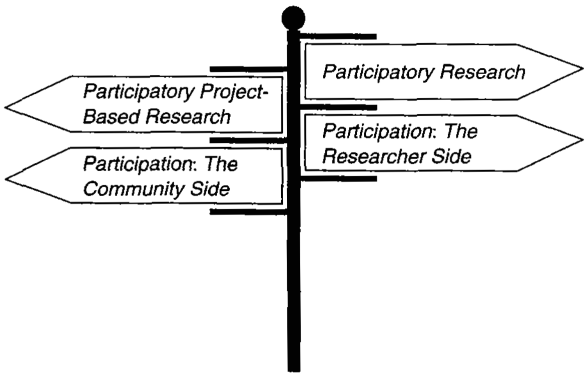
# Two

# The Goose Approach to Research




## HAVE YOU EVER FELT LIKE AN INTERLOPER?

Have you ever felt like an interloper?

I have.

When I was a graduate student, I decided to write a paper about the neighborhood I was living in at the time. It was a pretty fascinating place—an old, run-down area of small, single-family homes with an enormous 10-building high-rise development in its midst. Even more interesting was that a number of the old homes were undergoing renovation. I wanted to know why. So I gathered my courage and called the neighborhood organization office—making that first approach to schedule a research interview has always been hard for me. I arrived at the office for the interview and met Tim Mungavan, one of the neighborhood leaders and the community organizer/architect for the neighborhood redevelopment project. He looked a lot like me—blue jeans, ponytail, and wire-rimmed glasses. But there the resemblance ended. Before I could get a word out, he confronted me:

> We have students and reporters coming through all the time, asking neighborhood people to give their time and answer their questions. And we don't get so much as a copy of a paper from them. If I agree to talk with you, then I want you to agree that you'll give us a copy of the paper you write.[1]

Well, that did it. My first impulse was to run from the room, pack my bags, quit school, and find a nice, safe job sorting boxes somewhere. Thankfully, instead, I meekly promised to drop off a copy of the paper when it was done. Tim's words haunted me. Why was he so distrustful of researchers? Was I really just like them and couldn't be trusted either? Well, I thought about it and decided I didn't want to be lumped in with all those other researchers who had taken information from the neighborhood without any accountability. I was going to be the exception.

So I returned a few days later and told Tim I wanted to contribute more than just a copy of a paper. I wanted to make sure that I gave something back to the neighborhood in return for the time neighborhood activists gave for my interviews. Well, Tim got this gleam in his eye and pointed to a door in the corner of the office. It led to a short hallway and an outside exit. It seems the city fire marshal was concerned because it had also become a storeroom and was so cluttered that it was almost impossible to get to the outside door. Tim suggested I tidy it up. So there I was, a highly trained graduate student (well, at least that is what I thought) being asked to do menial labor. But I was intimidated enough to agree to it. The short and narrow hallway, barely six feet long, was filled with cardboard file boxes—the kind people use when they can't afford real filing cabinets—strewn helter-skelter about the hallway. Well, the first box I opened was filled with old



neighborhood newspapers. By the time I finished sorting those boxes and clearing a path to the exit, I had all my research data organized exactly the way I wanted it, and I have been doing research projects with the Cedar-Riverside neighborhood in Minneapolis now for almost two decades.

The way I do that research, however, is very different from what I imagined when I first met Tim Mungavan. I didn't have a name for it then and, in fact, didn't have a label for it for a number of years after that. All I knew is that it felt better. I felt as though I was giving rather than just taking. And I no longer felt like an outsider, an interloper. If you just finished the first chapter, you remember the goose story. And that is what it felt like. I was part of the flock. My research became part of the neighborhood's reflection process, and even its planning process. As the neighborhood researcher, I could sometimes fly in the point position when the neighborhood most needed information and then fall back when other skills were needed. At other times, my research was "honking from behind," encouraging the neighborhood by reminding them of their victories in restoring the community. And when my neighborhood activist friends, so much in the thick of battles with city hall to get the funds and the freedom to rebuild their housing, occasionally fell out of formation with frustration and disillusionment, I could reflect with them on the history of all they had accomplished and help them develop new strategies to go back into battle.

This process of doing research *with* people, rather than on them, is the Goose Approach to research. For those of you who are students or professors, and often feel like interlopers when you do research, or avoid research altogether because of that feeling, the Goose Approach can help you feel as though you have something to contribute. In addition, because it involves the people being researched in the research process itself, it can help assure that the research makes a real contribution to the group, organization, or community. For those of you in community settings already who have only had research imposed on you, the Goose Approach—or, as it is more commonly known, the participatory approach—offers a way for you to take control of the research to serve your community.

This chapter will explore how to maximize participation in a research project. You will likely notice that, in doing so, I will describe the researcher as an outsider to the community or group. That is not always the case, but even a researcher who is a respected community member may face many of the same challenges of getting people involved in the research itself.

## PARTICIPATORY APPROACHES TO RESEARCH

Of course, as you've probably already guessed, this style of research is not really called the Goose Approach. Participatory approaches to research are called a variety of different things in different places: action research, participatory research, participatory action research, collaborative research, community-based research, community-based participatory research, and popular education. There are some important differences among these approaches, as we will see. But first let's explore what they have in common and how people doing research can use the general approach.

> **Participatory Approaches to Research: Common Elements**
>
> - Focuses on being useful
> - Employs diverse methods
> - Emphasizes collaboration

### 1. Focuses on Being Useful

One of the reasons participatory approaches work so well for people doing research in community settings is that they are designed to be useful. For those already working in community contexts who do their own research to help their projects succeed, this seems almost too obvious. The kinds of research we will learn about in this book—assessing needs, mapping resources, evaluating programs, and others—are by definition designed to be useful. Those of us in higher education, however, often need retraining to make our research useful.

But, really, what is the difference between research that is useful and research that is not? Isn't it possible that any research can be made useful by someone applying its findings? That is possible, but it requires making a leap from the context in which the research was originally done to the context where you want to apply the findings. This is particularly a problem with basic research that uses *cross-sectional data*, such as a survey, where you are collecting data from *across* a population rather than from just a few individuals. The danger is that you attempt to predict the course of events in any single situation based on research done on a broad cross section of situations, and your specific situation may be outside the typical range that cross-sectional research concentrates on. As we discussed in the first chapter, the probability that extensive research applies to any particular situation is difficult to know, and therefore such research is



risky to rely on. Can statistical research on the quality of health care across urban communities in the United States apply, for example, to a working-class African-American community in Portland, Oregon? There is a lot that can go wrong between doing research on the general population and applying that research in a particular place with a particular group of people whose uniqueness might make general findings irrelevant.

The alternative is to custom-design a research project in the particular setting where it will be used. María Eugenia Sánchez and Eduardo Almeida[2] describe a two-decade research process with an indigenous community in Mexico called the Nahuat. For the first three years, the research team mostly got acquainted with the community, doing a few surveys and some field research to increase their own understanding of this unique culture. The women on the research team worked in the vegetable gardens alongside community women, and the men participated in outside economic craft and agricultural production. A number of them learned the Nahuat language. In this case, the researchers made themselves useful to the community before they tried to make the research useful. Eventually, they conducted legal research to help community members confront human rights abuses, and transportation research to get paved roads in the area. But the research and planning that went into these projects began from Nahuat cultural values and was guided by community members.

### 2. Employs Diverse Methods

In order to be useful, participatory approaches to research need to use methods that make sense to people. Most of us were trained to think about how well the research methods fit the research questions. A research question focused on understanding the opinions of the population in general, for example, implied a survey method, while a research question about the cultural characteristics of a small community implied field research.

Those standards still apply here. But there is an additional standard for determining which research methods to use—what methods will create research that will actually be used. Some of the communities I work with rely much more on talk than on writing, and one of my most embarrassing research moments came when I was working to write the history of a community organization in Toledo. We designed a project to recover the history of this once rowdy and confrontational community group on the east side of the city, in hopes of finding out why it succeeded for as long as it did and then why it folded. I ended up reading a lot of old newspapers and letters, but the most interesting part of the work was the interviews I conducted with neighborhood residents.

One method I use in such situations is to ask the people I interview to read and react to drafts of what I write. Validity—whether you are measuring what you think you are measuring—is one of the important issues in research. Returning interview transcripts to interviewees provides a validity check. I can find out whether I heard correctly and in the correct context. In addition, returning transcripts serves an educational purpose, engaging the people I interviewed in reflecting upon what they told me. This often works very effectively, both for correcting my mistakes and giving me new information as the people I interviewed begin to really understand what the research is about and then offer me even more information. In this particular case, however, I did not realize that some of the community people were illiterate. Sending them their interview quotes to review, followed by a 25-page draft, and then calling them for their reactions, placed those residents in terribly uncomfortable positions. I only found out about this gaffe indirectly through another resident, who quietly explained why her neighbor wasn't giving any corrections.

I learned through this experience that the written word is not the final word in research methods. In fact, some of the most interesting forms of research involve community theater and community art. Mark Lynd's[3] popular theater work, described in Chapter 1, is an example of project-based research that doesn't involve any writing. This project was designed for a group of adults with developmental disabilities to interview friends, family, and service providers and then use that interview data to create a play about living with developmental disabilities. The members of his group initially found the interview methods to be very difficult, especially when they interviewed experts on development disabilities, who often answered in jargon they could not understand. But, most important, they had decided to videotape the interviews. So they all sat down together to watch the videotapes and began to deconstruct the jargon. In doing so, they were able to compare the abstract language of the experts to their own stories. Then, rather than trying to write a report expressing the findings, they used the method of community theater. The play that resulted from this process allowed the cast members to present their experience in a creative form, informed by their new understanding of how others viewed them and their disabilities.



## 3. Emphasizes Collaboration

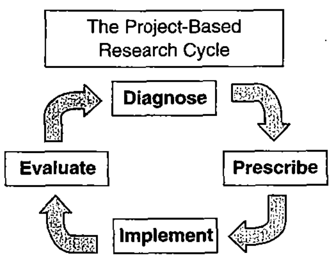
One of the best ways to make sure that the research will be useful, and that the research methods will fit the culture of the group or community, is for the people affected by the research to guide it. Knowing from the beginning that the people you are working with are not turned on by the written word can save a lot of headaches and embarrassment. And the best way to find out what kind of research methods will fit the community and produce the most useful outcomes is to ask.

Asking can be challenging, however. The researcher needs to spend some time getting to know the group or community. In many models of participatory research practiced in underdeveloped communities, this is called pre-research.[4] The researcher spends time learning what the power relations are in the setting—who the leaders are, what the power factions are, what issues are important to people. Because it is often impractical for the researcher to collaborate with everyone in the community or the organization, the researcher needs to know who is generally held in high esteem. Sometimes this is easy. In most of the research projects I do, I am invited in by some leader in the community or the program and am thus already associated with some group or individual. After just a few conversations with other people, I can fairly quickly determine whether my association with the inviter will help or hinder the work.

For the researcher entering the community without an invitation, establishing their own legitimacy can be more difficult. Recently I was involved in a project with neighborhood organizations in Melbourne, Australia. The goal was to conduct research assessing the information and technology needs of those organizations. The project had been developed between a local university and some of the organizations. But I was entering the situation cold, after a long 30 hours of cars, airports, and airlines to get there, and had no legitimacy in the eyes of these organization staff. The first few days were difficult. We couldn't get the neighborhood organization staff to commit to the meetings that had been set up before I arrived. So the first week there we spent a lot of time going out to the neighborhoods to meet people on their turf, on their schedule. By the end, we had begun to build up some interest and involvement from the organizations and are now looking forward to a "launch event" a few months down the road, where the organizations will take the lead in using the research to publicize their needs and then lobby for resources to fill those needs.

As with my early experience with the Cedar-Riverside community, described at the beginning of this chapter, "researchers" are increasingly distrusted out there as simply exploiting poor communities or disrupting organizations for their own professional advancement. Some community organizations now even require outside researchers to sign a contract stating what they will give to the community. A few years ago I became acquainted with the Corella and Bertram F. Bonner Foundation, which was sponsoring a project to create campus-based centers to support participatory forms of research. They were looking for someone to research the effectiveness of their efforts. It sounded like a fascinating project—doing participatory research to help participatory research.

Bobby Hackett, the Foundation vice-president, gave me his e-mail list to introduce the project to the faculty contacts on each of the campuses they were working with. I tried putting on my best participatory face and doing my pre-research through this e-mail list, but without much response. So I took the risk of approaching a gathering of all the participants, and the Bonner Foundation accorded me a space at the end of dinner the first evening. And it was a good thing it was at the end of dinner when there wasn't any food left to throw! I explained that the Foundation had asked me to research the lessons of the project and that I planned to do it in a participatory way, but I didn't get very far. Very quickly, up shot one of the professors, asserting that this didn't seem like a very participatory approach to him—the research project and the researcher (me, who by that time was trembling in my boots) had already been determined and, if this much had already been decided, how could the rest possibly be participatory? He was followed by another professor, who said: "I now know how community organizations feel—being required to participate in research they had no hand in designing!"




It was a tough crowd, and it was very clear I hadn't done my pre-research. The best I could do was to say that I was only there to offer the idea and plead that it would certainly be participatory from here on out, including a research planning meeting two days later, where they would determine what to research and how to use it. Well, they let me hold that meeting. My most vocal critics, who are now among my best friends, decided to give me a second chance and attended the meeting. They not only made wonderful contributions but took the lead in making the research useful through a book we recently published (*Community-Based Research and Higher Education,* 2003). Even though the project has ended, we are still working together, advancing the cause of participatory forms of research. And they taught me a valuable lesson about the importance of doing effective pre-research and maximizing participation from the beginning.



## A PARTICIPATORY APPROACH TO PROJECT-BASED RESEARCH

How does the participatory approach work in a typical example of project-based research? It would be easy to say that there is no typical example of project-based research. They are as diverse as the groups, organizations, and communities that use them. They employ research methods ranging from water and air testing to mapping to large-scale surveys to in-depth interviews. And they engage academic disciplines ranging from anthropology to zoology. They range widely in the types and amount of participation they exhibit. They occur at different points in a project cycle, with some focused on diagnosing a situation, others prescribing solutions to a problem, others implementing interventions, and yet others evaluating outcomes.

They all have in common, however, the fact that they are doing research, whether it is surveying community attitudes, sampling air or water for pollution, counting abandoned houses, mapping crime data, documenting public health conditions, studying policy proposals, or others. And in doing research, they all follow the steps in project-based research outlined in Chapter 1. In the previous chapter, however, we focused on how to do each of these steps in terms of maximizing the accuracy of the research. Here we will focus on how to do each step in terms of involving participants and maximizing the usefulness of the research.

**Steps in Project-Based Research**

- Choosing the question
- Designing the methods
- Collecting the data
- Analyzing the data
- Reporting the results

### 1. Choosing the Question

Once the researchers have a good sense of the local power structure and issues, they can begin organizing a group to guide the research. Because of the contexts in which I work, there is often a predefined board or steering committee with whom I work initially. My first meeting with that group outlines the possible research questions, which at that point often are issues the group is concerned about. I then take that list of ideas and check them with people outside of this initial group. In my most recent work with the Cedar-Riverside neighborhood, for example, the local nonprofit community development corporation (called a CDC)[5] invited me in to see if I could help design research to bridge some of the cultural and political divisions in the neighborhood. One of their research questions was concerned with how to overcome conflicts between residents of CDC-owned housing. As I talked with other community members, however, it became clear that some residents blamed the CDC itself for those conflicts. Since the CDC was sponsoring the research, we began to realize that if I did research on the housing conflict, I might worsen rather than resolve the conflict. Instead we ended up choosing a research question that focused on studying the community organizing potential across the neighborhood. In the last decade, Cedar-Riverside has become a very diverse community of white, Korean, Vietnamese and Hmong, Ethiopian, Oromo,[6] and Somalian residents. We decided to research the diversity of community organizations representing these communities, and their interrelationships, to build a broad-based neighborhood coalition.

## 2. Designing the Methods

The next step was to design the research itself. In traditional research, the main concern would be what methods best served scientific standards. Those standards are important and are the contribution the researcher makes to the research process. From a participatory project-based research perspective, however, it is also important to design the research methods for maximum impact. In this case, because the CDC was attempting to reach out and unify the community, part of my job became not just interviewing neighborhood organization representatives but linking organizations with each other. So one aspect of the research method involved interviewing organization representatives to find out their organization's history, mission, current projects, and interorganizational linkages. But a second aspect of the research involved encouraging organization representatives to meet with each other. In each interview I disclosed the purpose of the research and asked permission to provide the CDC with the organization's contact information. The research process itself helped to establish informal relationships called "weak ties"[7] between organizations in the neighborhood. At the same time I was doing the research project, the CDC was doing their own outreach. And while CDC staff were already aware of many neighborhood organizations, my initial compilation of contact information for the 40-plus organizations helped their efforts to organize two neighborhood events and recruit participants across the community's ethnic groups.



## 3. Collecting the Data

Many proponents of participatory research prefer that community members be as involved as possible in every stage of the research, including collecting the data. This is particularly the case for the popular education model, which emphasizes that community members themselves should do the research to build their own research skills and knowledge base.[8] There are lots of situations where that is impractical, however. Community or organization members are often too busy to collect the data, and few grants provide enough money for people to take time off from regular jobs or afford childcare so they can do research. The tight timelines that often confront project-based research, along with the training required for lay researchers to do the work, also don't mix very well. In many cases, then, the researcher ends up carrying out the research. But it is still very important to get as much participation as possible. In the case of Cedar-Riverside, I was able to spend time with a former Peace Corps volunteer with experience in East Africa. She provided me with an initial introduction to the Somali, Ethiopian, and Oromo communities. Among the things she taught me was to visit the organizations in these communities personally instead of calling to schedule an appointment. Doing so initially doubled my anxiety about making that first contact, as I have learned to start slowly and from a distance with most nonprofit organizations so they don't feel belabored with yet another researcher. But in each case, I walked into the office, introduced myself, was met with exceeding warmth, and offered a seat and as much time as I wanted right then and there. The first time I was shocked. I figured I would shake hands, set a time for a future interview, and be on my way. I had to do the interview on the fly. It actually helped, because this Somali man was so gentle and warm that I immediately reconfigured what I was doing to seek his advice on how to organize the research so that it would be useful to him as well. And I did that with every subsequent interview.

## 4. Analyzing the Data

Similarly to collecting data, many proponents of participatory research advocate the involvement of community or organization folks in analyzing the data. If the people affected by the project are involved in doing the analysis, they will receive educational and skill benefits and also be more likely to use the research. There are many ways to accomplish this. My preference, partly because most of my project-based research is with community organizations, is to start small. In research such as the Cedar-Riverside project, which is interview-based, I use the interview transcript validation process described above, giving each person I interview a transcript (when I am confident they are literate in written English) to review for accuracy. I also emphasize that the transcript is private until they approve it. I received comments from about a third of the people I interviewed, made the changes they suggested, and sent every person interviewed a rough draft. Again I asked each person to review it and add their own comments agreeing or disagreeing with the analysis. While I was doing this, I was also meeting with the CDC board each month, and they accorded me space at each of four monthly meetings. At the first meeting we organized an education session on different types of community organizing and then distributed a brief questionnaire asking board members about the community organizing goals they thought the CDC should pursue. At the next meeting I presented the results of that brief questionnaire, showing that the board preferred a cooperative community-building approach across the ethnic communities more than a confrontational approach of pitting the community against some outside target like city hall. We discussed this in terms of what types of community organizing CDCs may be best suited for. At the third board meeting I presented the rough draft of the research report. The discussions informed their own analysis of what the CDC should do, and during this time the board supported two cross-cultural, community-building events, both of which featured food from each of the neighborhood's communities. I'd never before attended a Somali-Ethiopian-Vietnamese-Korean-Anglo potluck.

## 5. Reporting the Results

As I've mentioned, reporting the results can occur in many creative ways—community theater, quilting, street demonstrations, oral storytelling, and who knows how many others. In this case the reporting occurred in writing, with the research report going on the Web. In addition, as the research progressed we also decided to create a neighborhood directory with the contact information for all of the neighborhood organizations that gave their permission, and we put that on the Web. It may seem odd that we would emphasize Web-based reporting in a neighborhood of poor immigrant and refugee communities. Indeed, at the beginning of the research the CDC board and staff and I thought that was out of the question. But here again, the advantages of community participation in the research process made themselves known. It turns out that many members of the Somali, Oromo, and Ethiopian communities were avid and skilled Internet users, partly because it was the best way to keep in touch with friends and family in their homelands and partly because of their desire to succeed in their new home. Every organization representative used e-mail regularly, and most even preferred receiving electronic copies of the research rather than paper copies. So we put it all on the Web. In addition, the CDC continued its strategic planning around its growing interest in supporting community-building in the neighborhood, expanding its outreach for its annual meeting and electing its first Somali board member in December of 2002.



# BUILDING PARTICIPATORY RELATIONSHIPS: THE RESEARCHER SIDE

This Goose Approach to research, as you may have surmised by now, rests on relationships. If, like me, you have ever feared imposing yourself on a community or organization, or felt like an interloper, it may be because you haven't really developed any relationships with the flock. Particularly, we professional researchers often feel caught between thinking we know what's best for the community or not contributing our own perspective for fear of being too influential. Both responses, however, are symptomatic of not having built those relationships and misunderstanding what collaboration and community-based expertise mean. I remember being brought up short a few years ago while working with an African-American community in Toledo. I was at a meeting, not contributing because I was stuck in the "fear of undue influence" trap, when one of the neighborhood leaders asked me directly what I thought. We'd worked together for about a year by that time, and while I hemmed and hawed, Rose Newton, in her wonderfully confrontational way, said: "Just tell us what you think and don't worry about it—if it's a stupid idea we'll tell you."

So, for those of us researchers with no community base, or communities/organizations with no available researcher, how does one build those relationships? The process has to begin by finding each other. At the end of this chapter you will find a list of resources that can help researchers and communities to find each other.

Researchers and communities trying to find each other face different kinds of challenges and opportunities. In many ways, it is easy for researchers to find partners. While researchers who want to work collaboratively in community and organization settings are still relatively rare, communities and organizations are everywhere. In urban areas, city governments often maintain directories of area nonprofits and community organizations, as do university social work departments. In rural areas, local newspapers often list meetings of area groups, and county governments can sometimes be good sources of contact information. The challenge is finding the right organization or group to work with. Researchers not only need to find an organization willing to accept help but one that has the capacity to guide that help and use the end product of the research. How can a researcher assess a potential community or organization partner before investing time and resources that may only lead to failure? Here are some questions to ask about the community/organization side of the equation:

**Questions the Researcher Should Ask**

- Does the community/organization have the capacity to participate?
- What resources can the community/organization contribute?
- Does the community/organization have research needs you can fulfill?

## 1. Does the Community/Organization Have the Capacity to Participate?

If the research is going to actually be used, the community or organization needs to have the capacity to use it. In some cases it is possible to find out something about an organization's history before even meeting them, including things like the stability of the board and staff, its funding, and the kind of projects it has been responsible for. This doesn't mean that small, unstable organizations, or disorganized communities, should be avoided altogether. Indeed, a good participatory research project can help build and stabilize a weak community or organization. But using research in this way takes special skill and effort, and the researcher either needs to have good community organizing skills or needs to be working with a skilled community organizer. It is also okay to take a risk on a small project that may not lead to anything. There are those out there who compare developing a collaborative research relationship to dating. You can't know everything about your potential partner before taking some risks, so make the risks small at the beginning.



## 2. What Resources Can the Community/Organization Contribute?

For those of us who do our community research on the side, because our university values only research that produces journal articles, it is often difficult to do this kind of research pro bono. As the community-based research model becomes more popular, and we develop a better understanding of how to engage students in such research projects, the research resource gap is becoming less problematic. But there are still resources that must come from the community side. Depending on the project, they often need to make time for interviews, open their files, read drafts, provide office space and computer access for students, and even help with training and supervising students on occasion. They may also need to be responsible for organizing meetings around the research part of the project. One of the most difficult challenges I have faced is working with a community organization that is already going full out. I become responsible for contacting all the relevant community people to encourage them to participate in the research planning, finding a place to meet, and making the reminder phone calls. It is important to know at the beginning whether there are staff resources or money available to support these research organizing tasks.

## 3. Does the Community/Organization Have Research Needs You Can Fulfill?

The community/organization needs to come up with a research question the researcher has some background in. I hesitate to think what may have happened in Cedar-Riverside had I not understood the thorny issues involved when CDCs try to move beyond their usual mission of building housing to building community. Most community organizations have a lot of expertise to begin with, and they are looking for advanced information. Of course, there are cases where the community or organization is entering uncharted waters as well, in which case a researcher's methodological expertise may be more important than their substantive expertise. I remember my second participatory research project in Toledo. The community development coalition that formed out of our first project decided it wanted a study of how philanthropic foundations give away money. At the time I didn't know what a foundation was, much less how to study them. But then I found myself and an extraordinarily dedicated graduate student ruining our eyesight reading microfiche tax records of Toledo-area foundations. For me personally it was the most tedious research I have ever been involved with, but, for the community, it was the most popular and influential research project I have ever contributed to.

## BUILDING PARTICIPATORY RELATIONSHIPS: THE COMMUNITY SIDE

Communities or organizations trying to fill a particular research need not only have to develop their own understanding of what they need but they also may need to really hunt to find a researcher who can fill that need, as there are often no lists of available researchers. Additionally, because time and resources are tight, it is important to find help that actually helps. There are still horror stories out there of researchers who didn't follow through on a promised project, didn't complete it in time to do any good, or didn't do quality work. And if you're not a research expert, it's difficult to judge someone who claims to be. It's also difficult to demand a résumé from people who are essentially volunteering themselves and their students for your cause—though you still should. So, what are the standards by which offers to help should be judged? There are a set of questions community members and workers, as well as academics themselves, can ask.

**Questions the Community/ Organization Should Ask**

- Is the researcher willing to follow the community/ organization's lead?
- How good is the researcher at meeting deadlines?
- Can the researcher communicate in a community context?
- What experience does the researcher have?



### Is the Researcher Willing to Follow the Community/Organization's Lead?

Any community organization being approached by a researcher should have a test ready. If you remember back to the beginning of this chapter, the first time I approached a community organization with my research question, as a graduate student, they instead asked me to clean their storeroom. Trying to be a good citizen, I accepted the task. I discovered that they were testing me not only to see if I could truly collaborate with them but also to see how far I would dig for the gold mine of data that their storeroom contained. Have a casual meeting and discuss what kind of participation the community will have throughout the research process. Discuss whether the researcher plans to publish anything from the research and whether you will have any input in their writing. Discuss who owns the data. The "A" answer will be "the community/organization owns it." Some community groups have gone to writing up contracts with their academic partners, which hold both the academic and the community accountable and are also helpful in planning the overall project.

### How Good Is the Researcher at Meeting Deadlines?

Community projects and academic projects are as different as any two things called "projects" could be. Community projects almost always have strict deadlines tied to absolute funding or legislative dates. Academic projects often have no deadlines except for the faculty member who needs to have an article published before the tenure decision deadline. Many of my academic friends chafe at the implication that they can't meet a deadline, and of course many of them are very responsible, but the academic environment is very lax about deadlines, allowing students and faculty to treat those deadlines more as suggestions. It is important to understand that, in academia, it is almost always possible to turn a paper in late. In the case of submitting articles to academic journals, there is no deadline at all. But when a foundation says your funding proposal must be in their hands by 5 p.m. on March 15, they mean it. It doesn't matter if you suffered a heart attack on the way to the mailbox. When I served on the review board for neighborhood grants made by the City of Toledo, one of the proposals arrived at the city at 5:15 p.m. on the appointed day—15 minutes late. By city policy, we had to refuse it. So make sure the researcher understands the project schedule. If students are involved, and the project extends beyond the end of the course, develop a plan for how the research will be completed after the students are gone.

## Can the Researcher Communicate in a Community Context?

Remember that last article you read from a professional academic journal? Remember how much of it you understood? Remember how many times you had to put it down before finally finishing it (if you actually did finish it)? And don't think those questions apply only to community people and students. When I was a graduate student and a new assistant professor, I had some wonderful community mentors who taught me how to write for community audiences. It wasn't about "dumbing down" my writing but about making it interesting—shorter sentences, more common language, catchier phrasing, a more storybook tone, with more real people. Academics and community members need to discuss how they will report on the research and how collaborative the process will be. Another way to assess how well a researcher can communicate is for them to attend a community meeting and find out whether everyone speaks the same language or at least can translate.

## What Experience Does the Researcher Have?

It is not enough for a researcher to be good at collaborating, meeting deadlines, and communicating. They ultimately also must be able to do the work. Do they have expertise in the type of research needed for your project? Do they have any past experience with similar projects? If they will be using students, what kind of training and expertise will the students have?

Regardless of these questions, most important to community-academic collaboration is the relationship. Project-based research is time-consuming, unpredictable, and often politically messy. The relationship needs to stand up through all of that. If you are not sure the relationship will be strong enough, then the research may not be good enough.



# LOOSE GRAVEL

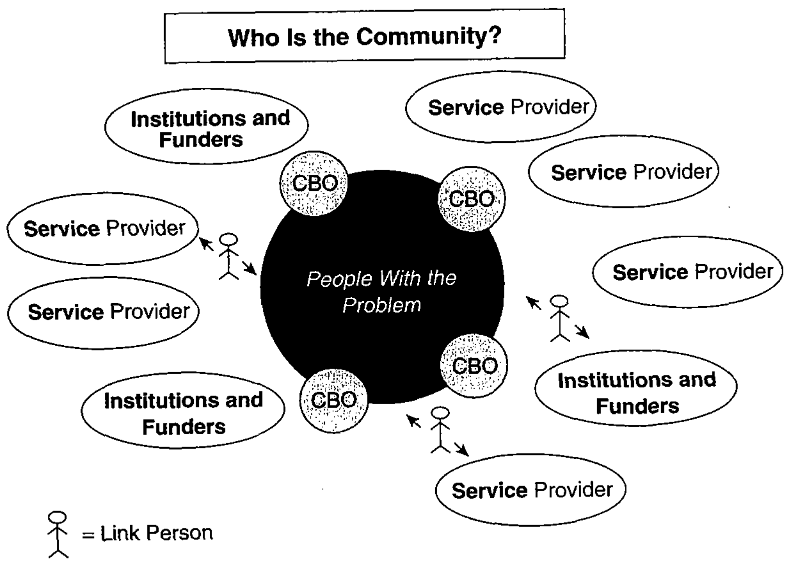
The path to participatory research is pretty clear—the more participation the better. If the researcher engages community or organization members at every step of the research, the chances for success are high. It's actually not hard to do. It just feels hard because, for many of us, it requires working across class, race, and cultural boundaries. But it is ultimately the relationships that matter, especially when you hit some of the loose gravel on the way to a successful participatory research project. There are three kinds of loose gravel that are important to understand from the beginning: understanding who the "community" is; determining whether the situation you are researching is characterized by conflict or cooperation; and dealing with charges of researcher bias.

## 1. Who Is the Community?

This patch of loose gravel may not apply as much to those working strictly in bureaucratically defined organizations. But those of you in such situations may still confront concerns that the people most affected by the research are not really involved in guiding it. Especially if you are working with a service organization located in a poor community, but not controlled by its residents, this section can be particularly important.

It is interesting to me how reluctant people are to talk about the question of who is the community. Some don't want to talk about it because they fear that the conversation will be divisive. They would prefer to think about us as all one big community, and to talk about *the community* as separate from those of us trying to help will reinforce divisions and cause conflict. Another reason some don't want to talk about it is because, at some level of consciousness, we "on the outside" know that the community is not us. And that applies not just to academics but to foundations, United Ways, government agencies, and even most nonprofits. Because, by and large, those organizations are not controlled by people who live, eat, and sleep with the problems that participatory research models are designed to attack. And that is where I begin in thinking about the community in participatory research.

To me, "the community" is the people with the problem: The economically disinvested neighborhood trying to get respectful and effective police protection; the gay/lesbian community trying to get fair marriage and adoption laws; the Latino or African-American




community trying to stop employment discrimination; the disabled community trying to get better health care; or the rural community trying to get clean drinking water. The community may be spatial or may span spaces. It may be well organized or disorganized. In some cases people may not even define themselves as a community—until a good community organizer brings them together so they can discover their common issues and complementary resources. When they do understand their issues and resources they sometimes form their own community-based organizations (CBOs)—groups that they as a community control, either by a majority hold on the board of a formal organization or by their mass membership and participation in an informal group. In the Cedar-Riverside neighborhood project described earlier, I found myself working with the neighborhood community development corporation (which is run by an elected neighborhood board), the Confederation of Somali Community in Minnesota, the Oromo Community of Minnesota, the Korean Service Center, and an informal Vietnamese group, among the many other non-community-based nonprofit organizations.

A step removed from the community are those organizations that are not controlled by the community but are connected to it by staff or board members who come from the community. Those "link people," or "bridge people," or "translators," as they are variously called, are special. In multicultural situations they are the people who not only



speak multiple languages but also understand the rules of multiple cultures. In Cedar-Riverside I worked with a Vietnamese community leader, a Somali community leader, a leader in the Oromo community, and a leader of the local Korean community. All were members of their respective ethnic communities, and were also running formal community-based service organizations in the neighborhood.

Two steps removed are those organizations with no direct connection to the people with the problem. Their staff or boards may share some structural characteristics—of class, race, gender, sexual orientation, disability, or other important characteristic—but they do not share the experience of the problem. Service providers, institutions, government, and other similar organizations trying to help a community—when they have no community base, no community participation or control, and no bridge people—are often suspect in a community. And yet it is with these twice-removed groups that so many academics partner—something I call working from the middle.

This situation confronts us with a number of questions. First, what does a researcher do in a divided community when there are divisive CBOs? This can often seem like the most difficult situation to deal with. But it may not actually be as difficult as it seems. For researchers often occupy a special status in community settings. Similar to newspaper reporters, many people see researchers as people who can help them tell their story. In my many years of working with the Cedar-Riverside neighborhood, perhaps one of the most contentious (though thankfully still nonviolent) neighborhoods in the country, I have learned a number of lessons in working with divisive neighborhood factions.

The most important lesson is that, if you don't take sides, you have to keep secrets. In the many neighborhood disputes I have witnessed over the years, I have more than once been told of the strategy one side planned to get the other side. I've kept that information secret, following my basic code that I don't distribute anyone's information before they have had a chance to review and revise it. Consequently, they had to work out the disputes themselves. And they were much better at it than I would have been.

The second lesson is that there are situations where your own values compel you to choose sides. I have just finished yet another research project with the CDC in Cedar-Riverside, looking at the strategies they have used to successfully create over 250 units of housing in the neighborhood. I agreed to the project after two years spent avoiding the housing conflicts in the neighborhood. But I eventually came to see those opposing the CDC as such a grave threat to the neighborhood housing that I felt compelled to give up my neutrality. That doesn't mean I don't still keep secrets, particularly because those opposing the CDC are community residents rather than outside actors. But my research is focused on helping the CDC reorganize the affordable cooperative housing they created rather than helping its opponents find a way to transform it into privately owned houses that they could buy low and sell high.

A more challenging situation than an organized, but divided, community is one that is disorganized, where there are no CBOs with any effective capacity. In some cases the researcher gets approached by a service organization working in such a community. The organization itself serves people in the community but has no community members who participate in the organization's programmatic or governance decisions. Think, for example, of homeless service organizations. Partly because of the level of deprivation of homeless individuals, and partly because of the level of mental illness such a situation can exacerbate or cause, it seems unimaginable to do participatory research with homeless individuals guiding the research. Yet that is exactly what happened with Project South's work in Atlanta in preparation for the 1996 Olympics, as the city demolished public housing near downtown and tried to sweep the homeless off the streets.[9] Ian Landry has also been conducting participatory research with homeless individuals in Canada toward building participation of the homeless in program development.[10] These are admittedly rare situations. But they provide lessons for how a researcher and a service organization can work together to increase the participation of people normally thought of as only recipients of those services.

Thinking of ways that the community (defined, remember, as "the people with the problem") can be involved in the research also provides an important test of a service organization. Some service organizations have such a long history of not engaging recipient participation in program design and implementation that they cannot imagine how to do it. If you are a researcher approached by a service organization, you can propose a method that involves recipients in decision making about the research, and then suggest how such participation can continue when the research actually gets put to use. If you are experienced in such a process yourself, you may even help a traditional service organization make the transition from simple service provision to building the sense of power and efficacy in those people it formerly thought of only as recipients. This becomes even more important if you are approached by a foundation to evaluate a program. My experience with the Bonner Foundation, described earlier, taught me that a research project appearing to be imposed from the "outside" will become little more than shelf research. In the case of the Bonner Foundation, it wasn't even being imposed, but the fact that even the idea for the research came from outside the program participants was immediately suspect.



The most important lesson in working from the middle, or with a disorganized community, is to do it with a skilled organizer. We researchers particularly—for some reason—see the research we do as extremely complex and requiring extensive training to carry out. But we don't see the skills involved in organizing a group, running a meeting, and managing the flow of interpersonal relations in moving from research to action as also requiring extensive training and a high level of expertise. One of my embarrassing failures in participatory research came while working with a Hispanic community in Chicago, who had experienced some successes in getting their local schools to be more culturally sensitive and supportive of parent involvement. The organization sponsoring the effort wanted to document their work and its outcomes so they could apply for grants to expand the project. My colleague and I agreed to do the research but wanted the parents to do the interviews—neither of us were fluent in Spanish or experienced in Hispanic culture and hoped that involving parents would assure that the research truly reflected the community's experience. What we didn't know, however, was how much organizing was involved in making this happen. We had funds to pay the parent interviewers, but our first meeting with them recruited only a few parents. We had a difficult time explaining the purpose of the project and how to do it and didn't realize how important it would be for us to keep the project moving by calling subsequent meetings, checking in regularly with the parent interviewers, and expanding the circle of parent participants. Ever since then I have realized the benefit of working with a skilled community organizer who could do those things.

## 2. Is the Situation Characterized By Conflict or Cooperation?

As we will see beginning in the next chapter, project-based research can occur across an incredibly wide range of issues. But one of the most important ways that such research can vary is across situations of conflict or cooperation. At one extreme is an organization that is organizing its membership to attack a target—a bad-guy corporation or government that has excluded or damaged the community in some way. At the other extreme is a unified organization or community developing a new, noncontroversial program to serve its own members. These two types of projects come from two very different worldviews and illustrate the distinction between what sociologists call functionalist theory and conflict theory.

Functionalist theory argues that healthy societies tend toward natural balance and naturally sort people into jobs and positions according to their individual talents and societal needs. This theory also assumes that people have common interests even when they have different positions in society. Healthy, persistent societies change gradually rather than abruptly. Thus, a group organizing to force change can throw off equilibrium, and cooperation to produce gradual change is a better alternative.[11] In contrast, conflict theory sees no natural tendency toward anything but conflict over scarce resources. In this model, society develops through struggle between groups. Imbalance is the normal state of affairs. A false equilibrium is only achieved temporarily, through one group dominating the other groups. Conflict theory sees society as divided, particularly between corporations and workers, men and women, and whites and people of color. The instability inherent in such divided societies prevents elites from achieving absolute domination and provides opportunities for those on the bottom to create change through organizing for collective action and conflict.[12]

Different types of organizations often tend toward one of the two models. The community work industry, for example, can be divided into the practices of advocacy, service delivery, community development, and community organizing. Advocacy—the practice of trying to create social change on behalf of others (such as children or trees or illegal immigrants who are unable to advocate for themselves)—and service delivery—what we normally think of as social services—both tend to occur through midrange, non-community-based organizations. Community development—providing housing, business, and workforce development—and community organizing—building powerful self-advocacy organizations—are more likely to occur through true community-based organizations. Advocacy and community organizing are based more on conflict theory, while service delivery and community development are based more on functionalist theory.

The question becomes how to use participatory forms of research with each situation. Historically, the practices of participatory research and popular education have been seen as more consistent with conflict theory, and action research has been seen as more consistent with functionalist theory.[13]

Participatory research and popular education were influenced by the Third World development movement of the 1960s. Academics, activists, and indigenous community members collaborated to conduct research, develop education programs, and create plans to counter global corporations attempting to take over world agriculture. Their research, education, and planning processes led to sustainable, community-controlled agricultural and development projects. The "participatory research" and "popular education" models resulting from this movement across India, Africa, and South America have been the leading models around much of the world.[14] These models also emphasize people producing knowledge to develop their own consciousness as a means for furthering their struggles for social change.[15] Consequently, the highest form of participatory research is that which is completely controlled and conducted by the community. It is interesting in this regard that the most well-known practitioners of this model, such as the Highlander Research and Education Center, the Applied Research Center, and Project South, are all organizations outside of academia.



The origin of action research is most associated with Kurt Lewin.[16] He and his colleagues focused on attempting to resolve interracial conflicts, along with conducting applied research to increase worker productivity and satisfaction. Action research emphasizes the integration of theory and practice and does not challenge the existing power relationships in either knowledge production or material production. It has been used in education settings and in union-management collaboration in research to save jobs and improve worker satisfaction.[17] Action research values useful knowledge, developmental change, the centrality of individuals, and consensus social theories. The point of reference for action researchers is the profession more than the community, and the practice is very similar to the models used by professional planners. The action research model emphasizes collaboration between groups and does not address the structural antagonism between those groups emphasized by the participatory research model. Action research instead seeks to resolve conflicts between groups, reflecting the basic worldview of functionalist theory.

It is important for the researcher and the community/organization to understand this distinction. In Cedar-Riverside, the survey we did with the CDC board showed clearly that they disliked conflict and wanted to work from a more functionalist world view. There were many issues they could have taken on by using a conflict approach. For example, the city had suspended a major source of funding for redevelopment in the neighborhood, leaving Cedar-Riverside the only neighborhood in the city not receiving such funds. But CDC board members wanted to emphasize strategies for bringing the community together around working *for* something rather than working against something, perhaps because they had become worn out by all the conflict over two decades of rebuilding and defending their community.

If the researcher works from a worldview that reflects functionalist theory, and the community worldview reflects the opposite, and they don't talk about it, each side could actually be working toward a different kind of outcome. And they may not realize it until it's too late. I was, in fact, used to Cedar-Riverside being a rough-and-tumble, confrontational neighborhood always up for a fight. But I did not realize how heavy a toll the neighborhood's internal conflict had taken, since I now lived 700 miles away and maintained my involvement through monthly site visits. I was all ready to provide research support so that they could organize a big confrontational campaign. Thankfully, we talked about this very issue, which led to research supporting a community-building strategy rather than a community organizing strategy.

## 3. Is the Participatory Approach Biased?

Doing research in a way that involves community or organization members often invites charges of bias. How accurate can research be, after all, if non-experts direct it? How accurate can it be if a researcher with a commitment to support a particular community or organization does it?

This particular patch of loose gravel will carry different risks for communities compared to researchers. Communities and organizations need to worry if foundations, judges, legislators, and community members will take their research seriously. These audiences assume that the research is conducted with some degree of one-sidedness. Their main question is whether the research is accurate. And while being armed with research that looks objective can sometimes help win a policy issue, more important is having research that can survive the criticisms of the opposition.

For university- or college-based researchers, however, the appearance of objectivity can be as important as the degree of accuracy. We saw in Chapter 1 that there is no necessary relationship between objectivity and accuracy and that the distinction between the two has been lost. But when it comes to getting tenure, if the academic's research appears too passionate, it doesn't matter how accurate it might be. It is still labeled and discarded as biased.

In addition, project-based research doesn't fit cleanly into higher education. When I got my first professor job, it was split half and half between a regular department and a university-based applied research center. I used this position to do participatory research with



community organizations. After the third year, however, I had to give up my work through the research center. Half of the department faculty didn't like it because they thought I was supposed to be doing research and interpreted my work as service projects. The other half thought just the opposite. In addition, much of this kind of research is descriptive and involves counting things. It is often much easier to get community permission to publish their data than it is to get an academic journal to accept an article based on such descriptive data. Some academic journals are becoming more interested in publishing articles on how to do participatory forms of research, but we still have a ways to go in gaining legitimacy for participatory forms of research.

So the first challenge for academic researchers involves explaining what they are doing. That is becoming easier thanks to the growing popularity of service learning and community-based research in higher education.[18] But even when faculty review committees understand it, they may not respect it. That is because so much of this kind of research disregards the reified version of objectivity that demands the researcher remain dispassionate and distanced, and that the research remain in the control of professionals at all times.

What are the defenses against this? First, as we have already discussed, is the critique of objectivity itself and returning objectivity to its status as a strategy rather than a goal in itself. More difficult to deal with is the charge of the researcher "going native"—becoming overidentified with the community's values. But here, too, it is important to separate commitment to a community from commitment to a particular research outcome. Just as objectivity and accuracy are not the same, neither are going native and researcher bias. The question is not the extent to which the researcher identifies with the community but how skilled they are at conducting research that can accurately reflect reality. Of course, researchers helping an organization evaluate a program need to check their desire to make the organization look good. But it is no less difficult for experimental researchers to check their desire to confirm their own hypothesis.

The final issue the academic researcher has to deal with is the charge that unskilled community members are making too many decisions about the research and therefore threatening its accuracy. On the face of it, this seems difficult to defend against. But Phil Nyden and colleagues[19] have shown that the combination of the abstract knowledge of academics and the experiential knowledge of community members is more powerful than each alone. The most powerful illustration of this point comes from a deadly disease that struck the Navajo community in 1993. When the Centers for Disease Control tried to investigate what was killing members of the Navajo Nation in New Mexico, they went in without understanding the cultural norms of mourning the dead and community privacy standards. As a consequence, the people they interviewed told them anything just to get them out of the way, and the CDC ended up, unknowingly, with useless data. In the interim, more people died. Eventually, a Navajo public health researcher, consulting with a local Navajo medicine man, helped manage the cultural differences, and they discovered the killer was the mouse-borne hantavirus. It appears, however, that this virus had already been diagnosed through Navajo "myth," which told of the relationship between excess rainfall and growth in the mouse population and the bad luck one would receive if a mouse ran across your clothing.[20] The Centers for Disease Control now cites the knowledge of traditional Navajo healers in its information on hantavirus[21] and has established community advisory committees around the country to link community-based knowledge with scientific knowledge.[22] Lives were lost by ignoring community knowledge, and were saved by treating that knowledge as legitimate.

## CONCLUSION

This chapter has focused on the process of doing project-based research with community members and organizations, emphasizing how to increase the participation of community and organization members in the research. It is important to remember, however, that this is not participation for participation's sake. The next chapter will focus on the project-based research model and will show how participation fits into that model. The purpose of participation in a research context is to support the project work of the organization. So, remember that participatory forms of research:

- Focus on being useful
- Employ diverse research methods
- Emphasize collaboration

Community and organization members can participate in, contribute to, and guide every step of the research process, including:

- Choosing the research question
- Designing the research methods
- Collecting the data
- Analyzing the data
- Reporting the results



When project-based research involves a collaboration between professional researchers and community groups or organizations, the two parties need to ask some questions of each other. Researchers should ask:

- Does the community/organization have the capacity to participate?
- What resources can the community/organization contribute?
- Does the community/organization have research needs you can fulfill?

Community groups or organizations should ask:

- Is the researcher willing to follow the community/organization's lead?
- How good is the researcher at meeting deadlines?
- Can the researcher communicate in a community context?
- What experience does the researcher have?

Finally, there are some potentially tricky issues that researchers and organizations need to face in project-based research:

- Who is the community? Is the organization or group sponsoring the research representative of the community or connected to it?
- Is the situation characterized by conflict or cooperation? Do the partners in the project agree on the characterization of the situation and the strategies to use in that context?
- Is participatory research biased? Will it be taken seriously in policy and legal contexts?

## RESOURCES

### Community-Based Research Networks Based in Higher Education

Community-Campus Partnerships for Health, http://www.ccph.info
Coral network, http://www.coralnetwork.org/
Just Connections, http://www.justconnections.org
Neighborhood Planning for Community Revitalization, http://www.cura.umn.edu/programs/npcr.html
Policy Research Action Group, http://www.luc.edu/curl/prag/
University Community Collaborative of Philadelphia, http://www.temple.edu/uccp

## Popular Education Centers Based in Higher Education

Center for Popular Education and Participatory Research, University of California Berkeley, http://cpepr.net/

Centre for Popular Education, University of Technology Sydney, http://www.cpe.uts.edu.au

## Popular Education and Participatory Research Centers Outside of Higher Education

Applied Research Center, http://www.arc.org/

Highlander Research and Education Center, http://www.highlandercenter.org/

Paulo Freire Institute, http://www.paulofreire.org/

Participatory Research in Asia, http://www.pria.org

Project South, http://www.projectsouth.org/

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