

What Is CBPR?

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In this video, we're going to talk about community-based participatory research (abbreviated CBPR) as an approach to research.

Before diving into CBPR, though, I want to start with something from the art world. This work is by artist Nina Katchadourian, titled *The Mended Spider Web Series*.

Around her home, Nina noticed many broken and abandoned spider webs. I imagine she felt a deep concern for the spiders and their disrupted habitats and wanted to help them out. So, she decided that she would create a web repair company. To connect with the spiders in their own environment, she advertised directly in their webs. She carefully stitched the words "web repair" along with a phone number into an abandoned spider web, using silky red thread and non-toxic glue. As Nina made her web repairs, she paid close attention to the structure of the web, mimicking its angles and patterns to honor its original design. This is an example of one of her repaired webs.

How do you think the spiders reacted to Nina's well-intentioned repairs? Pause the video while you consider your answer. When you are ready to continue, press play.

In every case, the spiders rejected her repairs and ripped them to the ground. They repaired the web in their own way. Also, part of this project, Nina shot video footage of the spiders taking the letters "gift" down. Now we don't know exactly why the spiders reacted the way they did, but the artist's "uninvited collaborations" with the spiders gives us an analogy to think about how to position CBPR. I often recall the spiders' reactions and this art project when I am in the thick of doing CBPR, thinking about my work *WITH* communities (not on or about them). Please keep this analogy in mind throughout the course.

Defining CBPR

So, what is CBPR? Here are some definitions from renowned CBPR experts Nina Wallerstein, Bonnie Duran, Barbara Israel, Meredith Minkler.¹

- CBPR is a "**transformative** research paradigm that **bridges the gap between science and practice** through community engagement and social action to increase health equity."
- It is an "inquiry with the **participation of those affected by an issue** for the purpose of education and **action for effecting change.**"

- CBPR “**equitably** involves all partners . . . with a research **topic of importance to the community** with the aim of combining **knowledge and action** for **social change** to improve community health and **eliminate health disparities**.”
- It is “an **orientation and overall research approach**, which **equalizes power** relationships between academic and community research partners.”

Notice the words that are bolded; for example, transformative, equitable, knowledge and action, social change, approach, equalizes power.

In other words, CBPR is a democratic research process where you are partnering with people toward shared decision making and equalizing power between researchers at a university (or medical center) and the community. Issues of importance to the community are the focus of the research. With CBPR, we're really thinking about working towards social change, taking social action to improve the health and wellbeing communities, not just doing research for the sake of discovery.

Positioning CBPR in the Action Research Family

I like to think about positioning CBPR beneath the action research umbrella. Action research is a broad term and encompasses a whole family of related research approaches. And certainly, we could get into distinctions and definitions of action research and participatory action research, but we won't do that here. It's important to just have some idea that community-based participatory research has a lot of close cousins and is related to a family of research that we could put under an action research umbrella. Some people like to think of CBPR under a participatory research umbrella. CBPR has its own distinct principles, guidelines, and set of assumptions that differentiates it from other types of action research. Participatory health research is the equivalent of CBPR, but it tends to be the term that is used in Europe versus CBPR in North America.

I founded and co-edit The Journal of Participatory Research Methods.² In our inaugural issue, we tried to outline all of the related approaches to participatory research, including community-based participatory research. The list is quite long— there are about 30 variations of participatory research alone! That's a lot of related approaches!²

Traditional Research Approaches

To understand what differentiates CBPR, let's take a look at how traditional research works. The traditional non-CBPR research paradigm tends to position research institutions as the place where expertise and knowledge live, and communities as the place where health needs live.

In a typical research model, the process starts within an academic researcher. The researcher identifies a question they want to explore and applies for grant funding to pursue it. Once the project is funded, community members participate by contributing data or experiences that help generate new knowledge. That knowledge may eventually be shared back with the

community, but it primarily feeds into academic publications and helps researchers build their careers through contributions to scholarly literature. This model places a lot of control over the research process with researchers and very little with communities.

And it's important to note that this imbalance is not neutral. There are a number of axes of power when we think about communities vs research institutions that include race, money, and knowledge as power. These axes of power also position researchers as the brokers or owners of the power in the traditional research paradigm.

Wallerstein and Duran¹ outlined some of the challenges of the traditional non-CBPR research paradigm, and how CBPR addresses them.

The first challenge is **external validity**, which means applying research findings from a study in one setting to another setting, particularly in diverse communities. A CBPR approach instead asks for community health priorities upfront and works collaboratively to co-develop interventions with community to ensure findings are relevant.

The second challenge is **how we think about evidence and knowledge**. In the traditional research paradigm, academic knowledge is privileged and transferred from the researcher to local communities. This view comes from Eurocentric ideas and the European enlightenment. CBPR, on the other hand, incorporates the community's ways of knowing and uses community explanatory models and community-based methods.

The third challenge with traditional research is that the **language of research is incompatible with the language and discourse of community**. This language is not neutral. It reflects underlying supremacist and extractive histories. To counteract this, researchers using a CBPR model are aware of language and language shifts and use language that aligns with community values.

The way that universities function is the fourth challenge. Researchers tend to control budgets and decision making, as we saw in the asthma case study. CBPR's response is that community investigators are partners engaged in all steps of the research process. Collaborative and shared decision making, long-term relationships, and accountability between the research institution and the community are hallmarks of CBPR.

The fifth challenge is that traditional **research often lacks sustainability beyond research funding**, as we saw in the asthma case study. CBPR builds community capacity and ownership, making sure that findings can be interpreted and acted on by community and have the potential to be applicable and to scale.

Finally, a major challenge with traditional, non-CBPR research is lack of trust, based on a long history of community exploitation and abuse in research. To counter that lack of trust, CBPR prioritizes community sovereignty and benefit as a way of building trust.

CBPR Approach

So, with all of these challenges with traditional research, which aspects do you think that CBPR modifies? Here you can pause the video and consider your response.

CBPR entirely reshapes the traditional research paradigm. In a CBPR model, the academic researchers and the community are side by side throughout the entire process. Together they define the research question. Together they obtain funding and develop the budget. Together they implement the study, and together they generate knowledge that is relevant to both the academic researchers and the community.

Summary

In summary, CBPR is a collaborative research approach that emphasizes community priorities, equalizes power between researchers and communities, and aims to drive social change. The traditional research model has many challenges, including lack of external validity, one-way transfer of knowledge, inaccessible language, power centralized in the research institutions, lack of program sustainability, and low trust. CBPR addresses each challenge by fostering equitable partnerships, honoring community knowledge, and promoting shared decision-making between academic researchers and communities. Ultimately, CBPR reshapes the research process into a collaborative effort where researchers are the experts in research and science and communities are experts in their lives, health, and communities. In this way, CBPR prioritizes community needs and issues and builds lasting impact.

I'd like to leave you with this thought: CBPR is not a method. It's an overall approach to research—a way of doing research that results in improved reach, rigor, and relevance. The ultimate purpose of CBPR is to eradicate health disparities through action and social change. CBPR is good for communities and good for science!

References

1. Wallerstein N, Duran B. [Community-based participatory research contributions to intervention research: the intersection of science and practice to improve health equity](#). Am J Public Health. 2010 Apr 1;100 Suppl 1(Suppl 1):S40-6.
2. Vaughn, Lisa & Jacquez, Farrah. (2020). [Participatory Research Methods – Choice Points in the Research Process](#). Journal of Participatory Research Methods.