

# Introduction to CBPR

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Welcome to this course on Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR). CBPR is an approach to research that centers partnership, equity, and co-learning between researchers and communities. As we will discuss in more detail, CBPR exists within a broader family of participatory approaches that include Participatory Action Research (PAR), action research, participatory health research (PHR), and community-engaged research, among others. The terminology and acronyms can be confusing, and the distinctions are often less about rigid methodological differences than about historical roots, disciplinary traditions, and geographic usage.

## Why CBPR?

We use the term Community-Based Participatory Research (abbreviated as CBPR) in this course deliberately. In North America, especially in public health and health services research, CBPR has become the most widely recognized term to describe research that is:

- Conducted with communities rather than on or about communities
- Guided by principles of equitable partnership, co-learning, and shared decision-making
- Oriented toward both knowledge generation and social change/action

At the same time, many of the core principles of CBPR overlap substantially with those of participatory action research and related approaches: attention to power, commitment to action, iterative cycles of reflection, and respect for local knowledge. For example:

Participatory action research (PAR) often emphasizes explicit cycles of action and reflection and has strong roots in social justice and political transformation

CBPR is frequently more embedded in health research systems, funding structures, and translational science, though many CBPR projects also pursue social change

Rather than viewing these approaches as distinct silos, it is more accurate to see them as part of a continuum or family of participatory traditions that share foundational commitments but differ in emphasis, context, scholarship, and naming conventions.

## CBPR Historical Foundations (section heading)

CBPR as we understand it today has its historical roots in Southern/Global South and Northern intellectual traditions and contexts.

### **Southern/Global South Traditions**

The philosophical roots of participatory research are often traced to Latin America and other parts of the Global South, where scholars and activists developed participatory approaches in direct response to oppression and inequity. Two key figures are:

Paulo Freire from Brazil: His seminal work *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970) introduced the concept of critical consciousness (*conscientização*), which emphasized dialogue, reflection, and collective action. Freire's ideas underpin CBPR's commitment to empowerment and social transformation

Orlando Fals-Borda from Colombia is a founder of Participatory Action Research (PAR). Fals-Borda emphasized the co-production of knowledge with marginalized communities and the use of research as a tool for political and social change

These Southern traditions, centered on liberation, decolonization, and systemic transformation, form the foundation of CBPR's political and justice-oriented dimensions.

### **Northern Traditions**

At the same time, participatory traditions in North America and Europe were influenced by:

Kurt Lewin, a German-American psychologist who is often credited with coining the term "action research" based on his work in the 1940s in the United States. Lewin introduced iterative cycles of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting within organizational and social psychology contexts.

Public health and community development movements in the U.S. and Canada mostly in the late 20th century also influenced CBPR. These movements emphasized community engagement, health equity, and translation of research into practice.

CBPR emerged at the intersection of the Southern and Northern traditions, integrating the action-oriented, justice-focused principles of the South with the applied, systems-oriented focus of the North.

### **Contemporary Key Figures and CBPR Contributions**

Four U.S. scholars have been instrumental in shaping CBPR as a distinct approach to community-partnered research from the late 1980s to today. Together, they have formalized CBPR in terms of core principles, best practices, evaluation frameworks and established CBPR as rigorous science that prioritizes community benefit.

Barbara Israel who was at University of Michigan was a leading public health scholar in CBPR. Israel and colleagues developed widely adopted CBPR principles including equitable partnership, co-learning, and long-term community partnerships.

Nina Wallerstein from University of New Mexico has advanced CBPR theory and practice with a focus on empowerment, health equity, and evaluation frameworks including evidence-based models linking partnership processes to outcomes.

Meredith Minkler at UC Berkeley is another key figure who has contributed extensively to CBPR practice and ethics particularly in community organizing, policy change, and dissemination.

Bonnie Duran at the University of Washington is known for work with Native American communities, particularly around cultural humility, historical trauma, and Indigenous methodologies within CBPR.

The contributions of these leading scholars have shaped what is now considered the “gold standard” of CBPR in terms of a rigorous participatory research approach that is methodologically sound, ethically grounded, and genuinely collaborative.

### **CBPR Across the Globe**

While “CBPR” is most commonly used in North America, the approach itself is global.

In Europe, the term Participatory Health Research (PHR) is often used especially particularly within professional networks such as the International Collaboration for Participatory Health Research (ICPHR).

In low- and middle-income countries (LMICs), participatory approaches are often influenced more directly from participatory action research traditions, so the term “participatory action research” may be used more in the Global South literature. These approaches are widely used in areas such as maternal and child health, infectious disease prevention, environmental health, and research related to community health systems.

For example, in South Africa, Mosavel and colleagues used a CBPR approach to collaboratively shape health priorities and interventions around cervical cancer. The community and researchers developed a framework that incorporated the community's concerns and priorities. Through extensive engagement with community members and stakeholders, researchers shifted the focus from cervical cancer screening alone to a broader concept of “cervical health” that reflected local realities, including HIV, violence, and poverty.

In Vietnam, a team of researchers engaged underserved groups as active partners in identifying barriers to hepatitis C care. Through this collaborative approach, communities highlighted key challenges—including high treatment costs, limited access to reliable information, and low awareness—and co-developed tailored, practical solutions such as educational media and community outreach.

Another example comes from a rural community in Northwest Pakistan, where researchers and community stakeholders co-designed culturally appropriate COVID-19 risk communication and prevention strategies. Through active engagement, community members identified key barriers—such as distrust, resource limitations, and gender dynamics—and co-developed solutions including health messaging, improved water access, and distribution of protective equipment.

A final example is a study done with mobile populations living with HIV across rural communities in Kenya and Uganda. Through iterative engagement, mobile stakeholders identified key barriers to care—such as disrupted treatment continuity and limited service flexibility—and co-designed tailored solutions, including mobile health records and peer-delivered services.

These four examples illustrate that while the label “CBPR” may vary, the underlying commitments to participation, equity, and action are shared across contexts.

As you learn more about the CBPR approach throughout this course, we encourage you to think about how you may already be incorporating elements of CBPR in your current research and what components you might want to add to current or future projects.

### References

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