Community-based research (CBR) creates new knowledge for the explicit purpose of advancing social change (Strand, Marullo, Cutforth, Stoecker, & Donohue, 2003). The types of social change we seek to advance through CBR include: enhancing the capacity of the individuals or community-based organizations (CBOs) with which we collaborate; increasing goods and services delivered to disadvantaged groups or clients of CBOs; empowering communities or constituencies to advance their social change claims; and altering the policies and/or social structures that limit opportunities and life chances for classes of disadvantaged people. We also seek to transform our higher education institutions and, when CBR is employed as classroom pedagogy, hope to transform our students academically, personally, socially and politically. Yet, based on experience with assessments of service-learning in particular and community change initiatives in general, we know how difficult it is to assess the impacts of our efforts (Eyler & Giles, 1999; Nyden, 1997). Social change is typically quite slow to occur and often contingent on far more factors than any particular social change initiative can influence. However, we assert that the steps toward social change that are implemented through intentional community-based initiatives can be better understood and supported by undertaking assessments—systematically understanding their process and rigorously evaluating their outcomes. This article articulates a conceptual framework and roadmap for undertaking assessments in CBR.

First considered is the question of what is distinctive about assessment in CBR and why we believe this work is so valuable. This is both a value-laden question and an epistemological matter that merits response at both levels. A conceptual framework of assessments in CBR is then presented in order to demonstrate the broad range of analyses that can be undertaken, and to illustrate how these contribute to understanding social change. A decision-tree is outlined to help practitioners consider the range of assessments they may wish to undertake. The framework and decision-tree developed here provides a common language for facilitating knowledge sharing across boundaries.

The article examines the benefits and challenges of undertaking assessments in community-based research (CBR). Such assessments are compared and contrasted to more traditional research processes. Further, the challenges of integrating CBR assessments into an ongoing social change initiative are analyzed. To aid in undertaking CBR assessments, five principles to guide CBR assessments are articulated: 1) community driven; 2) collaborative; 3) systematic and rigorous, yet flexible and context-specific; 4) guided by grounded theory; and 5) multidimensional. This analysis develops a three-dimensional conceptual framework for assessments, based on the level of activity to be examined, the change goals being examined, and the process or effects outcomes. Finally, a decision-tree is offered with guiding questions to help practitioners consider the range of assessments they may wish to undertake. The framework and decision-tree developed here provides a common language for facilitating knowledge sharing across boundaries.

Community-based research (CBR) creates new knowledge for the explicit purpose of advancing social change (Strand, Marullo, Cutforth, Stoecker, & Donohue, 2003). The types of social change we seek to advance through CBR include: enhancing the capacity of the individuals or community-based organizations (CBOs) with which we collaborate; increasing goods and services delivered to disadvantaged groups or clients of CBOs; empowering communities or constituencies to advance their social change claims; and altering the policies and/or social structures that limit opportunities and life chances for classes of disadvantaged people. We also seek to transform our higher education institutions and, when CBR is employed as classroom pedagogy, hope to transform our students academically, personally, socially and politically. Yet, based on experience with assessments of service-learning in particular and community change initiatives in general, we know how difficult it is to assess the impacts of our efforts (Eyler & Giles, 1999; Nyden, 1997). Social change is typically quite slow to occur and often contingent on far more factors than any particular social change initiative can influence. However, we assert that the steps toward social change that are implemented through intentional community-based initiatives can be better understood and supported by undertaking assessments—systematically understanding their process and rigorously evaluating their outcomes. This article articulates a conceptual framework and roadmap for undertaking assessments in CBR.

First considered is the question of what is distinctive about assessment in CBR and why we believe this work is so valuable. This is both a value-laden question and an epistemological matter that merits response at both levels. A conceptual framework of assessments in CBR is then presented in order to demonstrate the broad range of analyses that can be undertaken, and to illustrate how these contribute to understanding social change. A decision-tree is outlined to help practitioners formulate appropriate assessments.

What is Different about Assessment in CBR

CBR, as defined here, is the collaborative creation of new knowledge to advance social change on behalf of disadvantaged communities or groups. The term assessment is used to refer to the research process through which these social change efforts are evaluated with respect to outcomes—for the individuals and collectivities undertaking the
change effort, and for the targets or objectives of their change efforts. The actors themselves can be changed through the process of undertaking the change effort, often in ways that they hope empower them and/or expand the organization’s capacity or increase its efficiency. The intended effects of their change efforts typically include changing power arrangements (enhancing disadvantaged group’s power) and altering institutional practices or structural arrangements that limit their life chances. These process and effects outcomes are referred to below as one dimension of the assessment framework.

The process of undertaking assessments in CBR constitutes the critical feedback loop that enables assessing the effectiveness of social change efforts in light of the change goals set by the interested stakeholders in the process. Assessments are analogous to a reflective process through which social change actors and advocates articulate their change goals and formulate the criteria with which they will evaluate the successes and failures of change efforts. This in turn guides the actors in rethinking their change efforts, influencing whether and how their further efforts should be modified. This is the value-laden premise, and promise, of undertaking assessments in CBR—that the collaborative researchers seek to improve the efficacy of social change efforts so that they improve the quality of life and/or opportunities for the disadvantaged communities or constituencies with which they work.

This process forms a feedback loop, as illustrated in Figure 1, panel A. We start with a social change initiative that seeks to improve the quality of life and/or opportunities of a disadvantaged group (step 1). Such an effort is based on an implicit model of social change; an understanding of goals to be achieved, strategies to be pursued, and resources to be mobilized on behalf of the change effort; and actions undertaken to pursue these goals. The questions then arise as to whether the actions are actually being undertaken as intended and whether they are having the anticipated effects (step 2). CBR assessments were designed to create information that answers these questions regarding the processes and effects of these change efforts (step 3). After determining the appropriate methodologies to gather and analyze the data, we reach conclusions to respond to the initial questions (step 4). These findings are then used as input to reevaluate and possibly revise the social change initiative in order to improve its effectiveness (back to step 1).

In reality, many social change initiatives do not employ a feedback process that is community-driven; considers the goals, strategies, and resources of the key stakeholders; logically, systematically, and multidimensionally considers whether the intended process is being followed and having the intended consequences; and is responsive to the feedback generated through the assessment process. Indeed, it is argued here that most change efforts do not enjoy the benefits of integrating CBR principles into their operations, but instead operate based on individual leaders’ perceptions—responding to personal agendas and/or assumptions, with limited and randomly acquired feedback data, and interpreted through idiosyncratic analytical frameworks rarely examined self-consciously. Although these efforts might sometimes succeed, it is argued that adherence to the principles presented below increases the likelihood of achieving the desired change goals, although certainly not assuring such success. Viewed at this level, CBR is the deliberate analytical feedback process used to guide a social change effort.

Of course, like any conceptual model, this oversimplifies the reality of the social change process in several ways:

- there is likely to be jumping among steps rather than following them in order, and the

---

Figure 1
Comparative Models of Outcomes Assessments

1a: Community-based research model

1b: Traditional research model
process may “start” at any place in the cycle;
• in reality, there may be shortchanging and skipping of steps altogether; and
• there may be insufficient resources or expertise to carry out any particular step.

Nevertheless, despite these real-world departures from the conceptual model, the main point is that assessments in CBR are undertaken within a framework of a social change model. This has important epistemological consequences for how CBR assessments differ from a more traditional evaluation research model.

The more traditional model of scientific research is portrayed in Figure 1, panel B (similar to Wadsworth, 1998). Here the starting point is theory, which generates a question for which there is currently no clear and agreed-upon answer (step 1). This generates a research question based on postulated relationships among concepts, from which we logically deduce expected relationships (hypotheses) and observable outcomes (step 2). The researchers then devise a methodology for gathering data that indicates whether the expected outcomes occur in reality (step 3). The results are analyzed, generalizations made, and conclusions reached regarding the original hypotheses (step 4). These conclusions then cause the original theory to be reconsidered and possibly revised, starting the process over again (back to step 1).

Although the two research process diagrams have many parallels, there are several obvious key distinctions between them. First, each model’s starting point is clearly different, captured in part by the distinction between applied and theoretical research. Yet the difference is larger than this as well, as the CBR questions raised are more likely to be interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary in nature, whereas the traditional model is more likely to be discipline-specific. Second, CBR values the knowledge acquired through practice and lived experience, which is considered and given due weight in formulating research questions and designing appropriate research methods. Traditional research relies on accruing knowledge that is certified and credentialed through a peer review process, based on norms of “objectivity.” Third, a CBR assessment methodology more likely is to be developed in the specific context of the community and the social change initiative in place, whereas the methodology and measures of a traditional research project more likely will resort to standardized practices that have been applied in other contexts. Fourth, whereas traditional research relies on discipline-grounded theories and research methods to validate its questions, concepts, and methods, CBR requires two further criteria for validating research—the community’s knowledge and experience as a critical prism through which meaning is constructed, and the utility of the findings for effecting social change. Indeed, one could argue that it is precisely disadvantaged groups who have the clearest perspective on how power relations are reified through routine institutional operations, so that these groups’ insights provide the most valid understandings of how power operates to maintain injustices. Finally, we note that as a consequence of CBR being grounded in the community context—carried out in conjunction with real-life, ongoing, collective efforts to change social structures—the research and analysis is contingent on many more variables than can be controlled. While this point may prove to be intellectually frustrating, it counterbalances the converse frustration inherent in controlled experimental research, in which we find results derived from carefully controlled clinical trials not holding up in the reality of everyday life.

CBR Principles and their Implications for Assessments

The previous discussion of these two research models allows the authors to articulate some core principles distinguishing CBR from other forms of research and demonstrates how these principles lead to distinct opportunities, challenges, and practices of CBR assessments. To this end, the authors examine five key principles of CBR as they apply to assessments: 1) CBR is community driven; 2) CBR is collaborative; 3) CBR methodologies are systematic and rigorous, yet flexible, as influenced by their context; 4) CBR is guided by grounded theory; and 5) CBR is multidimensional. The authors briefly examine each of these five principle’s implications for assessments.

**CBR is Community Driven**

At the meta-level, the community’s social change goals underlie the analysis undertaken in CBR. At the programmatic level, the authors rely on the community organization or constituents’ goals to generate research questions and methodological designs. Outcomes are continuously reassessed in light of the community’s ongoing efforts. For the academic researcher, this is perhaps the largest difference between discipline- or theory-driven research and CBR. The effect is that the academic researcher must cede authority from these agents, which are, to a large extent, internalized in academic researchers through their professional socialization, and share authority for determining methods, procedures, analysis, and results
with the community’s interests. The academic researcher must be sensitive to subcultural differences of class, race/ethnicity, community history, and local politics when collaborating with community partners to understand the community’s concerns and establish a process likely to produce meaningful results. To complicate matters further, there is typically not a single community interest or stakeholder with whom the researcher must interact, but multiple interests and stakeholders, themselves often at odds with one another. CBR assessment results are not intended solely, or even primarily, for publication in professional journals, but instead are designed to affect program operations, constituents’ actions, or influence policy deliberations or institutional operations. This dramatically impacts the ways in which results are reported to key stakeholders, in language that is accessible and relevant for further informing the change process.

CBR is Collaborative

In the ideal, there is a shared articulation of questions, determination of methods, division of labor for undertaking the data gathering and analysis, and implementation of results. This does not mean that in any given assessment, both community and university partners undertake half of each of the tasks. Rather, partners contribute from the position of their strengths, expertise, and resource availability. In an ideal model, each partner learns from the other’s areas of strength, enhancing their own capacity in those areas. Over time, each partner is more capable to undertake greater responsibility for future assessments and is more effective at implementing the results of their analysis.1

The dynamics of power, status, and influence need to be considered, as the academic partner based in the university represents a relatively powerful institution in the community, whereas the community partners often represent relatively powerless constituencies. Whereas it might be quite typical and routine for an academic analyst to point out a poor community’s weaknesses or deficits, such a researcher might be relatively unaware of the strengths and assets the community possesses for addressing a social problem. Further, the academy-based partner may be quite unaware of their own biases and limitations in undertaking a collaborative process, and may be grounded in a set of privileged assumptions attendant to such a social position. Conversely, the community partner may be unaware of, or incapable of articulating, a critique of the academic partner’s limitations in undertaking such a collaborative endeavor, or may feel intimidated to do so. Once such limitations and/or assumptions are acknowledged, it will be important to continuing the collaboration that strategies for addressing them be developed. In short, a whole new range of sensitivities and self-awareness must be considered deliberately in undertaking collaborative CBR assessments.

Collaboration also implies that the collaborative products are jointly owned. For a particular assessment, this means that the data is jointly owned, the analysis is jointly derived, and the responsibilities for altering programs, behaviors, policies, or institutions are shared. Again, this does not imply that each partner operates in the same manner in terms of assuming responsibilities to make changes happen. Instead, there should be an agreed-upon strategy for how various change steps will be undertaken and by whom. This is one key reason for ensuring sufficient community participation through the assessment process—to ensure sufficient buy-in to the results so that actions will flow from the findings.

CBR Assessment Methodologies are Systematic and Rigorous, Yet Flexible, as Influenced by their Context

While it is important to learn from successful practices in others’ research—and indeed, this article is a deliberate attempt to help achieve this goal—it is also important to remember the distinctive nature of each community and program’s operations. As Patton (1997) reminds us, “There is no best way to conduct an evaluation. It depends on the people involved and their situation.” The research design and methods to be used must generate the information needed to address the specific questions raised by the CBOs and be practical in light of the collaborators’ resources and interests. The collaborators also need to be conscious of the subcultural differences that may exist among themselves and their constituents, and design assessment instruments and methodologies accordingly. Finally, all parties must understand the capabilities and limitations of the research because of access issues or technological challenges (Leavitt, 1999).

There is a significant opportunity for a democratizing effect on knowledge production inherent in collaborative assessments. Because the questions, assumptions, and methods rely heavily on community knowledge and interests, there is a greater likelihood that community members will actively participate in the research process and assume responsibility for its successful implementation. As noted above, this is beneficial to the community in terms of empowerment and increased CBO capacity. It is also beneficial in scientific terms in the sense that it raises the truth-value of the findings because it brings additional lenses and critical perspectives through which the results are examined and under-
stood. Yet this raises the issue of potentially biased results or interpreting findings in such a way as to reinforce an ideological agenda present among particular community stakeholders. This requires that we continuously and deliberately consider and challenge the assumptions and perspectives of all the participants in the research process—both academy- and community-based. Such a process requires developing trust and norms of mutual respect, which may be supported through constructing safe spaces for this work to occur. Given the likely power imbalance between the academy and community, such a space—and its attendant norms—is likely to be more effective if located in the community.

Having emphasized the distinct and context-bound nature of undertaking an assessment, the authors also stress the need for gathering data as systematically as possible while utilizing rigorously defined definitions and protocols. It does nobody much good to gather unrepresentative data, attained through biased instruments, from too few cases, measuring outcomes that are invalid, based on protocols that produce unreliable measures. Stated affirmatively, we want to use data gathering and analysis procedures that will produce findings most useful for directing future actions. We also need to pay attention to training novice researchers—such as students and community residents—who may be participating in the process, to ensure that data is reliable.

**CBR is Guided by Grounded Theory**

When we undertake a social change initiative, we are operating with a model of social change in mind (Stoecker, 2002). These grounded theories of change can be understood as three types: intergroup conflict, constructivist, and equilibrium reform. The types of programs that exist in the community—to collectively organize resources to alter power relations, organize around identities or symbols of oppression, or reallocate goods and services—fit each model respectively. The social change initiative particulars may draw on multiple models and certainly contain variations of these three prototypes of social change. It is crucial for the researchers as well as social change advocates to be conscious of the grounded theory of change guiding their efforts, and deliberate about how their results feed back into change activities. For the academic-based partner, this imposes an additional need to be sensitive to the community’s model of change so that results can be interpreted to inform the process.

**CBR is Multidimensional**

Already discussed are the meta- and programmatic-level assessments and the types of change they influence. By multidimensionality, the authors are referring to the different opportunities for change found within the programmatic level of assessments, due to the multiple stakeholders and interests being served through such an initiative. Any given change effort may seek to empower individuals or collectives, enhance the capacity of an individual or classes of people, improve program efficiencies in terms of operations or services delivery, change the relations among stakeholders within an institutional setting, and/or alter policies that affect any of these. No one particular research methodology or instrument can possibly inform all of these purposes. Even multiple methodologies are likely to address some of these perspectives better than others, while leaving others relatively or completely unaddressed. We must therefore balance the priorities of assessments with the resources and expertise available when designing any particular study, and recognize that it is likely to provide only partial answers at best. This further emphasizes the iterative and cyclical nature of this work.

**A Framework of CBR Assessments: Three Dimensions**

The framework was designed to help CBR practitioners better understand various types of assessment strategies used to measure social change. In this framework, three dimensions are specified for researchers to consider when deciding what assessments are most appropriate for their particular social change activity: 1) the level of analysis to be undertaken; 2) the type of change goal assessed; and 3) the short-term process and longer-term effect outcomes. The three dimensions of level, goal, and outcomes produce an ideal-type matrix of 24 different types of assessments. Figure 2 portrays this typology graphically. Although a given assessment will have a primary objective, based on the stakeholders’ priorities, many assessments will attempt to investigate more than one type of outcome. In fact, one of our purposes for offering this conceptual framework is to encourage CBR researchers to explore the numerous assessments that can be undertaken in a particular circumstance to assure that the appropriate research questions are being asked and that the wide range of methodologies available are being considered for use in that context.

**Levels of Analysis**

In their excellent “Evaluation Handbook,” the W.K. Kellogg Foundation (2002) defines three levels of analysis: the individual, client-focused level; the program and system level; and system change
and comprehensive community-wide level (pp. 29-34). The authors find this a helpful starting place and refer to these distinctions as micro, meso, and macro levels of analysis.

**Micro.** Micro refers to outcomes of individuals influenced by the social change activity. These individuals could include those who receive services via a program, or are trained as part of a social change effort (Hohmann & Shear, 2002; Saegert & Winkel, 1996; Schoepf, 1993; Van Vugt, 1994). For example, understanding the influence of a program on the teachers being trained in a particular instructional method, or community residents who acquire computer skills as part of a job training program, are included in the micro level of outcomes.

**Meso.** The meso level focuses on changes that occur in programs and/or communities resulting from social change initiatives. The meso-level assessment directs us to examine outcomes for organizations, or whole classes or categories of people, in order to determine if the change initiative is actually altering the organization in ways expected to enhance social change (Chambers, 1997; Dahlberg, Farrell, & Meyer, 1996; Julian, 2000; W.K. Kellogg Foundation, 2002). For example, Dahlberg, Farrell and Meyer’s study (1996) of a youth violence prevention program focused on outcomes for reducing fights and expulsions from the school and the overall school climate, as perceived by teachers, students, parents, and administrators.

**Macro.** The macro-level signifies those broader structures that impact individuals’ lives, such as social policies, local, state and federal laws, and community systems. At this level of analysis, the assessment will have to consider larger populations of people from an entire community, or from several communities (Jenkins & Bennett, 1999; National Neighborhood Indicators Partnership, 2002; Schorr, 1989). Examples of macro assessments would include collaborative studies with former welfare recipients in multiple localities to determine the impacts of welfare-to-work legislation on quality of life; or studies of empowerment zones across several cities to determine their effects on job creation in low-income communities.

**Types of Social Change Goals**

There are four types of outcome goals sought by social change initiatives: to enhance the capacity of individuals or organizations; to increase the efficiency of an organization’s operations (i.e. to deliver goods and services better); to empower constituents to become more effective agents of change on their own behalf; and to alter policies or structural arrangements to benefit the disadvantaged. The authors’ assessments would measure one or more of these outcomes in order to determine whether the change efforts are succeeding and perhaps offer guidance as to how they might be altered to do so more effectively.

**Enhance Capacity.** Change efforts may seek to increase the skills, resources, or attributes of a particular group of individuals. An assessment would measure the increase and provide guidance in achieving these ends more effectively (Fine, 1996; Greenwood & Levin, 1998; Lagana & Rubin, 2002; Miller, 1986). Such a study also may be conducted at the organizational level, to assess whether the group has increased its capacity to achieve its goals. An example of this type of assessment would be to examine how well a community organization that provides child care services to low-income families also provides job training and certification opportunities for community members to become licensed child care providers, thereby increasing the number of qualified childcare providers in the community.

**Increase Efficiency.** This type of assessment focuses on the quality and effectiveness of service delivery to its target population. Whereas enhancing capacity refers to increasing an organizations’ ability to deliver more and better resources, this goal refers to an organization utilizing its current resources more effectively to deliver on its promised objectives. Such an assessment would determine whether the services are being provided efficiently and in accord with quality standards of delivery (Darby et al., 1997; Guba & Lincoln, 1989; Patton, 1997). An example of an assessment focusing on program efficiency would be whether a free health clinic is reaching out to provide health care to its intended target population in the community, whether the clients are satisfied with these services, and whether this care is effective in reducing negative health indicators. Such as assessment can lead to positive social change to the extent that
it results in more effective delivery of health care services, and the health of more members of the underserved target population is improved.

**Empower Constituents.** Many social change efforts seek to empower particular groups of disadvantaged people so that they are better skilled, experienced, informed, and organized to achieve the goals they determine for themselves (Brunner & Guzman, 1989; Schoepf, 1993; Travers, 1996). This typically entails organizing a defined constituency around particular efforts to increase their quality of life. An example of an assessment around an empowerment campaign would be to determine the extent to which a set of community residents knows about a redevelopment issue and participates in activities to shape those efforts so that they benefit from them, rather than being displaced.

**Alter Structures.** Change efforts that seek to alter institutional operations, or power relations to improve the life chances of the disadvantaged, are perhaps the most difficult to assess (Schoepf, 1993; Sorensen, 1996; W.K. Kellogg Foundation, 2002). Such efforts are likely to achieve change slowly, often incrementally, and are contingent on many factors beyond a particular mobilization effort. Nevertheless, assessments are needed to study such changes and provide feedback to actors seeking to achieve them. For example, an assessment of a community’s educational reform effort to improve children’s education by implementing a charter school program would assess children’s educational achievement in both charter and public schools, along with teachers’, students’, and parents’ satisfaction with the changes, and their associated costs.

**Process and Effect Outcomes**

For each type of social change effort, assessments may focus on the process through which the change activity is being implemented, and/or the effects it has on the target population. Assessment procedures should also be open to observe and document processes and effects that were not originally intended or designed to occur, but which may have arisen nonetheless. Analyses that focus on processes occur contemporaneously with the change effort to document and evaluate their effectiveness. Analyses of effects usually occur after the change effort to document and evaluate their effectiveness. Analyses may focus on the process through which the change agents seek.

**Processes.** Assessments may examine the operations of a change-seeking organization or service delivery agency to determine the extent to which these activities are in accord with standards, or how well they accord with the stakeholders’ perceptions of the quality of these operations (Haire-Joshu, Brownson, Schechter, Nanney, Houston, & Auslander, 2001; Julian, 2000; Patton, 1997). For example, a food bank may wish to determine how many tons of food is redistributed through its operations on a monthly basis; how well its clients are satisfied with the quality of groceries they receive and their treatment while at the facility; and how well-known their activities are among low-income residents of a targeted geographic area.

**Effects.** Assessments are also designed to document the extent to which the desired outcomes are also achieved through a change initiative (Banks & Mangan, 1999; Hohmann & Shear, 2002; Saegert & Winkel, 1996). In the food bank example, the outcomes of interest would be the amount of food delivered to families in need and the effects of these additional groceries on household nutritional intake. However, should it be the case that some families are diverting other financial resources away from food—allowing the food bank’s groceries to substitute for, rather than expand or extend the family nutritional intake—the food bank director, staff, and board would want to know of such occurrences in order to determine how to prevent them.

**Example of an Assessment within the CBR Framework**

Thus far, discussion has focused on understanding separate dimensions of the CBR assessment framework. The following example helps illustrate how this framework can guide assessing social change initiatives at multiple levels. Note that the following example does not include every cell in the hypothesized CBR assessment matrix. As has been articulated previously, it is unlikely that any one initiative will entail using all framework aspects. Instead the framework offers options to be considered when designing research that is intended to be part of a social change process.

**Example**

In a study of a youth violence prevention program, researchers undertake an evaluation to determine the effectiveness of a conflict resolution-training program used in an after school program. Since the program goal is to impart a set of skills to the youth participants that helps resolve disputes without violence, the evaluators created a pre- and post-test design to ascertain whether youths were learning the skills being taught in the program. The evaluators met with the program director to define the research goals and discuss types of measures to be used in evaluating youths’ acquisition of conflict resolution skills. The researchers worked out a quasi-experimental design with the program direc-
tor—enabling the researchers to pre- and post-test youths that would undergo training and compare them to a control group who did not undergo training—and pilot-tested their measurement instruments on a small youth volunteer group, hearing their input on the instruments and making revisions accordingly in response to youths’ feedback.

By traditional research standards, this is a very nice experimental design that is sensitive to the program director concerns and integrates youth input. The program goal is to enhance youth capacity to resolve conflicts nonviolently, teaching them skills that will improve the quality of their lives by reducing risk of violence. It is clearly a micro-level study focused on outcome effects. After conducting the study, the researchers find that the youth who have been through the program do express greater familiarity with conflict resolution concepts and techniques than those not in the program, and that this increased over the time of their program participation. By classical evaluation terms, the program would be judged a success and perhaps the funder would continue or even expand the program’s funding due to its documented success. The program director and the researchers would congratulate themselves for an effective collaboration and score this as a success in terms of winning greater funding to provide this service to even more youths.

In light of the authors’ CBR assessment framework, we would suggest that the researchers might consider several additional assessment types that could offer greater insight into their program and its impact. For example, researchers might consider assessing the macro-level impact of the program. They could accomplish this, for instance, by examining the juvenile arrest rate for the community in which this program operates and compare it with another similar community, perhaps finding no difference in arrest rates for juvenile crimes. Further, we might learn from interviews with the young people that have been through the program, that they are just as likely to get into disputes with other youths outside the context of the program, or to be arrested for various offenses. By incorporating additional research methodologies, looking at the same questions by asking them from different perspectives with respect to level and outcomes, we are able to contribute additional knowledge to guide the community’s efforts to reduce youth violence. How do we understand better what is going on here?

Further, we should reconsider one of CBR’s basic principles, that of collaboration. Clearly, the research is only nominally collaborative as the youths, parents, and other community stakeholders are minimally, or not at all, included in developing the assessment. The youths would be quick to explain that of course their responses on the post-test “improved” over their scores on the pre-test because they know how they are supposed to answer the test questions after the training. This has very little connection to actual behavior, as they might point out, because the program and the testing instruments are undertaken in one context while their “real lives” occur outside of the program. The program may provide them with some knowledge, but it has done little to create practiced and confident practitioners of new skills and nothing to support their use in the community. While this is a basic research design dilemma, having input from the youth who have a collaborative relationship with the researchers could address this problem. As the evaluation stands, the goal of empowering the youths has been ignored by the program and the evaluators, and as a result, the structures of youth violence have not been altered.

The assessment matrix points to multiple outcome goals that could be used for undertaking a program assessment. In addition to developing measures for youth’s capacity enhancement, the evaluators could have developed procedures for assessing the other outcomes of improving the program’s efficiency, ascertaining the youth’s sense of empowerment regarding violence prevention, and measuring the structural outcomes. In addition, the researchers could have adopted a more process-oriented component to their research, examining how the youths interact with each other and within their communities. Finally, the youths and their parents could have been invited into the assessment process to solicit their views on what the program means to them and their expectations for the program’s operations. Thus, this illustration points to the fact that because the research design considered only a single context of in-program evaluation—a single cell in our conceptual framework—the researchers have neglected to measure important levels of change (macro level), important change goals (alter structures), and important outcomes (lowering violent behavior in the community) that they should be studying.

**Decision-Tree for Assessment**

Turning now to considering how to determine the appropriate assessments for a particular social change initiative, Figure 3 displays a decision-tree that illustrates options researchers have at each level of analysis to help guide the research they conduct. The decision-tree provides a structure for the decisions one makes, but with each branch being a prompt for answering a series of questions regarding the needs and desires of the social change agents. The goal of the decision-tree is to
simulate a road map for navigating the CBR assessment framework. For the decision making process it is suggested to work in the order of first defining the initiative level that one is assessing, then uncovering the most important type of outcomes that the stakeholders are interested in, and finally focusing on whether it is important to investigate the process, the effects, or both. This sequencing provides a rational model for narrowing the scope of study, leading to appropriate research designs and considerations, while also encouraging flexibility and sensitivity toward other appropriate designs to enable attention to related cells in the conceptual framework.

Recall that assessments can be divided into micro, meso, or macro levels. To assess the level of the outcome assessment, the main actors are identified in the social change initiative. In other words, the authors would answer the question, “Who or what is attempting to be changed through this initiative?” This may be simple to uncover, or may be difficult because initiatives often work at several levels at once. For instance, if one is assessing a Head Start program, one may focus on individual level project outcomes, but also may investigate the Head Start program’s effectiveness as a unit and its impacts for empowering the parents. Having this kind of framework allows researchers to work on multiple levels simultaneously by following more than one track at once.

The second step is to determine which type of outcome assessment will be most useful for the program. Deciding upon this issue involves answering a number of questions that engage the stakeholders in the social change initiative. As is consistent with CBR principles, the work that is conducted in CBR assessments should be useful to the organization. Therefore, undertaking an investigation of what types of outcomes the stakeholders are interested in is essential for successfully using the CBR methodology to conduct assessments. What types of things do the leaders of the initiative want to know? What types of information do the constituents of the change initiative want to know? What are the goals and priorities of the initiative itself?
What resources do the constituents and leaders have to offer to investigate these questions? Deciding upon the goals of the assessments could be simple if all parties are similarly focused; however, often the leaders and constituents disagree on the goals and purposes of the initiative. Nonetheless, this may also guide the researchers to the assessment types that are useful for social change to occur. For instance, if there exist great disagreement between leaders of the group and the community constituents of the change, it may indicate that community empowerment would be a useful type of outcome to study. The goal of this research would be to focus on what has the potential to bring about more effective social change, as defined by its stakeholders.

The third step is to address whether the process or effect is most important to assess in a particular social change initiative. Once again, focusing on the needs of those stakeholders in the initiative is the most important factor in deciding what is important to assess. We may wish to know how the change actors and their constituents or clients interact with one another, and what resources they bring in addressing a change goal. Alternatively, we may wish to know how effective a change strategy is by measuring altered resource allocations or change in institutional practices. Although understanding both the processes articulated in the change initiative, and the effect that the initiative has on the different types of outcomes is ideal, it is also important to understand the context in which the initiative takes place. The decision to assess the process rather than the effect of an initiative may be influenced by many factors, including the desire of the organization or outside forces, such as the requirements of the initiative’s funders. It may be that the community being organized or served is more concerned with the process of how they are interacting with one another and other key stakeholders, or being treated by agency staff, leading to their greater interest in a process assessment. These decisions have to be made in the context of the particular social change initiative and with the various stakeholders’ needs, goals, and requirements in mind.

The fourth step in assessing social change initiatives is to decide on specific research methodologies to use. Specific disciplines often encourage and support a limited number of research methodologies, thereby excluding other methodologies. That said, it is important for researchers to recognize the spectrum of research methodologies, both quantitative and qualitative, which may be appropriate to their specific questions and goals. Methodologies may include survey, ethnography (Cozby, 2001), participant observation, direct observation, interview, content analysis, unobtrusive measuring, oral history, and others. Here it is suggested that researchers step outside of their disciplinary comfort zone and think about what methodology best answers the questions.

Conclusions

The intent in creating this conceptual map and decision tree for CBR assessments is threefold:

1. To encourage CBR researchers to think broadly about the social change goals of the initiative they are assessing, recognizing that studies should examine the multiple goals sought by the actors (i.e., moving across the set of change goals). This recognizes that each stakeholder in the process may have multiple goals and that there are multiple stakeholders involved in any such initiative. In addition, each outcome assessment may consider both the process, and effects of, a change initiative. And, although the level of analysis may be relatively fixed by the nature of the actors involved, we should at least consider how the change initiative influences the larger community or context in which it is located as well as the individual, small group, and organizational units involved in the process (i.e., moving up and down the level dimension).

2. In mapping out the decision-tree for utilizing a conceptual map, the authors have spelled out a set of questions and issues that the research partners should discuss. These are useful to help guide developing the kinds of methodologies and tools that could be applied in a particular assessment. Also indicated are some of the pressures that might be experienced by different stakeholders in the process, thereby offering some insights into likely sources of disagreements over assessment designs and procedures.

3. For academic researchers coming to CBR from disciplinary basis, this framework hopefully provides a richer understanding of how one’s own discipline’s tools and methodologies can contribute to CBR assessments. At the same time, this framework points out the need for reaching beyond one’s own discipline to seek out methods, instruments, and tools that help us to understand better social change processes. This framework also helps us to communicate across the numerous fields of evaluation research found in different disciplines and practice fields. As the practice of CBR grows and the research reported on in disciplinary and interdisciplinary journals multiplies, there will be a growing challenge to share results across disciplines and for academically-based researchers to learn from others’ work who are not in their discipline. The framework and
decision-tree developed here provides a common
text for facilitating the sharing of knowledge
across academic boundaries.
Marullo, Cooke, Willis, Rollins, Burke, Bonilla, and Waldref


Authors

SAM MARULLO is associate professor and chair of the Department of Sociology and Anthropology at Georgetown University. He is also director of the Community Research and Learning (CoRAL) Network of Washington DC. He regularly teaches a year-long, community-based research seminar for undergraduates, Project D.C., which is the capstone course for students with a concentration in Social Justice Analysis.

DEANNA COOKE is assistant director of the Office of Research at Georgetown University’s Center for Social Justice Research, Teaching and Service, and co-director of the Community Research and Learning Network. She is a community psychologist and conducts both basic research and community-based research.

JASON WILLIS is a senior at the Catholic University of America in Washington, DC, where he majors in psychology and education. He has worked with the Community Research and Learning Network for two years and is currently its grants and information manager. Jason has made presentations in several professional meetings and has written a reflection manual, Reflex, for student tutoring groups.

ALEXANDRA ROLLINS will receive her B.A. in Sociology from Georgetown University in May 2003. Alex is the student representative to the Sociology Department and is a representative to the student forum of the America Sociological Association. She is currently the program coordinator of the Community Research and Learning (CoRAL) Network.

JACQUELINE BURKE is a junior at Georgetown University, majoring in political economy. She enjoys working with children and participates in mentorship programs. Jacqueline has been an assistant program coordinator with the CoRAL Network.

PAUL BONILLA is a sophomore at Georgetown University studying Government and Portuguese. Paul has worked with the Community Research and Learning Network in Washington, DC as an assistant program coordinator. In addition, Paul has been actively involved in Operation Smile, a non-profit organization that repairs facial deformities in 21 countries, and currently helps manage student involvement in Operation Smile in the United States and abroad.

VANESSA WALDREF graduated from Georgetown University with a B.A. in Sociology and minor in Justice and Peace Studies and Theology. At Georgetown she served as program coordinator of the Program on Justice and Peace and was president of the Georgetown Solidarity Committee, a student organization advocating local and international labor rights. She currently works as an advocate and organizer with the Welfare Rights Organizing Coalition through the Jesuit Volunteer Corps in Seattle, WA.