of context- and topic-specific CEnR discourses, with greater clarity in value-base and desired outcomes (Trickett, 2011).

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Simple conceptual models often used to characterize CEnR approaches have also become less useful in an ever-diversifying field of practice. One such model conceptualizes CEnR partnership practices as forming a continuum from more to less community involvement (McCloskey et al., 2011). While useful, this conceptualization highlights only a single dimension of CEnR—the amount of community participation—while sidelining equally important dimensions such who and what defines “the community,” the roles played by the project’s various contributors and participants, the outcomes valued by those same actors, the change strategies employed as part of the project’s “action” dimension, and the locus of intervention for those change tactics (London et al., 2020). Another popular model links CEnR practices to their roots in the Global North (e.g. Kurt Lewin) and South (e.g. Paulo Freire), which are associated with efforts to enhance services and interventions (the “Northern tradition”) and to empower and transform oppressed communities through participation in research, action, and reflection (the “Southern tradition”; Lykes, 2017). This distinction, which is often employed by critics of the Northern tradition, conceptually de-couples the empowering process of participation from empowered outcomes such as policy or narrative change. Such narrow frameworks therefore hinder the development of dynamic, pluralistic CEnR approaches.

Looking forward, we suggest that what is needed to support a next generation of CEnR scholarship and practice is an expanded and clarified taxonomy of typologies and nomenclature. By continuing to focus primarily on what CEnR projects have in common, we run the risk of overlooking the strategies and tools that have emerged to support work in diverse fields of study and action. To illustrate this need, we point to three themes in the conceptual framings and core practices of CEnR—process and partnership, knowledge and epistemology, and power and structure—that reflect greater variance than is captured by popular terminology and models, including in recent issues of this journal (Suarez-Balcazar et al., 2020; Wallerstein, 2021). We ultimately argue that an expanded, systematized taxonomy of CEnR typologies would not only enhance scholarly collaboration and communication, but would also create space for a wider range of practices and approaches in the field of CEnR.

Process and Partnership

Articles in the recent special issues of this journal reflect a broader effort in the field of CEnR to understand the engaged research process and the nature of research partnerships, and emphasize the potential for equitable partnerships and co-learning processes to disrupt the systems

and structures that maintain structural inequities. Articles consider, for example, how to measure key contexts, mechanisms, and outcomes of CEnR (e.g. Boursaw et al., 2021), reaping the benefits of diverse perspectives while grappling effectively with inevitable challenges (e.g. Coombe et al., 2020), features of group process that enable partnerships to achieve shared objectives (e.g. Gone et al., 2020), and building trust with vulnerable populations (Afifi et al., 2020; Rodriguez-Espinosa & Verney, 2021). There is often a monolithic approach in this body of literature, however, in which anyone who is not a researcher or an employee of a university is the “community.” This overly broad characterization of community not only eliminates valuable opportunities to document practical lessons about working with different types of stakeholders in certain problem areas and research topics, but also flattens important power relationships and disparities among various potential non-academic partners.

In this body of literature, the phrases “community partners” and “community–university partnerships” have become standard language for describing academic and non-academic members of CEnR partnerships. This language can, in some cases, be descriptive and effective; actors’ institutional affiliations have, after all, a great bearing on their priorities, interests, and roles in the collaboration. However, it also highlights one specific axis of difference: academic or non-academic. As a result, “community partners” are often descriptively grouped together, implying a degree of homogeneity and homophily among a project’s non-academic collaborators (and non-academics in general) that is unlikely to exist in reality, and which glosses over important distinctions between different types of non-academic actors.

The “community” in engaged research, for example, is often professional practitioners, particularly those in agencies and organizations that serve communities (e.g., providers of health and social services) rather than with organizations more directly controlled by community residents and representing their interests. This distinction is important. Logistically, professional practitioners may need to set up contracts with the university, work within their own organizational timelines, or fit the project into their organization’s scope of work. Community residents might have different needs and constraints based on their level of organization, home and employment situations, and personal experience of the issues at hand (which may be associated with mistrust of institutions, social vulnerability, and trauma). Broad application of the term “community” obscures these differences, hindering the development of a body of literature on more tailored practices and approaches for different types of partners.

Treating the “community” as a monolith also obscures the complex power dynamics that exist within and between communities, and which can have great bearing

on a “community-engaged” project’s process and outcomes. While a community group that is controlled by residents will likely reflect that community’s own interests, professional practitioners serving that community may have other interests—those of their profession’s particular guild, for example—that are not necessarily aligned with residents’ priorities. Researchers choosing to work with certain community partners without awareness of these dynamics may therefore reinforce or even exacerbate existing power disparities (Christens & Speer, 2006). Indeed, where community residents have less power or privilege than professional practitioners, participation in a CEnR project places community residents at greater risk (of losing their job, for example).

To date, relationships between researchers and community partners have been the subject of considerable work in CEnR, and yet few distinctions have been made regarding how different CEnR approaches should be employed with these different types of partners. Engage for Equity (Dickson et al., 2020), among others, have begun identifying the types of community partners often involved in research, and this descriptive work marks an important first step toward more critical engagement with the process and consequences of working with various types of non-academic partners. However, unifying models tend to focus on generalizable constructs such as partnership synergy (e.g. Coombe et al., 2020) and relational processes such as dialogue and mutual learning (e.g. Espinosa et al., 2020) which, while appealing for their ability to incorporate complexity without being too formulaic, fail to capture how “mutual learning” might look different when working with a single professional with expertise in the subject matter versus a small neighborhood organization, for instance. Measuring different aspects of partnerships can yield insights into collaboration dynamics (e.g., Bour-saw et al., 2021), but some aspects may be more important in some forms of partnership or contexts than in others. Moving forward, much more work is needed to systematically differentiate between types of academic, professional, and community partners and their interests in project processes and outcomes. Among other things, this differentiation means determining which of the many possible measures or indicators of partnership success should be used in various contexts, balancing the needs of those different types of partners.

Knowledge and Epistemology

One of the most commonly cited rationales for CEnR is that research conducted with (rather than *for*, or *on*) non-academic partners disrupts traditional hierarchies built around academic and expert knowledge. Partnership

processes can create new cultural narratives regarding health and wellness by, for instance, challenging assumptions regarding audiences for (and contributors to) academic knowledge, or cultural assumptions informing the design and implementation of research (e.g. Agner et al., 2020; Gone et al., 2020). CEnR may also be more resistant to deficit-based models when seeking to address social issues, or in regard to who is capable of having and creating valid knowledge (e.g. Abraczinskas & Zarrett, 2020; Ozer et al., 2020). Indigenous CBPR and Tribal Participatory Research in particular have called for recognizing the contributions of diverse cultural knowledges in participatory research (Walters et al., 2020).

In much of the CEnR literature, however, research and knowledge production are treated as primary concerns rather than as one component of systems change processes. “Community” participation in the academic research enterprise itself is especially valorized, with approaches that involve non-academic partners in every stage of the research process lauded as achieving “gold standard” CEnR (e.g. Sánchez et al., 2021). This idea draws on traditions of popular education, then extrapolates that when those who are not professional researchers participate in designing and conducting research, they are engaged in an inherently empowering process that that may provide insights and skills that are crucial for liberation from oppression. Equal power relations in these partnerships are seen as raising up community knowledge as equal to that of researchers, disrupting the colonization of communities’ cultural and social worlds by technocratic systems (Wallerstein & Duran, 2018).

This orientation to CEnR works better in some contexts than in others. In some cases, participation in and control over the research process have enabled marginalized communities to feel safe engaging with researchers; to reshape harmful cultural narratives about health, culture, and healing (Agner et al., 2020; Gone et al., 2020; Skewes et al., 2020); to acquire desirable research or professional skills (e.g. Espinosa et al., 2020); and to feel a sense of ownership over change-making processes that affect them (e.g. Abraczinskas & Zarrett, 2020). For example, a project by Gone et al., (2020) focused on incorporating Indigenous traditional healing practices into the health and wellness services at Detroit’s urban American Indian health center. The authors describe the reality of this process in detail, emphasizing the necessity of compromise, patience, and trusting the partnership process when respecting sacred ceremonial knowledge, navigating academic pressures and constraints, and advancing an anticolonial politics. Such examples powerfully illustrate the importance of working as equal partners throughout the research process and ensuring that “expert” knowledge does not further marginalize non-academic partners.

Less prominent in the CEnR literature, however, is the idea that more partner involvement is not always better. As discussed above, different types of “community” partners may have markedly different expectations for a partnership and their roles in relation to the research process, and many may only be interested in certain phases of the research (issue-selection and taking action on the findings, for example). In some cases, community partners are already skilled at some forms of research and are seeking a partnership with professional or academic researchers to augment and inform their efforts. Other projects may be focused on producing specific social changes and could therefore involve multiple change-making tactics including research, advocacy, and community organizing (Speer & Christens, 2013). Indeed, community partners’ efforts—for example, to change policy—may be better achieved by separating some aspects of the research process from their community advocacy work, thus ensuring that decision makers see research as credible (e.g. Petersen et al., 2006). In such cases, adherence to a participatory model that insists on teaching and involving partners in every phase of the academic research process can be a waste of time (at best) or, at worst, exploitation of un- or under-compensated labor and/or a detriment to achievement of the project’s goals. A distinction between *involvement* in the research and opportunities to *control* or *inform* certain phases of the project could therefore be a useful starting point for elaborating on existing models of CEnR.

Non-academic partners’ involvement in certain phases of the research may, in this view, be more or less advantageous depending on their needs and interests and the larger context and goals of the collaborative effort. What works best for each project depends on a range of factors including the needs and interests of the non-academic partners, capabilities of the non-academic partners and researcher(s), and overall goals of the project (London et al, 2020). The “Science Shop” model (Andrade et al., 2018), for example, relies upon Science Shop staff members to link non-academics’ research questions to the appropriate researchers (usually graduate and undergraduate students) rather than cultivating close collaborative relationships between the two parties. Staff negotiate logistics such as timelines and help the research team develop a suitable research design to yield insights into questions generated by non-academic stakeholders. While not ideal for every setting or project, this model illustrates how the concept of CEnR might be re-imagined to include a broader range of legitimate, well-defined typologies.

Power and Structure

A third element of CEnR that varies across contexts and approaches is how the project relates to and seeks to alter

power structures. The terms “power” and “empowerment” appear often in discourses around CEnR, with equitable partnerships and epistemic justice elevated as key pathways to participant and community empowerment (e.g. Boursaw, 2021). CEnR scholars acknowledge that the systems of oppression that permeate our society appear and operate in research processes and aim to disrupt them using strategies such as acknowledgment of power and privilege (e.g. Wallerstein et al., 2019), democratic decision-making processes (e.g. Gone et al., 2020; Sánchez-Youngman, 2021), and professional and personal development opportunities for non-academic partners (e.g. Espinosa et al., 2020). However, fewer projects consider the roles that engaged research plays in driving sustained changes to power relations in community contexts, as well as the broader social, political, and economic conditions that produce health inequities.

Power in CEnR is frequently considered in the context of partnership and group dynamics, but is rarely connected to local politics and processes by which communities can build their resources and assets relative to larger systems. Boursaw and colleagues propose a measure of community power in research (2021), for example, that seeks to capture the extent to which non-academic partners participate in and can make use of findings from research—a very narrow definition of community power. Their other proposed measures also look primarily at intra-partnership dynamics, with dimensions including bridging capacity, developing and sustaining trust, and resolving conflicts. Although their “community action” measure, including “producing useful findings for community action and benefit,” begins to address this limitation, there are no measures for, or discussion of, the potential need for conflict or the capacity to mount and sustain pressure or hold decision makers accountable. Neglect of these broader considerations reflects, we believe, a tendency to conflate the privilege held by academic researchers with actual social power. Despite the benefits and prestige associated with academic institutions and research, decisions in the sociopolitical domain are commonly based as much (or more) on the political realities in which decision makers find themselves as they are on scientific evidence (Roura, 2020; Speer & Christens, 2013). To assume that academic research has the power, on its own, to leverage transformative changes to the conditions in communities is an unfortunate underestimation of the broader social and political dynamics that shape those conditions.

At the same time, focusing only on power in partnerships is, in our view, an underestimation of the social change processes to which research can meaningfully contribute. Instead of focusing on the disruption of systemically uneven power geometries through shifts in intra-

personal dynamics, the development and expression of power through CEnR must also be scrutinized in the context of local power structures and coordinated actions across multiple domains (Freudenberg & Tsui, 2013). This is particularly true for projects that aim to produce community empowerment as an outcome. Efforts to disrupt the systems that produce social stratification will inevitably be met with resistance, necessitating that those efforts be backed by substantial social power. Such power, particularly in oppressed communities, often comes from collective organization (“people power”; Speer & Hughey, 1995). Empowerment within CEnR partnerships may do little to build this kind of collective power, making projects with this focus less effective for producing the kinds of change that communities may want or need.

It is important that, as this CEnR discourse expands, we remain cognizant of these different power structures and approaches to altering them. Psychological empowerment through equitable, self-reflective partnerships may be appropriate for one project and may indeed lay a foundation for empowering processes and outcomes at the level of the organization and community (Speer & Hughey, 1995). However, other community concerns may call for strategic actions targeting broader structural forces; in these cases, “collective changes in prioritized behaviors of people and groups” (e.g. Watson-Thompson et al., 2020, p. 245) may not be adequate to oppose powerful stakeholders, navigate complex sociopolitical dynamics, and ultimately disrupt broader systems of power. By nature of those specific goals, such work would likely involve a different type of CEnR than would be used in other projects.

Conclusion

The recent special issues/sections of this journal addressing CBPR (Suarez-Balcazar et al., 2020; Wallerstein, 2021) reveal a remarkable diversity of CEnR practices. However, much of the popular terminology and many of the frameworks for these practices still focus on what unifies CEnR projects rather than what differentiates them. The resulting discourse places considerable emphasis on certain features of CEnR while essentializing constructs such as “the community,” “power structure,” “participation,” and “partnership,” narrowing our understanding of CEnR practices rather than cultivating their diversity. Looking forward, we suggest that an expanded, systematized taxonomy of CEnR typologies and nomenclature could support the continued application of the multiple approaches that CEnR encompasses to new contexts, community concerns, and research methods.

We are not simply arguing for new terminology and nomenclature, however. A wide variety of terms already

exist in the CEnR literature, some more useful than others. Rather, we suggest that a greater variety of CEnR practices are being used than are meaningfully represented by existing terms and frameworks and that—if developed and applied systematically—new terminology could support conversations specific to these emergent fields of research and action. Empirical study of projects drawing from common nomenclature and frameworks, for example, could yield insights into the best fit and design for CEnR typologies.

Finally, we wish to underscore the possibilities that CEnR presents for social transformation. To date, CEnR projects have focused on group-level processes (e.g., trust) and learning through emphasis on equitable partnerships. Excepting policy-oriented CEnR projects, many are insufficient in their consideration of how communities’ participation in research can build power to transform the broader economic, social, and political forces that produce and maintain health inequities. Supporting discourses that consider different approaches to social change—as well as the types and numbers of collaborators, collaborators’ roles, research methods, etc. that can best produce that change—is a key opportunity presented by the expansion and systematization of CEnR nomenclature.

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