If Thomas Kuhn (1962) is correct, a field of inquiry develops in stages. Some members of a field of inquiry recognize anomalies in the foundational beliefs and seek better explanations of problems, such as health and economic disparities, and practices of inquiry about them. A few distinctive achievements or discoveries provide the new approaches greater legitimacy. Eventually, a critical mass of information and researchers develops and the alternative explanations and research practices offer canons of practice, which mark an advanced stage of the development of an emerging field of inquiry.

This special issue of the Michigan Journal and Meredith Minkler and Nina Wallerstein's edited volume, Community-Based Participatory Research for Health, offer evidence that the field of community-based participatory research (CBPR) has reached an important developmental point as a field. The forthcoming Community-Based Research and Higher Education: Principles and Practices (Strand, Marullo, Cutforth, Stoecker, & Donohue, 2003); the recently published The Handbook of Action Research (Reason & Bradbury, 2001); and Ernest Stringer's recent work (1999) and forthcoming work on participatory action research in higher education provide further evidence that we have exemplars of the methods of participatory research and canons for their practice, even if we cannot as yet agree on a single name. Whatever the nuances among the terms, there is coherence. We are talking about research that

- brings academic researchers into collaborative efforts with community residents and leaders to produce knowledge;
- engages all involved in a co-learning process;
- takes a systemic perspective;
- builds community groups’ capacity to conduct needed changes;
- challenges the existing canons of disciplinary research and pedagogical practice and;
- balances research and action (p. 5).

There is much to celebrate in this developing field and in the appearance of Minkler and Wallerstein’s book, but also we have reason for concern about the anomalies that beset any paradigm, even a new one. Let us celebrate first.

Celebrating a Milestone

Minkler and Wallerstein have provided an invaluable volume for those of us concerned with CBPR. We find in their work not only models of discovery and their methods but, as all new innovative theories provide, ties with other serious scholarship that transcends disciplinary boundaries. Charles Foucault’s concerns with repressive and productive or relational power find a place as an epistemological assumption of CBPR. Jurgen Habermas’s insights into the political nature of communication, and hence scholarship, backlight the meaning and methods of CBPR. James Scott’s fine work on domination and the arts of resistance gives us insight into the political nature of “local knowledge” including the astute calculations of when to go public with a hidden transcript. Naturally, references to Paolo Freire and Myles Horton and their work on education as liberation pervade the volume. Their work also provides references and tribute to the work over the past several decades that pioneered the praxis of the field.

The health in these chapters is the public health of Dan E. Beauchamp (1976), whose work incorporated public health into social justice and explained public health as a social movement rather than an area of individual competence and professional expertise. Beauchamp expresses the expansive definition of health, which the World Health Organization uses—health is a state of complete...
physical, mental, and social well being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity. Some chapters have a primary focus on health interventions or conditions, but these chapters’ generalizations could apply to hunger, housing, or environmental quality as well as health.

Other chapters take the long-lens view of health recently developed further by advances in social epidemiology, which looks beyond behaviors to understand the social causes of illness and differentials in health status. CBPR looks also to the social causes of human problems and differentials in their occurrence. It is for these reasons that the title reads “for health” rather than “on health.” The book’s emphasis on public health equates to a concern with the health of the public including the maladies of institutions and research practices.

Another set of chapters provide a conceptual background and sociology of CBPR that should find their way into the research methods of any program and the hearts of academics who aspire to reflective practice. These chapters are retrospective, naturally, but Stephen Fawcett et al.’s chapter provides a prospective glimpse not only of the Internet’s role into CBPR research, but CBPR’s role in creating tools and transferring skills that community groups can use on their own. Caroline Wang does the same in her chapter on documentary photography.

Part I, the most theoretical of the book, offers the conceptual origins and historical development of CBPR, including principles of practice. Every discussion of principles throughout the book has a companion discussing the issues that its practice raises. For example, the principle, “CBPR facilitates collaborative, equitable partnerships in all phases of the research” (p. 56) raises the issue that “Participation in all phases of the research does not mean that everyone is involved in the same way in all activities” (p. 63). Chapter 2 is a particularly useful synthesis of many of the streams of inquiry that feed CBPR and provides incentive to visit some of its headwaters—Habermas, Foucault, and Freire.

Part II presents the ideas of researchers who have dealt with CBPR’s complexities. They offer honest reflections on the difficulty of dealing with racism, privilege, power, and other divisive social institutions to reach an increased degree of trust and relevance. How do we move from studies about people to researching with them? How do we recognize that, as pure as our intentions might be, our community partners may present only the part of their knowledge that they want to share (p. 87) because they may have reason not to trust us, coming as we do from institutions far from and exclusive of them?

Part II chapters also contrast the ideal type of CBPR and its practice. Randy Stoecker, for example, contrasts the ideal of the community origins and conduct of CBPR with the different roles of academics as initiators, consultants, and collaborators. The chapters of Part V also suggest the praxis of theory and experience with CBPR. They recount CBPR with and by diverse populations—low-income residents of Detroit’s East Side; Cambodian girls in Long Beach, California; and a transgendered community in San Francisco. More than case studies of CBPR, they are useful to illustrate the issues raised on race and privilege, and achieving community partnerships in the other Part II chapters.

Chapters in Parts III and IV provide insights into assessing the strengths and needs of communities; developing tools, the Internet, and methods; and new perspectives through photography and exhibitions. Part IV chapters on choice points in CBPR and the ethical issues of research raise the anomalies of power that other approaches to research ignore. Thus, these chapters belong in methods courses in academic programs of every field.

CBPR’s focus on action resulting from the knowledge it produces distinguishes it from other forms of inquiry. Thus, Part VI examines CBPR’s role in making a problem into an issue and an issue into an agenda item for public action. The other chapters provide a spectrum, from advocacy for the community reintegration of drug users, to the direct action of hotel workers to acquire information and act on it. Participatory evaluation also relates CBPR to action, as Jane Springett explains. Her chapter not only contrasts participatory methods with other evaluation modes, it provides direction for a common and crying need of community organizations—formative evaluation to assist rather than to monitor.

The editors did a remarkable job of providing signposts for readers along the way. Each Part has ample introduction to frame the chapters that follow. Almost every chapter has a format that gives the reader a clear idea of what is to come and articulates the chapter’s general and particular arguments. Thus, theoretical chapters ground themselves in examples and the case study chapters offer generalizations.

The editors warn that a reader who wants a “discussion of various critical theories and other perspectives that have helped shape participatory research approaches is likely to be disappointed” (p. 9). That may be the case, but the volume takes us to the edge of a grand theory repeatedly, and the treatment of concepts, race and privilege, choice, and evaluation bring the reader a synthesis of the sources that should remedy any disappointment.

The editors also provide a dialogue among the
chapter contributors. We learn, by the editor’s frequent cross-references, how one chapter relates to another in the same section and to a distant chapter in another section of the book. The editors have also kept the repetitive nature of the introductory statements about CBPR to a minimum. They might have provided us synthesis in a concluding chapter; a framework fashioned from the several lists of characteristics, for example, would have been useful.

Markers of Remaining Anomalies

There is much to hail in this new book but also reason to pause and reflect on the new challenges for CBPR.

Irony of the Book

For all its discussion of researcher-community collaboration, this book weighs in heavily on the researchers’ side. The editors have as their goal: “to provide a highly accessible text that will stimulate practitioners, students, and academics... as they engage—intellectually and, ideally, in practice with community partners—in this alternative approach to collaborative inquiry for action to eliminate...disparities” (p. 9). It is hard to imagine a community partner, such as the leaders of hotel workers or a community environmental group, getting through the book.

The book’s purpose leads to this irony. Minkler and Wallerstein make the point several times that despite the emphasis on community, CBPR often needs privileged and trained researchers from outside the community. Community partners, however, more often know their business of organizing for change better than researchers know how to assist them. The book aims therefore, primarily but not exclusively, to make researchers aware of their privilege and the power implied in the methods they use and in the institutions in which they work. It also makes them aware of something their community partners already know very well—the difficulty of transgressing “complex layers of race, gender, sexuality, and ability differences” (p. xiv) to be effective and ethical partners with local efforts to achieve some small part of a global understanding of social justice and sustainable development.

Their purpose—to better prepare researchers to engage in collaborative research efforts with community partners—remains a problem because of and despite their significant achievement. As much as we should welcome the protocols and guidelines for CBPR, which appear in the appendices, they present a problem because of the temptation to mistake tools for the work itself, and to seek shortcuts to the long and hard process of relationship building in CBRP. Ironically, the success of CBPR and its practitioners present the problem of continuing to make problems for others and ourselves.

Consequently, despite the wonderful examples of CBPR for and with community partners, we still have the challenge to develop methods that will permit community groups to conduct research of their own and by themselves. Only by striving to turn research for and with them into tools that community partners can use to do their own research will we really be pushing the cutting edge of concepts such as “empowerment,” “community development,” “community organizing,” “representation,” and “participation.” As we celebrate outstanding achievements about research with community partners, are we developing tools that other groups could take up and replicate with or without academic partners? Research not only with community partners but also of their own, enabled by the tools that CBPR researchers have worked out with them? Yolanda Wadsworth (1991, 1997) is one person conducting this work; she receives notice only once in these pages.

The irony or anomaly, in Kuhn’s terms, that the new developments in CBPR present us is to prevent them from becoming methods, much less a paradigm, that legitimate another set of “experts” and thus curtail the democratic transformation of producing information.

Where Do the Markers Point?

The editors make note of another irony. The book comes at a time when—despite the infrastructure of support from foundation and government agencies, community-based programs, academic recognition including journals, and networks of practice—public health has turned to “hard science.” The terrorist attacks of 9/11 have exacerbated this turn with new funding streams going to support old practices of public health (p. 9).

This is more than a problem of public health because as Avedis Donabedien, a stalwart of public health observed, “a health care system reflects the values adopted by a society and the ways in which it has chosen to conduct its affairs” (Quoted in Couto, 2002, p. 220). The editors point out a problem for the social capital of civil society. Robert Putnam took this perspective, and the work of the social epidemiologists, and advanced the case that social capital is a public health issue. “The evidence for the health consequences of social connectedness is as strong today as was evidence for the health consequences of smoking at the time of the first surgeon general’s report on smoking” (2000, p. 7).

The change in public health, which the editors cite, signals changes in social connectedness.
Terrorism sows seeds of mistrust and fear, as do some anti-terrorist policies. At such times, people and institutions are much more likely to revert to what is familiar and to be less tolerant of the unfamiliar. Yet, the best antidote to fear and mistrust is CBPR’s emphasis on relationship building, shared power, and bridging social divides. Ironically, CBPR’s underlying assumptions are more important since the editors began their work precisely because there may be fewer acceptances of them. This suggests the importance of teaching people to transgress and of conscientization—Paulo Freire’s concepts frequently invoked in this book.

Making the Future a Problem

If CBPR did not have enough troubles within its institutional, social, and political environment, its success brings a new set of issues. Budd Hall, a pioneer in this field and author of the Foreword—surely a well-deserved honor—is dean of the faculty of education at the University of Victoria. Minkler is assistant vice chancellor for national and community service at the University of California, Berkeley. Laborers in the vineyard have reached the position of authority about which they used to warn others. As we gain authority individually, our capacity to make the future a problem diminishes. This is a trade off. We need to welcome the institutional place that many CBPR researchers have reached and to have confidence that they will continue to bring about institutional change; even Freire took an administrative position in his last years.

But as our rank advances, our constituency broadens, and as Stoecker found out, we may find ourselves “working with bankers, foundation officials, and large nonprofits that [do] not share [a] desire to transform all power structures to participatory democracies and community-controlled economies” (p. 99). The editors have taken the most radical path least compatible with institutional stability—action research conducted in formal organizations would have been a much safer route compatible with success within institutions. The “community-based” nature of this volume is serious. It distinguishes it from other approaches to action research in organizations (Argyris, Putnam, & Smith, 1985; Greenwood & Levin, 1998; Senge, 1990), and aligns more with the CBPR from the southern hemisphere, increasing the risks for academics.

Success in CBPR, in particular, challenges us personally and professionally to continue to make the future a problem to the dominant class, in Freire’s terms:

The future is essentially problematic. We have different possibilities for the future, not just one....The dominant class thinks of a future different than I do. I believe that we are engaged permanently in changing or preserving the present. The future depends on what we change or preserve. This is the future: to fight for change or to fight in favor of keeping the present. (1995, p. 2)

Certainly one can work to “problematize” the future within institutions. Freire’s warning is not about “selling out.” He told us, I think, not to take acceptance and authority as a certain future but as a means to continue to problematize it.

The Long Fight in the Institutions

In that spirit, let me point out a problem within the book. The editors cite Yellow Creek Concerned Citizens (YCCC) work as “one of the classic examples of popular epidemiology in action” (p. 10) and the Woburn, Massachusetts case as “perhaps the most celebrated example of CBPR” (p. 345). Both cases illustrate the book’s emphasis on relating CBPR to social and policy change but the cases span the boundaries of participatory research. Those boundaries extend from research with and by a community group to research for it.

In both cases, creek-side or streetwise epidemiology indicated unusual environmental degradation and health problems, and related them to a common source. People in both places organized around what they now understood to be a public problem and sought redress from public and company officials. Eventually, officials told both groups to get “proof” of their problems.

The YCCC group got help from the Vanderbilt Center for Health Services (VCHS); I was director at the time, which used an organizing model (Couto, 1986). Students trained local residents in survey techniques and the VCHS staff remained in contact with them as staff analyzed the data. When criticized—a department head told me, “No self-respecting epidemiologist would be associated with this”—I stopped calling it epidemiology and referred to it as community-based health risk assessment. The report went directly to the YCCC for its use as proof in their efforts to stop the contamination of Yellow Creek and to acquire a safe water supply.

The Department of Biostatistics of Harvard’s School of Public Health assisted the Woburn group and used an applied research model. It used a double-blind interviewing method by training volunteers, none of whom came from the area of risk, who did not know if they were talking to a person in the control or experimental group. In order to avoid a charge of bias, the researchers did not share data in the process of study with the Woburn group.
and only reluctantly agreed to share its findings the night before a press conference when the Harvard researchers released a report of their findings. The Harvard team used a rigorous scientific method, albeit without the usual external funding, and produced a set of findings for the public and scientific community. Despite their best efforts to maintain the science of this study, the Harvard group members were disappointed when journals would not accept their paper for publication because newspapers had reported the study. The Harvard group ran into criticism similar to the Vanderbilt study. Most telling of all, epidemiologists at Harvard criticized the study because biostatisticians had conducted it.

In both cases, the “science” of the research was sufficient to provide the community groups more evidence of their health problems. Efforts at policy and social change need “proof” of a problem somewhere along the organizing process. The more rigorous the approach, however, the more expensive the study becomes and the less space it provides for the members of the community at risk. An organizing approach reduces costs and involves community members but engenders more criticism of its findings within the academy.

Politically, the research of participatory research must be rigorous. Academics undermine their community partners without the value-added of their scholarly training. Proof, however, has a range. The politics of knowledge surfaces more often because of the public and social costs and liability they imply, as they did at both Yellow Creek and Woburn, than the methods employed to acquire it. Proof in cases of public action does not have to reach a peer-sanctioned, statistically significant probability of the non-random association of two factors. It has to show that the degree of risk for harm is such that a reasonable person would avoid it. The political test for proof of risk in participatory research is the likelihood that a reasonable person, including epidemiologists and other experts, would switch places with the people of the community at risk, drink and bathe in the well water along Yellow Creek, or buy a home in Woburn’s exposure areas.

This does not change the need for rigor but it shifts its criteria and the arena of conflict. As academics, our task is to take lessons from the community back to the campus and to bring our training to the community. Our classes, papers, and journals offer us the place to change our disciplinary focus and professional practice that often “colonizes” knowledge and hides the social origins of the poverty of people living in areas of wealth (p. xiii). As we work to legitimize local struggles for justice with knowledge, we need also to de-legitimate those forms of knowledge that perpetuate injustice.

Stoecker, as well as Bradbury and Reason, deal explicitly with the personal and professional implications of one aspect of that de-legitimation task. In moving research from for a group to with and by a group, we move from a priesthood of knowledgeable experts to a demystified realm of knowledge production. Within this span, we also come to grips with the problems of the institutionalized forms of knowledge that prefer value-free and action-absent findings, except the need for more research.

Having won a place at the table, we still have the task of making a problem of the way things are done there. Perhaps, service-learning earned no greater approbation than the recommendation that Robert Putnam gave it as a means for the creation of social capital. After several hundreds of pages of analysis of the decline of civil society, Putnam offers service-learning as one of several remedies (2000, pp. 306-08). Service-learning continues to have its problems that need attention. More importantly however, we got to where we are with service-learning because some of us made problems with community service and before that some college presidents and students made problems with its absence on U.S. campuses. We are where we are today also because some of us made a problem with service-learning and sought more and better ways to integrate community-based work into classes and curricula. We had allies in those people who made problems of scholarship and crafted a vision of a scholarship of engagement (Couto, 2000).

We still have problems to make. For example, the institutional review of research to protect human subjects only begins to deal with the ethics of research. In this volume, we find a harbinger of continuing ethical issues: selecting an issue when the community is divided; the inclusion and exclusion of team members and study participants; insider and outsider issues; dilemmas in sharing the findings (pp. 250-58); and, one that I would add, meeting our promises to community groups. We have to make a problem about problem-making and to step into the second, third, and fourth dimensions of power to explain the bias embedded in language and institutions about what is and is not a problem and what measures are or are not appropriate to deal with them (p. 38, 352). We have to make problems about the rewards and incentives of colleges and universities. Sarena D. Seifer’s contribution, tucked away as Appendix D, deals with tenure and promotion practices and CBPR. By including this material, the editors anticipated another next area of problem making for us.
Espertado

We make a problem of the future, even the future of CBPR because as human beings, Freire asserted, we are “ontologically amazed” and “epistemologically curious.” Espertado, a Portuguese word that combines surprise with feelings of fear and adventure, signifies life. “In the moment that we no longer have amazement in the sense espertado, we are dead” (Freire, 1995). This theme comes up repeatedly in this fine book. Orlando Fals-Borda urges us to understand our world better and thus to “reenchant” it (p. 201).

We should have espertado for this book. It helps us “imagine and realize a more just and equitable society” in the development of CBPR. It invites us to invent a future “in which individuals and communities have a genuine voice in influencing the factors that determine their health” (p. 347)—an amazing and enchanting future.

References


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