

Practical Tips for Participatory, Culturally Anchored Community Research

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From a number of sources, especially the 2002 Chicago conference on participatory community research (Jason, Keys, Suarez-Balcazar, Taylor, & Davis, 2004) and a special journal issue on the process of community research (Primavera & Brodsky, 2004) we assembled a list of specific, practical issues to consider in conducting participatory, culturally anchored community research. They can be useful to read before becoming involved in such research or while involved in it. They can also be useful for students studying such research in class, as long as the instructor provides concrete examples.

These tips are suggestive, not exhaustive. They are an introductory list of issues to consider, not a detailed analysis of participatory community research. We list published resources at the end of the list; all of them offer much more comprehensive discussion (where books or special journal issues are listed, we have not listed specific chapters or articles within them). More resources on these topics appear every year. Collaboration with experienced, committed researchers and citizens is the best way of learning nuances and skills beyond the issues mentioned here.

Students and faculty may wish to consider these questions as they read and discuss this list:

Which guidelines concern strengths or skills that I have now? How?

Which guidelines would involve my learning of new skills? How?

How could I learn these skills? From whom? In what settings?

1. Recognize and articulate the values that guide your individual involvement in community research. Recognize and discuss how the aims and values of researchers and host community settings differ. Avoid the condescending attitude that engaging in participatory community research is a “noble sacrifice” by researchers. Research involves costs for community members, too, as well as opportunities for both to benefit. Be prepared to find common ground, but also recognize when collaboration would compromise your values. Consider whether the host community setting may promote social injustice, for instance in its practices toward women or other groups.
2. Cultivate humility and a willingness to listen carefully and to learn. Also cultivate awareness of emotions, your own and others’, and of how you are perceived by others. Communicate in ways that respect the norms, heritage and values of the host community and culture. Be willing to self-disclose your own background, life experiences, values, goals, and concerns, and to listen to citizens’ views.
3. Consider the conditions under which you enter the community. With whom do you communicate? Are those persons or organizations representative of the community? Do they represent one side of a controversy? What organizations are involved through researchers, funders, and community members? Within an organization, identify the persons and positions in the organizational hierarchy with whom you need to communicate and cultivate a supportive relationship.

4. Respect, embrace, and learn about the cultural heritage and resources of the host community. Learn about the mission and “organizational culture” of each community setting involved in the research. Cultivate your own attachment to the host community and setting. Volunteer community service, social activities with community members, attending cultural events, rituals and celebrations, and learning about the history of the host community and culture can promote this.
5. Appreciate the resources and strengths of both community members and researchers. These include personal skills and talents; time, money or funding; community or academic prestige; experiential understanding of cultural, local community, and social issues; personal access to community members or settings. Consider what resources that researchers have to offer to the host community, and whether the community wants them. Foster an atmosphere of recognizing each others’ resources, working together to use them wisely, and learning from each other.
6. Work to develop relationships with community members and research participants that are as egalitarian as possible. Consider inequalities in power and resources between researchers and members of the host community, and how those can be lessened as much as possible (some may be impossible to eliminate, but can be lessened). Especially find ways to communicate the purposes and methods of research in terms accessible to community members. Continually reconsider whether the research is actually benefiting the host community, and who in that community actually benefits.
7. Create safe settings for discussion where researchers and citizens can personally explore difficult issues of culture and power: how one’s own culture influences and limits one’s worldview; strengths of different cultural worldviews and values; personal effects of social injustice and oppression, and how these are relevant to the research; how to plan research to promote empowerment of community members, and access to resources that are wanted by the host community.
8. Create a formal structure for sharing decision-making about the research with community members: a community research panel, or a formal relationship with organizations in the community. Make decisions regarding the research goals, funding, methods, process, outcomes and reports or other outcomes in partnership with that group. Consider and discuss how much control that the community members will have in these decisions. This will involve negotiation and compromise. Consider using a facilitator familiar with the host community or culture to structure meetings, clarify communication and reduce power inequalities. Deal promptly and openly with conflicts or misunderstandings.
9. Clarify the roles and contributions to be expected from researchers and community members. Consider whether members of the host community will be hired for positions in the research project, and how they will be selected, trained and supervised.

10. Find practical ways to strengthen the capacity of the host community setting and its access to valued resources. Examples include providing funding, technical assistance, skills training, or advocacy. Find ways to support the skills and career development of community members. Plan how to strengthen setting capacity and resources beyond the time when researchers leave the community.
11. Recognize that both researchers and community members will need support from peers in their own settings, and safe space for discussions with those peers apart from the research partnership. Recognize that participation in the research project may open community members to criticism by other citizens, and be prepared to discuss that issue.
12. Share accountability for partnership successes and setbacks. Share the recognition and resources that flow from the research. Share responsibility for conflicts and misunderstandings when they occur, and work together to address them. Cultivate personal skills in asserting and accepting disagreement, and in managing conflict. Support these skills in others. Build ways for community members to hold researchers accountable.
13. Expect to modify everything that worked in one culture when used in another: theoretical assumptions, assessment and measurement techniques, analytic and statistical procedures, methods of reporting findings, ways to build relationships and resolve conflicts, and ways to assure practical benefits for the host community. Value these experiences as extending psychological knowledge.
14. As much as possible, define cultural groups in terms that they use themselves. This applies to everyday language with community members and to definitions for research. Seek to understand the diversity within a cultural group or community. Seek to understand not only the overall culture, but also the specific setting where the research takes place (e.g., school, neighborhood, organization).
15. Use qualitative research methods, such as ethnographic interviews, participant observation, and focus groups to learn about the community, culture, host setting, and other contextual factors. These methods afford rich understanding of cultural and community practices, bolster interaction between researcher and participant, and can reduce ethnocentric procedures and interpretations. They may also lead to finding useful quantitative measurements.
16. Given the current lack of knowledge of cultural factors in community psychology, strongly consider a within-group study of one cultural group. Identify strengths of that culture. Use between-groups comparisons only when equivalence of methods and concepts can be assured.
17. Include cultural or ethnic identity and other social identities as factors in the research. Solicit participants' definitions of their identities, and analyze the importance of those

for the topics or variables studied. Recognize that some individuals may identify with more than one cultural group, and that all persons have multiple social identities. Develop ways to understand identities as strengths of the person, community and culture.

18. Consider recruiting an interdisciplinary research team. Community issues must be understood at multiple ecological levels across disciplinary boundaries. Understand that boundaries between academic disciplines can be barriers to collaboration, but that complex community/social problems demand interdisciplinary perspectives.
19. Recognize that it is an ethical imperative for community psychologists to evaluate all outcomes of a community intervention or research project. Outcomes may be positive and negative, intended and unintended. Study these from a multiple perspectives, involving a diversity of informants. Recognize that any community research project changes a community in some way, and thus is an intervention.
20. Recognize that participatory, culturally anchored research ultimately is based on values about the relationship of researchers and communities. It may or may not be an effective means to other goals. It does not always strengthen the quality of research, or create tangible benefits for communities, or promote broader social justice. These benefits often occur, but cannot be guaranteed, and researchers and citizens must pursue them actively if they are to occur.
21. Recognize that genuine involvement in participatory, culturally anchored research often leads to an ongoing process of personal change for both citizens and researchers. This often involves experiencing and resolving conflict. Cultural misunderstandings, power differentials, past histories of exploitative research, and other factors emerge as challenges. These experiences can strengthen critical awareness, skills, and capacity of both parties, but may also involve confronting one's own biases and taking risks. Researchers and citizens need to ask: Am I ready to accept the change this involvement may bring?

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