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# Community-Based Participatory Action Research: An Emerging Alternative

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UNIVERSITY OF MIAMI

COMMUNITY-BASED PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH: AN EMERGING  
ALTERNATIVE

By

Bryan J. Lagae

A THESIS

Submitted to the Faculty  
of the University of Miami  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for  
the degree of Master of Arts

Coral Gables, Florida

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of  
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COMMUNITY-BASED PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH: AN EMERGING  
ALTERNATIVE

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An integrative analysis is presented of positivism, shared epistemology, and the final emerging alternative: community-based participatory action research (CBPAR). The analysis includes how each philosophy defines, views, and analyzes a community. While overcoming the drawbacks to adopting social indicator analyses to study social life, CBPAR provides a strategy that uses collaboration, empowerment, and participatory democracy to engage communities. As part of this investigation, other shared epistemologies such as symbolic interactionism, ethnomethodology, and previous community-based methods are considered.

CBPAR studies have had significant impact on public policy, so much so that communities sometimes reject “improvements” that they have wanted or needed because a collaborative process was not pursued. Accordingly, as is discussed in this thesis, CBPAR researchers should be trained properly and provided with the resources and skills necessary to be successful at collaborating with communities, or research and planning will not be community-based. But as CBPAR gains respect and recognition, this approach to conducting social research, and creating and evaluating interventions, will no

longer be an emerging alternative, but rather a way for all communities that have been marginalized or forgotten to be heard and change their current situations.

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## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

There is a great deal of value that researchers can gain from studying communities. In learning about diverse and evolving communities, researchers can understand the different challenges that members face and become involved in helping to address various problems. To truly understand the community and solve problems in a compassionate and democratic way, a unique research strategy must be implemented along with the development of definitions of a community that accommodate this goal. The way of studying communities that is advocated in this proposal is not a new technique, but an emerging alternative. The way that researchers have studied communities in the past within a positivistic framework of social theory is no longer applicable to the community, and a theoretic shift toward community-based participatory action research (CBPAR) is necessary. In light of this emerging philosophy, communities are understood to be socially constructed, and cannot be passively observed. This understanding of the community is interpreted through interactions, or how people within the community live, work, study, and play. These interactions are enacted on a daily basis and constitute social reality.

Discussing this change in philosophy is particularly relevant now, due to advances in statistical analyses and other computer software that have made positivism and the study of communities from that perspective more sophisticated than ever. What makes this trend troubling is that current research that highlights some of these different technological advancements does not even demonstrate why a particular technique is used. Nonetheless, these devices not only influence how future sociological research is conducted in the community but also public policy. In this regard, Goetz (2004)

describes one of the largest positivistic community-based social experiments: the Moving to Opportunity (MTO) program. This program, first authorized in 1992, was implemented because statistical evidence showed that if poor families were moved out of their communities and into others that are more affluent they would succeed. This process, called “de-concentration,” has been ineffective because this approach views communities to be objective geographic units that can be manipulated until a “desirable” demographic balance is achieved. Instead of addressing the reasons for poverty, or other problems that exist within the community, this strategy follows the basic logic that social issues can be solved by moving people around, and that proximity to successful persons will inspire those who are poor to improve themselves.

The positivistic definition that outlines the community, in geographic terms, may have never been appropriate and is potentially harmful to people. In fact, as Touraine (1974) notes, the study of the community should follow a path that frees it from the concrete charms of positivism in a way that actively generates knowledge. The goal of this thesis is outline how knowledge is constructed in positivism, and how it is different from CBPAR. The thesis will also provide an integrative review of other areas that have provided an alternative to positivism and share similar epistemological tenants as CBPAR. Finally, the task at hand is outlining how CBPAR differs from positivism and other shared epistemologies for studying the community. Ultimately, CBPAR provides a meaningful and ethical way to study the community that engages members at every stage of the research while also addressing societal issues.

### 1.1 Positivism and Its Relationship with Communities

To understand the origin of the positivistic definition of the community, and why societies are broken down into geographic terms, the philosophy of positivism must be examined. Singer (2005) summarizes the philosophy developed by Auguste Comte in 1822. Specifically, positivism was a plan for the intellectual, social, and political reorganization of society, and was developed to overcome what Comte called the theological and metaphysical stages of human knowledge. The theological and metaphysical stages, due to their speculative nature, no longer had a place in the development of knowledge or the collection of factual information. According to the philosophy of positivism, a strictly scientific view is needed when analyzing the social world because science reflects what is happening in the universe. Therefore, researchers would no longer be preoccupied with asking the question of “why,” which is strictly a theological question, but instead should focus on “how” things are in the universe and attempt to collect observable data (Singer 2005).

Giddens (1974) reviews the positivistic viewpoint and how this philosophy has been applied in sociology and ultimately to the study of communities. Specifically noteworthy is that positivism favors removing value judgments from all research decisions since such evaluations have no empirical content that can be validated, nor is there any experimental equipment available that can accurately measure these assessments. In sociology, positivism is associated with scientific research and has the specific goal of treating any inquiry as a “natural science” similar to physics or chemistry.

In the study of communities, positivism is represented by three main epistemological assumptions that are part of the positivistic attitude. The first assumption is that the methodological techniques of natural science can be adapted to sociology, thereby treating the community as an empirically verifiable object. Positivism, in this sense, implies that the researcher is simply an observer of social reality. The second is that the outcome of sociological investigations can be formulated in terminology that is parallel to natural sciences, in that the goal of community research is to generate “law-like” generalizations. The third assumption is that the study of communities should be devoid of any values, since the researcher is divorced from the social world (Giddens 1974).

Giddens (1974) also summarizes why the assumptions of positivism are not applicable to sociology, and these problems can be extrapolated to the study of the community. The first problem is that subjectivity and meaning are not necessarily sources of error to be factored out of an equation; instead, they are central to the study of communities. Second, there are problems with generalizing since not all communities are identical. Likewise, communities are dynamic, changing, and grounded in values and beliefs that should guide research. And third, the construction of knowledge that is central to community life is ignored by positivism. As a result, positivism paints a very sterile picture of community life.

## 1.2 A Shared Epistemology

Several alternatives to positivism have developed over the years that have some elements of a shared epistemology with CBPAR and have provided alternatives to the positivistic definition of the community. One example of this is the work of Robert E.

Park, who broke away from the traditional way of defining a community only in geographic terms. Park, a social psychologist, was widely considered to be a positivist due to his research methods, and was mostly recognized for his research on European immigration, specifically his assimilation cycles (Herman-Kinney and Verschaeve 2003). Despite the critiques of Park's work, his call for a change in the definition of community went against his positivist roots and provides a very important theoretical alternative to positivism. The community, Park (1915) wrote, must no longer be defined in terms of geography, and that while physical space exists, this element is insufficient to capture the social interactions of residents. This distinction is important methodologically because the researcher no longer defines the community *a priori* by using physical boundaries such as a river, a mountain range, census data, or school district boundaries. Instead the public is asked about their interactions and how they define their communities.

Social change and the interpretive nature of the community are important considerations in CBPAR. This change has to be interpreted on a symbolic level and emerges from social action (Freire 1982). The fact that the terms community and the social world are often used interchangeably reflects how symbols are linked together to form the framework for the "stakeholder process" (McAllister et al. 2003). The stakeholders are important to determine who is included in the collaborative process and how the community is defined. Interpersonal action, in other words, is at the root of determining the identity of a community.

As a result of this changing definition, analyzing the needs of a community is not just a process of determining the numbers of people, educational levels, economic levels, or racial composition of residents in a specific locale (Martin 1976). To define a

community accurately much more information is needed. Defining a community now requires more than descriptive statistics; what is required, instead, is information about the member's decisions, goals, and objectives. Critics of this methodological distinction cite the vagueness of this approach and lack of clear goals. They contend that if there is not a pre-defined community, there is no way to determine how much money or resources that should be allocated to any project, for example. An adequate response to these criticisms is that the needs of communities are not vague if the proper dialogue is established.

There are many different inquiry paradigms that range from the aforementioned positivism to “constructivism” and “critical theory” (Guba and Lincoln 1994). The paradigm that is associated typically with CBPAR is constructivist but with critical elements. These critical elements posit that social reality is influenced by social, cultural, and historical considerations (Israel et al. 1998). On the other hand, from the constructivist paradigm, having multiple interpretations can mean that these interpretations overlap, but when they do not overlap a determination must be made about who is included and recognized as belonging to a community. In this sense, according to the constructivist paradigm, the community consists of an ongoing process whereby others are recognized to be part of this group and an understanding is reached with respect to who is included in the research process.

The important point is to recognize the different research paradigms and appreciate how they guide the research process, as well as influence the definition of the community. In previous community-based research the community has been conceptualized as “...a geographic section of a larger community or region (e.g., city)

that usually contains residents or institutions and has socially distinctive characteristics” (Sampson 2011, Pp 56). The community in CBPAR, on the other hand, is defined differently and tied to interaction and emerges from the constructivist process (Strand et al. 2003). With this definition in mind, who is included in a community changes over time to reflect different overlapping spaces and how they are recognized (Wang 1999). A community, in short, is a construction and cannot be specified *a priori*.

### 1.3 A Movement Toward Interaction and Meaning

Some researchers have taken a different approach that uses interaction as a framework, such as Manfred Kuhn and Sheldon Stryker, to operationalize and measure concepts like the self and social relationships (Herman-Kinney and Verschaeve 2003). Stryker is known for the affect control theory and identity theory, whereby the interactions between individuals are measured under the assumption that regular patterns exist within society that can be assessed either by experiments or surveys. Community-based research is different from this position, since both Stryker and Kuhn overlook meaning and identify behavioral patterns to be part of a large overriding social structure. This approach to symbolic interactionism seeks to understand the person outside of the person, so to speak, and adheres to two of the main criticisms that sociologists have of positivism. That is, Stryker and Kuhn want to generalize to all individuals based on structural models while remaining completely objective and value neutral (Herman-Kinney and Verschaeve 2003).

In communities, however, interaction is not so simple. In fact, different interactions take place between individuals within the community, individuals in the community and the researcher, and between the community and the larger social world

(Lofland 2003). In this regard, Blumer (1969) emphasized that the human capacity for symbolization is necessary for interaction to occur. Likewise, Charon (1998) noted that interactionists view the “community” as a form of interaction, and thus communities are made up of people who interact and come into existence through communication and other forms of discourse.

Charon (1998) also wrote that communities are made up of actors who address others on a regular basis. Action, however, is not enough because persons must communicate and interpret any interaction that occurs. In other words, a community exists symbolically, is socially constructed, and changes based on ongoing social interaction. Although a community is made up of a collection of individuals, these actors work in cooperation with one another, or in “collaborative action.” Such action may lead to the sharing of beliefs, knowledge, skills, and goals (Charon 1998).

Additionally, Denzin (1978) contends that interacting individuals produce and define their own situations, and are capable of engaging in “minded,” self-reflexive behavior. In other words, members of the community are capable of shaping and guiding their own behavior and that of others, because the interactions that take place are negotiated and fit into the standpoint of others. In this sense, Snow (2001) added that neither the individual nor society exist alone, but emerge through interaction. Generally speaking, communities are a product of discourse.

When studying communities, therefore, the focus of research should be interaction. Accordingly, to interpret observed regularities in terms of causal laws that are consistent with positivism is not an effective way to study the community. Contrary to positivism, interactions are the most important part of studying communities, and not



determining whether certain characteristics can be observed in one group and not in another. Similarly, Gellner (1974) adds that meaning is not an echo, or duplication like something found in a mirror, but is expressed through interaction, language, and culture. Meaning is thus socially constructed by members of the community and is central to social life (Dennis 2011).

Consistent with his view of community, Park (1925) stated that to understand human behavior and social processes, researchers must immerse themselves in the worlds of their subjects and study people “in their own terms.” While agreeing with Park, Denzin (2003) adds that researchers cannot be completely objective, politically neutral observers who stand outside or above the study of the community. The researcher, instead, is historically and locally situated within the process being studied and thus should work with members of the community to help them accomplish goals that they have collaboratively developed. Instead of the neutrality championed by positivists, community research is predicated on the theoretical and, eventually, the methodological principle of creative engagement (Giddens 1974).

#### 1.4 Putting It All Together

An appropriate way to study communities leaves positivism behind and invites members to participate closely in the research process. In this scenario, the role of the researcher is vastly different from both positivism and other theoretical frameworks. In traditional positivist research, the goal is to advance knowledge in a specific discipline, while community-based participatory action research is working toward the betterment of a community. This shift to CBPAR, however, is not simply pragmatic but represents an entirely different philosophical position (Strand et al. 2003).

CBPAR has several principles that relate to the relationship that researchers have with communities, particularly how problems, interventions, and participation are addressed. Specifically, CBPAR is a joint undertaking between researchers and community members that uses multiple sources of knowledge and methods of discovery (Lantz et al. 2002). Instead of relying on experts from the outside to provide knowledge that may or may not be relevant, community-based participatory action research focuses on the persons who have constructed the world-view that shapes how norms, problems, and other issues should be understood (Strand et al. 2003).

CBPAR offers an alternative approach to knowledge, one that is neither value neutral nor objective (Strand et al. 2003). Instead, the basic epistemological assumption is that communities construct their respective realities. What this means is that CBPAR is predicated on several philosophical principles. The first is non-dualism, since knowledge emerges from human actors (Israel et al. 1998). Another is holism, and thus neither persons nor communities are viewed in isolation from one another. A third is related to treating others as truly unique, so that they are understood in their own terms. In the end, these principles set the framework for social justice whereby communities are understood to be the result of “joint action” that must be respected (Minkler et al. 2008).

Due to this philosophical shift, the focus of CBPAR is not generalizability or finding appropriate operationalized constructs, but rather epistemological relevance. Hence, researchers must become flexible and innovative while allowing the experiences and skills of community members to guide the research process. The world-view of a community, therefore, should guide research instead of abstract methodological

guidelines. As part of democratizing and demystifying research, CBPAR challenges conventional assumptions about knowledge and social order (Strand et al. 2003).

In the end, community-based participatory action research is based on collaboration between the researcher and the community. This collaboration must be ethically developed and include the community to develop, implement, and finally evaluate knowledge (Israel et al. 2002). Additionally, CBPAR advocates that the study of communities should be rooted in people's experiences with everyday life and how they make sense of the resulting reality (Eng et al. 2006).

### 1.5 Chapter by Chapter Analysis

The first chapter of the thesis is an introduction that outlines the need for the shift to CBPAR, and why this change is particularly relevant right now due to public policy and the current research on communities. Specifically, three goals will be achieved in this chapter. The first is to explain how the community has been understood previously within the context of positivism. The next is to explain the change that has taken place in understanding communities and how they should be studied. The third is to illustrate why this philosophy lends itself to CBPAR.

The second chapter consists of a description of positivism, specifically how a community is defined within this framework. The goal is to explain the basis of knowledge in positivism and extrapolate how this outlook has been applied to the study of communities. How communities are conceptualized under positivism is examined, as well as how this philosophy is inconsistent with the study of interaction. After explaining the definitions and strategies used by positivism the stage should be set for describing any alternative method that is preferable for studying community life.

The third chapter reviews symbolic interactionism, ethnomethodology, and previous community-oriented strategies. The goal at this juncture is to explain the shift in theory away from positivism toward interaction and a focus on meaning. Important changes are proposed for the role of the researcher with regard to embracing subjectivity rather than objectivity. A socio-historical analysis is included that outlines a shift in philosophy away from geography and toward interaction (Park 1925). Additionally, interaction is examined as a prelude to understanding community life (Herman-Kinney and Verschaeve 2003).

The fourth chapter focuses on the different aspects of CBPAR and how this strategy can improve the study of communities. The chapter outlines the different aspects of CBPAR and how this method differs from positivism and builds on the improvements discussed in chapter two. The main tenant is that CBPAR is the most effective way to study a community and thus will discuss some of the clear advantages of this strategy.

The fifth chapter is the conclusion and ties the agenda of CBPAR to the broader picture of understanding research, examining how CBPAR influences public policy, and outlines specific examples of successful CBPAR projects. Central to this conclusion is that people in the community should guide a research project, and CBPAR is the most advanced approach to achieve this aim.

### 1.6 Contribution to the Literature

Previous literature has covered the main tenants of positivism and its influence in sociology. Nonetheless, the main contribution of this thesis is to extrapolate how positivism has been used to study communities, and how this philosophy is inconsistent with such a task. Based on a review of the literature, there is no clear or recent

comparison of positivism and CBPAR. This thesis provides such a comparison, while illustrating how researchers have arrived at CBPAR as appropriate for studying social life.

In addition to offering a comprehensive comparison, this thesis discusses the role of the researcher in CBPAR. Sometimes researchers may actually cause unintentional harm to a community when the interaction that constitutes the group is overlooked. How CBPAR advances the role of the researcher over symbolic interactionism, ethnomethodology, and previous community-based research is a topic that needs to be assessed. The important theme is that researchers engage communities at an epistemological and practical level.

Previous literature on CBPAR has examined different strategies for starting a CBPAR project, and this work effectively describes how to build relationships with communities (Eng et al. 2005). The gap that exists in the literature relates to how theory shapes a researcher's involvement in a project. Positivism, for example, requires neutrality or no engagement. Other research strategies increase involvement due to the emphasis that is placed on language and the construction of knowledge. CBPAR, however, extends beyond this stage. But the question remains: How is this change theoretically justified? The justification for this transition is illustrated in this chapter.

### 1.7 Chapter Summary

The goal of this thesis is to outline and update how the study of communities has changed, and how this transformation is beneficial for future research and fostering improvements. Although in some cases positivism might have value, the important idea is that using CBPAR offers many advantages over this philosophy in the study of

communities. But there are also shortcomings with some versions of symbolic interactionism, ethnomethodology, and previous community-based approaches that are overcome by CBPAR. Nonetheless, the change to CBPAR may not be easy for many researchers who may believe this approach is ineffective. The basis for this judgement is that CBPAR is consistent with the demand for research that recognizes that social reality is constructed, and not necessarily objective, and thus can provide unique insight into community life.

## CHAPTER 2: POSITIVISM: ANALYSIS OF A COMMUNITY

Positivism, as the term is known today, was used by Comte to suggest that true knowledge is derived from observable phenomena (Hall 1990). Positivism arose at a time when metaphysical and theological explanations represented the dominant mode of thinking. Nonetheless, one of the problems with metaphysical explanations is the inability to verify statements of reason, or, put another way, these ethereal experiences cannot be confirmed. For example, if a person experienced God, or spoke with this deity, such a claim could not be verified in any standard or reliable manner. The subjective or speculative nature of such a conversation would not only be unverifiable, but could never be replicated in another situation with similar circumstances (Hanfling 1981).

Keeping this issue in mind, positivists found this level of inquiry to be unsatisfactory at best, and fraudulent at the worst. Due to the subjective and speculative nature of metaphysical experiences, the verification principle, as described by Schlick et al. (1979), could never be used. Truth, therefore, would remain elusive since for any given statement various meanings could be established. Therefore, statements that are not subject to the verification principle, or clearly outlined, are devoid of any significance and regarded as useless (Giddens 1974).

The original verification principle was intended to be a simple, streamlined method of reflection that was developed *a priori*, and contained clearly defined categories that could be used to classify events (Singer 2005). In positivism, these categories are crucial because verification is used to distinguish meaningful from meaningless statements. In this regard, the most effective way to classify phenomena is

with “social indicators” that operationalize an abstract event in a concrete way (Bauer 1966). Further, personal experiences and social phenomena can be treated as solid objects that are part of reality, rather than metaphysical elements.

The verification principle, for positivists, means that they can establish the connection between belief and cause for action, and thus social indicators could be used to formulate causal statements (Land 1971). Accordingly, the goal of positivism is to establish that a certain observable condition leads to another and that this relationship is not spurious (Ayer 1940). Furthermore, their connection must be possible and reasonable under a strict set of guidelines, have a strict temporal order, and be replicable under similar circumstances (Hanfling 1981). The result of this requirement is that reality is portrayed in a concrete and orderly manner.

### 2.1 Ethics in Positivism

Consistent with the verification principle, positivism developed a strict set of research guidelines that moves away from unverifiable experiences to focus on behaviors, attitudes, and characteristics in the social world. In this sense, insight might be gained into social action (Singer 2005). Positivism, therefore, could serve as a way to predict the future course of social development, but a purely neutral or scientific method would have to be adopted. Although the principles of positivism were developed to form the basis of social reorganization, the debate strayed away from the ethics of social reorganization to methodology. Specifically noteworthy, these ethical principles were explored by the logical positivist Carnap (1935) in writing about value judgments. Value judgments, according to positivists, have no theoretical sense, and therefore should be assigned to the realm of metaphysics.



Further, when discussing methodology, the ethics of positivism follows those of natural scientists, in order to refrain from the falsification of data and document in a rigorous fashion the impact of the stated propositions. Following this line of thinking, the construction of testable propositions is crucial to maintaining these standards because such statements are developed prior to research (Richardson 1998). In other words, these statements, usually called hypotheses, are presumed to be neutral and do not guide an investigation. Therefore, the possibility exists of a direct encounter with the reality in question without the influence of value judgments. Hypotheses, simply put, are not judgments.

Verificationists, like Popper (1947), believed that ethics means staying true to a certain guiding theory. Much of the debate today with positivism centers on researchers adhering to a specific theoretical tenet. The basic idea is that research should be value free. The point of research, therefore, is to compare hypotheses to reality and alter the theory if findings justify such a change. In this regard, the hypothesis does not necessarily shape perception, but a properly constructed study enables reality to be encountered. The logic of the hypothesis, in other words, facilitates accurate perception and conclusions. In the end, methodology is at the heart of the “traditional perception” that positivists maintain is central to the production of valid knowledge. As such, people can perceive reality without bias if they are trained properly in methodology.

In order to assist with neutrality of perception, an “observational language” was developed to facilitate the main objective of neutrality. Thus, positivists asserted that scientific theory is a linguistic representation of real or possible social experiences (Klee 1997). Positivists, in essence, have taken the communities and their social reality to be

representable by linguistic statements. Staying with the goals of positivism, these linguistic statements are best represented by mathematical logic and ultimately, mathematical symbols.

Mathematical language was desirable primarily due to its perceived subject-neutrality and universality. For positivists, this mode of expression provides an unambiguous and precise background to describe and observe social phenomena. In this regard, mathematical logic represents the peak of power and precision that allows researchers to capture and express causal relationships that occur in communities (Klee 1997). Most important, mathematical logic removes the vagueness that positivists believe plagues everyday language. With this concern in mind, positivists then assumed that formal symbols could represent accurately the relationships between objects, properties, or events. Specifically, mathematical language allowed positivists to represent linguistically an abstract object in physical terms, which is in a neutral and value-free way. As a result, logical and causal ordering can be established without any ambiguity.

## 2.2 Objectivity and the Role of the Researcher

One of the most important maneuvers made by positivism is the incorporation of the principles of natural science into the observation of the social world (Singer 2005). In order for the researcher to be in a position to observe directly social reality and advance causal statements, a certain distance must be maintained from this world. In fact, this impersonal relationship between the researcher and the subject of the research is the philosophical bedrock of positivism (Alexander 1982). In a strict sense, objectivity means arriving at an understanding of the social world that negatively sanctions

personalization and rewards the ability to separate observers from reality during the pursuit of knowledge. The elimination of these beliefs and attitudes is vital to avoid “contaminating” empirical data and disturbing the observational tests that are necessary to envision causal relationships.

The claim that a researcher can exist independently of what is being studied is an epistemological assumption that sustains claims about an objective reality. The role of the researcher, accordingly, is to describe this impersonal world in a manner that is logical and reasonable. Methodology, in this sense, represents a set of blueprints that are used to guide investigations. These strategies and techniques, consistent with the ethos of positivism, are not thought to require interpretation (Hempel 1966). As a result, a systematic and deductive strategy evolves that is thought to capture an empirical and objective reality that is available for study. In the presence of such an objective referent, research is relatively straight forward.

For positivists, this method presupposes that objects exist in a world that is independent of the knower and, eventually, is reflected in perception and thought (McCarthy 2001). Truth is thus a process of understanding these perceptions by returning to the empirical foundations of knowledge; indeed, the only truth that is meaningful and valid is one that can be empirically verified. But this notion of objectivity and the concept of verification are based on a broader principle. In general, this idea has been represented as dualism, and is at the heart of trying to approach the world in a neutral manner.

Without the prospect of separating subjectivity from objectivity, or value from fact, positivism cannot transcend the human element or the human condition (Singer

2005). The belief that this prospect of dualism is possible is essential to preventing the human condition from contaminating empirical research. Particularly, post-positivists along with empiricists, have developed a point of view that acknowledges the difficulty of maintaining objectivity, but as long as the human element is minimized within statistical acceptability, then value-freedom is preserved.

This basic principle allows researchers to gain an “omniscient” point of view by introducing a position free from any perspective. While this separation is fundamental to Western philosophy, positivism provides the most sophisticated epistemology and methodology available to overcome the human element. In essence, the culmination of positivism is to obtain knowledge, since a knower is banished to obscurity. By attempting to overcome doxa, or opinion, knowledge is treated as something very abstract and, in the end, unknowable (Foucault 1966).

### 2.3 The Generation of Law or Law-Like Statements

Once objective or verifiable data are collected in a manner that is consistent with the natural sciences, the important step of generating law-like statements is possible (Shapere 1969). By designing research with representative samples that mirror the population, the generation of law-like statements becomes second nature. A necessary epistemological step is that everything is standardized including the sampling process, thereby securing neutrality. With methodology transformed into techniques, hypotheses can be tested against objective data. In a manner of speaking, a closed system is established. Hypotheses establish a neutral conceptual framework while methodological techniques provide the required data. Once this entire process is operationalized, generalization is inhibited only by procedural flaws.

Using these tenants of positivism, every aspect of reality can be transformed into objects of study, including communities. Communities for example, can be associated with social indicators that are empirically reliable and easily recognized. Once these traits are identified in a systematic manner, through a range of procedures, relationships and accompanying laws can be specified.

#### 2.4 Positivism and Its Inconsistencies with Studying Communities

As Hall (1990) writes, the “outlook for positivism no longer is positive.” This claim is especially true for the study of communities. By the 1960s the problems with defending a positivist position had been well documented, and the argument turned from positivism to post-positivism (Adorno et al. 1976). Although the charge that post-positivism, or other incarnations of this philosophy, can solve the problems related to questions concerning knowledge are dubious, many sociologists and researchers who examine communities still share the values that are the core of Comte’s philosophy, no matter if they claim to use a different approach (Halfpenny 1982).

Make no mistake, the treatment of knowledge, especially the differentiation between beliefs and attitudes, is present in all of the incarnations of positivism since Comte, such as the logical positivism of the Vienna circle, logical empiricism, post-positivism, the subjective empiricism by Rickert, and the falsification strategy developed by Popper. All of these approaches introduce the methods of natural science to generate true knowledge that is subject to verification and validation.

In this regard, the standard claim that better measures can be obtained through increased procedural rigor exists in any form of positivism. Especially in the development of public policy, there is a tendency to use social indicators when trying to

conceptualize and study communities. The problem lies in the removal of the human element from the study of these groups. But from the perspective of positivism, the elimination of any source of speculative information is expected, even if the human element is sacrificed.

### 2.5 The Role of Geography in Defining Communities

In staying true to the epistemology of positivism, using geography to define the community has been a natural fit for many researchers. Descriptive social indicators can be constructed readily based upon pre-existing geographic boundaries, such as states, counties, school districts, and even physical features like rivers or lakes (Land 1983). Furthermore, indicators can also take the form of occupancy rates, income levels, demographic traits, and other objective features that can be readily observed. The use of geographic and other physical standards provides an ideal way of defining communities in a manner consistent with positivism. In a very practical way, this information is already available in national data sets that can be mined with advanced statistical procedures. The entire research process, accordingly, never appears to leave any room for uncertainty (Halfpenny 1982).

Although geography may be an attractive method to frame social indicators, communities are not this easily identified. For example, geographic areas are static, rigid categories that do not necessarily correspond to how people view themselves (Schneider 1975). Instead, these groups are dynamic and differentiate themselves from others in a myriad of ways that involve interpretation and social construction. In other words, community members draw on their experiences, values, beliefs, and commitments to identify themselves as members of a specific community (Murphy 2012).

As should be noted, the use of social indicators has a tendency to homogenize communities. A very narrow and set range of traits are used to characterize these groups. The key advantage of this strategy is that making generalizations is relatively easy. Any group with similar traits, for example, can be assumed to have an equal chance of sharing a similar characteristic, such as being ill, having trouble finding a job, or being unsatisfied with social affairs (Hanfling 1981).

But this method is particularly troublesome in the study of communities, not to mention the development of public policies. When analyzing a community based upon a geographic unit, for example, “undesirable” outliers may emerge that threaten generalizability (Halfpenny 1982). Although these outliers are undesirable in terms of statistical analyses, they may represent a real attribute or opinion within a community and should not be dismissed. The point is that social indicators are not sensitive to these variations, and, in the end, obscure the real life of a community behind a facade of objectivity.

## 2.6 Objectivity and the Problems with a Passive Description

In reality, the knowledge linked to social indicators is somewhat fictitious. Specifically, verifiability is substituted for the actual interaction that constitutes the life of a community. Weber (1974), for example, was particularly critical of this strategy due to the accompanying portrayal of social existence. Specifically, he argues that the social world should not be studied in the same way as a physical object. Instead, the social world, and specifically communities, is comprised of active individuals who behave in terms of how they perceive reality. With respect to positivism, however, this interpretive dimension represents a source of error that must be avoided.

The attempt to be an objective, passive observer of social reality is problematic for the researcher as well (Avison et al. 1999). Researchers are connected to their respective communities, as well as the group studied. They may have grown up there, or had friends and family that live within this locale, but at the very least know about the problems that exist. Accordingly, the observations that are made or conclusions that are drawn are always influenced by the researcher's personal experiences and thoughts. Dualism, in this sense, is impossible to maintain. In the realm of pure logic or step-wise methodologies, however, the separation of fact from value seems likely. But outside of these abstract domains, such a differentiation defies everyday experiences.

The argument is far from settled for post-positivists, or empiricists in general, who admit that achieving true objectivity is difficult. Nonetheless, admitting that the world has a subjective element violates the major principles of positivism, that is, verification. Further, if objectivity is surrendered, the possibility of establishing the autonomous referents required to verify statements or refute hypotheses is undermined (Wiggenstein 1968). The task for researchers, therefore, is to adjust their methodology (Smith and Easterlow 2005). In community-based studies, this approach takes the form of finding better measures for health outcomes, crime rates, or employment opportunities. Community-based studies also frequently include statistical adjustments, such as adjusting geographic boundaries based on computer algorithms that attempt to correct for the subjectivity of an actual community boundary without sacrificing the ability to refute hypotheses (Thrall 1998).

In the field of drug abuse research, for example, many so-called "quick and dirty" needs assessments are undertaken. Basic to those procedures is the use of indicator



analysis. Social indicators such as housing, employment rates, and education levels have been used to predict the likelihood of behaviors such as drug use in communities.

Additionally, in criminology, researchers such as Sampson et al. (2002) use “natural boundaries” to identify communities. In the end, these boundaries became proxies for the actual interaction that occurs in a neighborhood. A community is identified in each case that is equated with empirical elements, but not disconnected from actual community life.

Despite this critique, social indicators are not completely without value. For example, they can be useful in gaining insight from surveys or ascertaining the level of a problem within a community (Israel et al. 1998). Often knowing information such as health or literacy rates, or access to water, is important. However, in terms of community-based research, social indicators that are used divorced from the human or social context are not very meaningful. Indeed, there are significant dangers in relying solely on social indicators that are discussed in Chapter Five.

### 2.7 Positivism and the Definition of a Community

Using the language of social indicators, the definition of communities under positivism is “unambiguous” and comprised of “target” or “output” variables that can be treated as objective, verifiable, and, based on a properly constructed methodology, generalizable (Fox 1974). The requirement that targets or outputs are unambiguously defined is particularly troublesome, due to the fact that communities are dynamic and shifting, and consist of people who have unique characteristics that may or may not be found in other communities (Martin 1976). Despite the evidence to the contrary, positivists still seek to define communities as purely physical objects that can be observed or examined (Bevir 2000). But this perspective is problematic because the

history or biography of a community is overlooked (McCarthy 2001). Although such a sterile picture is helpful in formulating causal statements, the results by themselves may not be meaningful.

In addition to the problems previously mentioned, this definition of communities has been accompanied by an increased focus on the technical side of research. As a result, reliability and validity are tied to statistical measures rather than how communities define themselves and their relationships. In addition, these studies focus on corrections and adjustments with respect to methodological critiques, rather than the inability to convey an accurate picture of a community's reality. The effectiveness of policies, accordingly, is based on achieving statistical significance. These statistical thresholds are problematic, however, due to the abstract nature of determining statistical significance when this index is divorced from community values.

The real confusion lies in differentiating statistically significant results from substantively significant ones. In particular, results that vary by a tenth or even a thousandth are not significant in the everyday life of a community. Furthermore, any discussion is compounded by the decisions made about the social indicators that should be included in any multivariate analysis. Despite the movement by post-positivists away from deterministic to probabilistic language, social indicators are still treated as beyond interpretation (Halfpenny 1982).

## 2.8 Chapter Summary

Based on the epistemology of the natural sciences, positivism and its different variants have developed a methodology to study communities. Nonetheless, in many respects this general philosophy is inappropriate for use in the social sciences,

particularly the study of communities. Due to the many problems with studying communities, a different research strategy is necessary that does not rely on objectively and passively describing the social world. For example, the movement away from defining communities in terms of geography is an important step that accommodates the dynamic nature of a community.

The philosophy of positivism is incompatible with development of sound public policy, because of the approach taken to conceptualization of community life. Generally, many policies are unsuccessful, in part, because of the way in which a community is portrayed. In response, various theories have emerged to challenge the relevance of positivism particularly in the social sciences. Whether or not these positions advance beyond positivism is a question that must be further addressed.

### CHAPTER 3: A SHARED EPISTEMOLOGY

While acknowledging the shortcomings of positivism in studying communities, several different areas of study have developed alternatives to this philosophy. The goal of this chapter is to outline selected approaches that have developed alternatives to positivism, and compare the similarities and differences of these to CBPAR. While there are certain similarities between each of the approaches highlighted in this chapter and CBPAR, each discipline has been refined continually and updated to provide options for researchers who believe that positivism lacks key components, such as emphasizing meaning, that are essential to social research. Specifically, positivism overlooks the human element, something that these alternate philosophies seek to embrace. The philosophies outlined in this chapter either completely or partially reject positivism, thusly providing a different view of communities and their study.

The reader should note, however, that some of the areas covered are quite broad with many different research strategies and interpretations of epistemology. Symbolic interactionism is one of the greatest examples of this issue, with research paradigms that range from those that seek to quantify the self (Stryker 1980) to others that contend communities are socially constructed and defined through interaction (Denzin 1970). Due to such variations, the focus of this discussion is on the broad epistemological similarities and differences with CBPAR and the variability between these philosophies. Similarly, while being comparatively more homogenous than other research areas, ethnomethodology exhibits degrees of variation and scope within the research agenda (Randall and Rouncefield 2011). Finally, many early community-based studies run

counter to positivism but are either interpreted in ways that contravene CBPAR, or their theoretical changes are not manifested clearly in their research projects.

### 3.1 The Chicago School and Its Influences

Many of the central figures of this section have a shared epistemology, since many of them founded, attended, or were influenced by the Chicago School of sociology. The Chicago School whose founders included Albion Small, W.I. Thomas, and the philosopher George Herbert Mead created a unique academic environment that contained a unified epistemology shaped by Thomas and Mead and formed a cohesive framework that would influence many generations of sociologists (Becker 1999). These original founders contributed to the legacy of the Chicago School not only with their ideas, but by demonstrating that sociology could be implemented in a variety of ways. For example, Mead (1934) emphasized the subjective meaning of human behavior, the social process, and creativity that later prompted Herbert G. Blumer to develop these themes into symbolic interactionism.

Other sociologists within the Chicago School, including Robert Park and E.W. Burgess, continued the interactionist tradition within urban sociology and their study of cities. For example, Park and Burgess (1921) advocated a more participatory methodology that changed how sociologists viewed urban environments. In training their successors such as Louis Wirth, along with the additions of Everett C. Hughes and John Dewey, a common theoretical tradition flowed from the vision of Park and Mead that became the foundation for the theoretical advancements of Blumer and Hughes in the late 20s and 30s, and again after the Second World War.

With the addition of John Dewey to the Chicago School, the influence of pragmatism continued (Emirbayer and Maynard 2011). In fact, pragmatism was important to Harold Garfinkel and the development of ethnomethodology later on. Dewey (1988 [1925]) and his brand of pragmatism focuses on the cooperation between individuals and their connection to the environment, thereby enabling these persons to react to and interpret social events. Garfinkel (1967) would later develop this interpretation of social reality into a unique perspective that pertains to analyzing everyday activities.

Not to be forgotten in the Chicago School was W. Lloyd Warner and his development of community studies. Also citing shared epistemology, Warner (1959) and the Yankee City Series studied class and ethnicity in the United States. His methodology prompted William Foote Whyte and Hughes to adapt a similar style to studying communities that was enormously influential at the Chicago School for several decades (Becker 1999). For instance, this philosophy also helped develop industrial sociology and the work of Braverman (1974) in examining inequality and class in America.

Tracing the lineage of the Chicago School, and who has contributed to studying communities over the years, is a project of socio-historical importance (Reynolds 1993). The scholars from the Chicago School were not merely passive recipients of this tradition. These professionals and their students proposed and shared many novel ideas. On the other hand, many differences of opinion also emerged.

### 3.2 Symbolic Interactionism and Its Epistemology

Influenced by Mead (1934) and the brand of pragmatism that focuses on the resurrection of the human element, Blumer undertook the task of developing these ideas

into a research strategy. Blumer (1969) developed the term “symbolic interactionism” to include three core principles that pertain to communities. The first concerns meaning, and the claim that community members act toward others based on how their behavior is interpreted. Therefore, meaning is a central principle in the study of communities, and the “truth” that arises from interactions is contextually useful. The second core principle is language. Specifically, language gives community members a way to negotiate meaning through symbols. By engaging in language with others, through symbolic interaction, humans identify meaning, or “naming,” and develop discourse (Charon 1998). Finally, the third relates to thought. In the process of language, members interpret and modify symbols. In this regard, thought is an internal dialogue that allows role taking, or imagining different points of view. What this outcome means for the study of communities is that instead of focusing on a concrete, objective reality, interaction is the centerpiece to social research.

In recognizing that communities are socially constructed, there are many different interactions that can take place between individuals within the community (Lofland 2003). Blumer (1969) emphasized the human capacity for symbolization and, more important, the ability to create meaning. Other researchers have developed this line of thinking further, and argue that interactions form the moral and ethical foundation that is important for encouraging participation and the full democratization of a community (Denzin 2003).

Recent studies based in symbolic interactionism (SI) have highlighted the important role of interaction in studying communities (Gardner 2004). What this research illustrates is the mobility that takes place within communities may not be

captured with social indicators alone. With relative ease, members of communities can be picked up from one site to another, moved to multiple locales, and connected to form bonds with others without much formal contact. This sort of connection would not be possible if the community were simply a geographic or demographic unit.

Similarly, other studies guided by SI have investigated online communities that have no geographic boundaries and are maintained by ideas rather than formal boundaries (Gottschalk 2010). These communities may be extremely influential in promoting social change, since each member has the same ability to post information and collaborate to build virtual settings and discuss social activities. These ideas, furthermore, are often ambiguous, fleeting, and divorced from concrete indicators.

What makes this view of a community possible is the epistemology adopted by symbolic interactionists (Reynolds 1993). In some ways, these theorists reverse the usual process whereby knowledge is acquired. Rather than originating from social indicators, knowledge is a product of (inter)action. A community, accordingly, can be created without the usual empirical referents. With respect to the study of communities, this discovery signals that communities may not be tied to standard parameters (Lofland 2003). A community, in short, can be constructed in ways that do not necessarily adhere to empirical regularities.

SI can be differentiated from CBPAR on many different levels. Many of the previously mentioned arguments concerning positivism can be used to describe how CBPAR differs epistemologically, for example from Stryker's (1980) attempt to quantify the self. In this sense, Stryker and the members of the Iowa School adopted a different strategy from those of the Chicago School toward interaction. In contrast to the Chicago



viewpoint, Stryker (2002) advocates a social structural version, and criticizes the tradition inspired by Mead as quaint, unreal, imprecise, and unaware of the certainty that could be gained by an empirical methodology. The Iowa School, on the other hand, promotes a position consistent with Stryker and the quantification of social reality. These two positions are directly opposed to the theories of Blumer (1969) and other interactionists who consider (inter)action to be crucial to the organization of communities. CBPAR, while closer to the epistemology of the Chicago School, introduces the researcher as central to a community-based project, particularly the collaboration with community members (Strand et al. 2003).

While SI shares the notion that communities are dynamic, socially constructed sites of interaction, most CBPAR researchers would be suspicious of using language adopted by some of these theorists when they claim that particular factors need to be “clarified” or “operationalized” (Zimmerman 1978). Other symbolic interactionists, who believe that abstract objects are “things” to be examined, are treading dangerously close to positivism (Dennis 2011). There are other researchers who reject this brand of SI and follow a path more closely associated with CBPAR, but differ in the role of the researcher (Strand et al. 2003).

In CBPAR, the researcher participates with community members in carrying out a project, whereas such collaboration is not a consistent component of SI. Some researchers within symbolic interactionism, however, advocate informing community members about their backgrounds, the objectives of a study, and any ethical concerns that may arise from conducting the research (Denzin 2003). Nevertheless, in CBPAR the

researcher is an intricate part of what is being researched. In an important way, the line is blurred between the subject and researcher in CBPAR (Strand et al. 2003).

The most important difference lies in the inclusion of the community at each juncture of a CBPAR study (Minkler 2004). In particular, Park (1915) advocated that researchers leave their offices and engage people in order to truly see what is happening in neighborhoods and communities. Although this philosophy has the correct intentions, simple proximity to the individuals is not enough, especially if a research agenda has been developed prior to speaking with anyone in these communities (Leung, Yen and Minkler 2003). The important step of discussing projects with community members that have a significant stake in what is occurring is an important point of divergence from many research projects grounded in SI.

The epistemological changes of SI that were advocated by the Chicago School are highly influential in developing an epistemological position that revives and focuses on the human element. Nonetheless, the human element is often ignored in research, even when studies are sustained by symbolic interactionism. Proximity is often confused with understanding how the reality of a community is constructed (Kelly 2005). Accordingly, symbolism is treated as similar to social indicators, with the identity of these referents somewhat fuzzy.

### 3.3 Ethnomethodology and Its Epistemology

Influenced by pragmatism and phenomenology, Garfinkel (1967) promoted ethnomethodology as an alternative to the mainstream sociological approach to analyzing everyday life. With pragmatism serving as the backdrop and the phenomenology of Schutz (1967) providing the vehicle of achieving his epistemology, Garfinkel and Rawls

(2005) were able to identify the conceptual tools needed to illustrate that the “actor’s universe” is an “experienced universe.” That is, Schutz (1967) depicted the experience of everyday life to be filtered through a set of categorical definitions that specify how the world should be understood. The resulting stock of typical “meanings” and “recipes” provide people with a sense that everyday existence has meaning and continuity. The key point, however, is that facts are “accomplishments” rather than “things.” Facts, in other words, are sustained through interpretation and renegotiation and, contrary to Durkheim, do not exist *sui generis* (Mehan and Wood 1975).

With phenomenology as a backdrop, there are many methods employed by ethnomethodologists, but three seem to be the most important: indexicality, reflexivity, and documentary interpretation (Pfohl 1985). Indexicality refers to the process whereby a particular meaning is elevated in importance over others and treated, at least momentarily, as the dominant reality (Atkinson 1988). Reflexivity, on the other hand, expresses the ongoing (re)construction of this meaning and the attempt to provide continuity to the resulting reality.

Once defined, a situation or person begins to embody these definitions. Accordingly, the “objective reality,” or interpretive situation, becomes an indexical feature of the next interaction and interpretive activity (Garfinkel 1967). The concept of documentary interpretation is thus used to explain how the information that is received can be used to infer meaning and motive in others, or as Garfinkel (1967, p. 78) writes “Not only is the underlying pattern derived from its individual documentary evidences, but the individual documentary evidences, in their turn, are interpreted on the basis of ‘what is known’ about the underlying pattern. Each is used to elaborate the other.”

Unlike symbolic interactionists who believe that people share common symbolic meanings, ethnomethodologists believe that communities share a body of interpretive work that enables them to convince themselves and others that they share common meanings (Cicourel 1974). From an ethnomethodological standpoint, reality involves reflexive activity that reveals order to consist of ceaseless interaction (Mehan and Wood 1975). Further, ethnomethodologists argue that hidden, or taken for granted assumptions are the basis of order; the resulting reality is thus fragile, unlike an empirical object (Reynolds 1993).

Ethnomethodology was developed as a direct response to Durkheim's approach to social facts (Garfinkel 2002). While Durkheim (1965 [1915]) wrote that social order constitutes an objective reality, Garfinkel (1967) counters that social facts are ongoing accomplishments that are constantly renovated. Accordingly, along with CBPAR, ethnomethodology rejects the notion that communities or researchers can be objective, passive observers of social reality. For Garfinkel (1991), social "reality" is not a collection of facts that are physical objects, and, further, certainly not something that can be placed in categories *a priori* by researchers who have never visited a community, or spoke with any of its members.

There is no unmediated natural or social reality in ethnomethodology, due to the influence of phenomenology, since the world is a "plenum" that can be (re)constructed in many ways (Garfinkel 1986). Similarly to CBPAR, ethnomethodology rejects the presuppositions of positivism and questions the need for objectivity in research. Having been influenced by the early work of Parsons (1937) and the view that the world is a disorganized social structure, Garfinkel (2002) tried to solve the problem of order without

resorting to the traditional method recommended by Durkheim of transcending the plenum. A plenum is a disorganized state but not a condition devoid of meaning.

Nonetheless, this meaning must be stabilized and brought to presence.

Ethnomethodology, in essence, provides a way to create order in the plenum, or a way to organize social facts in a way that is orderly and meaningful (Garfinkel 1986).

Social facts, for Garfinkel (2002), are sounds, movements, and actions in social gatherings and in communities that are recognizable by others as intelligible and coherent. The perception and production of coherence must precede any intelligible use of any concepts, or what he considers to be the “just-thisness” of things. In ethnomethodology, “primary coherences” are the outgrowth of (inter)action that sustains a particular interpretation of reality as normative.

As a result of this connection between human action and meaning, or reality, the social world is referred to as the *lebenswelt*, or “life-world,” by ethnomethodologists. Since Garfinkel’s (1967) ethnomethodological approach is heavily influenced by Schutz (1967) and phenomenology, the everyday world is thought to embody human action. The basic idea is that the world does not consist of “dead” empirical indicators, but rather is “enlivened” by the values, beliefs, and commitments of community members. For this reason, the world is considered to be alive. And the appropriate study of this living world requires sensitivity to the various aspects of human action that shape social reality (Dourish 2004).

The resulting reality, accordingly, is characterized as the product of “mundane reasoning” (Pollner 2010). Rather than universal, ethnomethodologists believe that reason is enacted locally. With respect to communities, the point is that these groups

may enact very different forms of reason. A researcher, accordingly, should be sensitive to how reason, and thus norms and expectations, are instituted locally (Garfinkel 1967).

Ethnomethodology shares with CBPAR the rejection of universality and the generation of law-like statements (Garfinkel 2002). Beyond this issue, ethnomethodologists have rejected the notion that the sociological viewpoint represents a privileged position from which to observe social reality (Randall and Sharrock 2011). CBPAR along with ethnomethodology incorporates the viewpoints of “lay” people, or non-academics, and their positions and opinions into key parts of the research. Essentially, the point is that researchers are not necessarily more equipped to interpret “correctly” the experiences of community members. People within communities understand what is going on around them and should be integral parts of the research process.

Where CBPAR makes a break from ethnomethodology involves the approach taken to research, since ethnomethodology still favors a more passive interpretation of social reality (Maynard and Clayman 1991). Community members serve as “epistemological guides” in CBPAR and are involved at every stage of a project; ethnomethodology does not require such participation (Israel et al. 2001). Along these lines, CBPAR is similar to ethnomethodology with respect to knowledge production, but there is a caveat. Specifically, CBPAR seeks projects that enact social change (Macaulay et al. 1999). To this end, the goal of this change is stated explicitly and shared with members of the community. Based on this process, the aim of CBPAR is to influence public policy and improve the lives of the members of the community. Similar to

phenomenology, ethnomethodology has been criticized for not advancing a political position or a perspective on change.

### 3.4 Shared Epistemology of Previous Community-Based Studies

The shared epistemology of CBPAR and previous community-based studies is a more complicated matter than the differences between SI and ethnomethodology. Rather than focusing on epistemology, previous community-based studies have often embraced many aspects of the research process that are vital to CBPAR. Nonetheless, the epistemologies of these early studies are difficult to establish, along with how they are shared with CBPAR and put into practice.

One of the earliest works by Warner (1959) examined American class and the possibility for economic mobility in communities. Warner theorizes that communities are dynamic and changing, and exhibit great variation, and thus discovering generalities is very difficult. Unfortunately, Warner harbored outdated views on marriage and adopted an offensive method for categorizing community members (Thernstrom 1965). A CBPAR researcher would disagree, for example, with Warner's classification of community members based on their class position, such as his description of lower class communities as "river brookers" or "low down Yankees." Such categorization, without much in-depth communication, would be more in line with positivism than CBPAR (Blackshaw 2010).

Along with using offensive categories, early community-based researchers often defined communities based on them being "from the other side of the tracks" or the "wrong type of neighborhood" (Elliott, Haney, and Sams-Abiodun 2010). By depicting communities as "ugly neighborhoods" or places that are undesirable, geography began to

express values (Smith 1976). According to this line of thinking, communities are not established by their members, but reflect stereotypes that were often found to be degrading. Therefore, CBPAR favors a partnership approach and seeks to end depicting communities by using such reified language and categorizations (Israel et al. 1994). In fact, CBPAR favors a strategy that is collaborative, while early community-based studies avoided collaboration and used irrelevant and often derogatory categories.

Community-based studies by Grannis (1998) have also examined the “actual” interactions of community members and compare these to their reported interactions. Nevertheless, he contends that only through the construction of “tertiary communities,” which respect the normal flow of pedestrian traffic, can the true geospatial boundaries be discovered. Tertiary communities, or “t-communities,” are neighborhoods constructed from natural boundaries such as rivers, lakes, and mountains along with highways, train tracks, and parks. In the end, t-communities are neighborhoods constructed by researchers based on pre-determined social indicators for a definable geographic area.

T-communities are developed to reflect the “true interactions” among community members, and give better results in data collection and analysis. This methodology is useful if the researcher is trying to determine homogenized social units for the purpose of undertaking statistical analysis of a community, but the real characteristics are lost in this process (Minkler 2011). Finally, t-communities, while providing units that are easily processed by statistical methods, are not a product of consultations with the members of a community, and are devoid of the meaning that is valuable to CBPAR. In reality, researchers who construct these abstract communities are re-drawing their boundaries based on criteria that reflect the judgment of the researcher.



What t-communities represent are units that researchers or planners believe are important rather than the actual associations within communities (Wallerstein 2006). Such abstractions are simply necessary for maximizing social measurement, but most likely irrelevant for public policy. By imposing these geospatial boundaries on community members, the typical outcome is to reify the issues that are engaged by CBPAR (Israel et al. 2006). But, if the goal is to reach the homogeneity necessary for calculations, then the question must be asked whether the community is being kept in mind during this type of research.

Other research is aware of the challenges of defining neighborhoods without the input of community members (Coulton et al. 2001). But, instead of altering their epistemology based on this insight, these scholars have decided to work towards eliminating the “misspecification” of neighborhoods through technological GIS innovations (Foster and Hipp 2011). Such an approach acknowledges the limitations of boundaries predicated on census-tract information or administrative frameworks, and seeks to re-draw schemes based on aggregate data. This strategy solves some problems while creating others. For example, the ecological fallacy, which will be discussed in more detail in Chapter Five, demonstrates how a relationship that may be statistically significant on the aggregate level does not necessarily hold for individuals (Robinson 1950). In this case, the community members, whose housing relocation made sense on the aggregate level in the Movement To Opportunities Program (MTO), rejected the new housing assignment later because these changes did not make sense to individual families. Most examples of such aggregate data substitute social indicators for the collective judgments of communities (Higgins and Metzler 2001).

Some of the more recent community-based studies incorporate many of the assumptions of CBPAR, such as communities are dynamic, mobile, socially constructed, and emerge through interaction (Sampson 2011). Where these strategies diverge from CBPAR is that instead of relying on the community, the point is to find better social indicators to map clear networks, power relations, and the sources of problems (Sampson et al. 2002). While this line of thinking uses the most sophisticated modeling techniques to date, there is little effort to consult the definitions community members use to identify themselves as a group. In CBPAR, this information is thought to be essential to discussing valid data.

Further, CBPAR would agree with recent community-based studies in advocating for community partnerships, especially in terms of encouraging community leadership and organizations to take an active role in promoting the well-being of neighborhoods. However, CBPAR goes beyond simply identifying networks. Instead, CBPAR would stress how these networks interact with community members for the purpose of enacting social change. Additionally, CBPAR questions the effectiveness of decision-making without input from the people who stand to benefit from research and other projects.

### 3.5 Chapter Summary

The groundwork has now been laid for a research philosophy that offers alternatives to positivism and earlier community-based studies. CBPAR, while having an epistemology similar to SI and ethnomethodology, provides an alternative to previous research projects that does not seek to minimize or overcome the human element by discovering more sophisticated social indicators. Despite many of the similarities

covered in the chapter, there are serious differences between CBPAR and these research strategies with respect to studying communities.

Additionally, when comparing the differences between CBPAR and earlier projects, an important consideration is the impact any differences might have on research. As others have pointed out, not including the people who actually live in communities is problematic (Coulton, Theodos, and Turner 2009). And from the perspective of CBPAR, this omission cannot be corrected by the introduction of sophisticated statistical models and other software (Sinton and Lund 2007). In the next chapter, CBPAR will be examined, along with the advantages of this strategy for community research.

## **CHAPTER 4: COMMUNITY-BASED PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH AS AN EMERGING ALTERNATIVE**

The groundwork has been laid for an alternate approach that highlights collaboration and democratization without trying to adhere to the impossible standard of objectivity. CBPAR embraces the human element and does not treat community members like objects, participants, or subjects of research. With this in mind, CBPAR highlights the important role of theory in research without trying to justify the use of social indicators. Correspondingly, the goal in CBPAR is to engage community members in a culturally sensitive way, rather than devising ways to reach conclusions about their behavior divorced from their interpretation of social reality. Once collaboration and democratization are highlighted, CBPAR attempts to empower groups that have been previously minimized to create an environment that is conducive to finding creative and shared solutions that are beneficial for a community.

What CBPAR is proposing is an entirely different way to generate knowledge, one that advocates a modified “collective action” approach. In view of contemporary theory, collective action describes the behavior of a group of actors, and their reactions in a community setting, directed to changing an established position (Touraine 1985). This approach, also called the “stakeholder method,” is reflexive, identifies all relevant stakeholders, and empowers groups to change social order (Strand et al. 2003). The advantage of using this approach is that the focus remains not only the actors within the community and their respective positions, but also their struggles within a specific historical and cultural context.

For example, terminology has frequently been used by previous community-based research that states communities are “lost,” “gained,” “destroyed,” “smart,” or at the whims of titanic “social struggles,” but such language used without context has little meaning for projects that are truly embedded in a particular neighborhood. Additionally, this terminology is often hyperbolic and not used by community members to understand or describe their daily lives.

The challenge then becomes promoting and assessing “relevant knowledge” at every stage of a community-based project (Vega and Murphy 1990). This knowledge is generated by people in their daily struggle to survive, and should be recognized by the academic community as integral to the process of research (Roux 1991). CBPAR, in this line of thinking, can be described as taking ideas and processes that were already underway from community members, and transforms these factors into a dynamic vehicle that allows for reflection, problem solving, and cooperation. With these outcomes in mind, relevant knowledge is determined by the people’s day to day pace of life, interests, and the importance they attribute to changing conditions within their communities.

#### 4.1 An Epistemological Beginning

A unique facet of CBPAR is that this approach cannot be traced back to a seminal or classical work that has established a unifying standard for all future epistemological endeavors (Rahman 1991). In this regard, CBPAR is actually similar to “open source” programming and has been refined and advanced continually as a philosophy since the 1950s and 60s, while keeping some core epistemological principles and adapting others as theory in the field advances. Accordingly, CBPAR was inspired originally by the ideals of “class struggle” with the resulting actions of the oppressed leading to collective

action. With the concept of collective action in mind, the perpetual struggle for resources and the allocation of power within societies led to polarization, whereby some groups became self-aware of their circumstances surrounding their lives and their communities. The onset of this insight compelled them to participate in processes aimed to reduce the gap between those who have and those who do not have social power.

There are also situations where those who maintain power erect barriers to stifle the collaborative and democratic process. Furthermore, identifying the facilitative role of the researcher in these situations is necessary to work through pertinent issues and address the influence of power structures with the relevant stakeholders (Maiter et al. 2012). In this regard, CBPAR practitioners must often challenge these sources of power to provide the space necessary for a community to be self-determining. This shared commitment to changing the conventional power structures is an integral part of CBPAR's agenda for community change (Miller, Rivera and Gonzalez, 2011).

Using previous terminology, this struggle has been classified as a quest for "liberation" (Fals Borda 1985). However, the dominant view of social transformation is often so preoccupied with challenging the established social power brokers, such as a political party or an oppressive company, that the convergence between dominant and oppressed groups is often obscured (Rahman 1991). But people cannot be liberated by a consciousness and knowledge other than their own, and thus a participatory strategy is necessary not only to mobilize the masses but develop an endogenous process of social development. This need for an emerging alternative gave rise to CBPAR, with the explicit goal to empower communities and produce knowledge through their own

verification channels, along with the right to disseminate and use this knowledge in a way that is guided by their own principles.

In addition to advocating that communities become self-sufficient through the production of their own knowledge, CBPAR has several other epistemological influences that tie theory closely to this approach to research (Montero 1996). For example, the Marxian concept of “praxis” has often been used to describe the process of social change in the midst of oppression and neglect (Gianotten and de Wit 1991). This prospect of putting theory into practice for delivering social change is necessary because a relationship exists between a community and larger interests that needs to be examined if any significant transformation is going to occur. The aim of CBPAR then becomes a task of equipping oppressed groups to acquire sufficient creative and transformative leverage to change the nature of these relationships. With the larger picture in mind, socio-political thought must be generated that a community values and is willing to follow.

Another source of epistemological grounding comes from the assumption that knowledge does not exist only in the realm of (social) science (Montero 1996). The knowledge that is generated from CBPAR is not the property of academics who wish to publish and share information with other “experts” (Fals Borda 1969). The knowledge linked to CBPAR should be generated by and stay with the community. Specifically, researchers should not view their goals as externally motivated, but situated within the project and giving a voice to the community. Often times, so called “experts” are detrimental to a project because they do not have any ties to a community and are viewed as having a knowledge base that is objective and thus universal (Strand et al. 2003).

In this regard, CBPAR shares an epistemological position with ethnomethodology and phenomenology, which maintains that everyday life is the proper basis for research and daily interactions are the centerpiece of any project that hopes to change successfully the conditions in a community (Nyoni 1991). Most important is that the perceptions of community members have a great impact on everyday behavior and direct their struggle to improve the existing standard of living and to defend and promote their way of life and their ability to work, educate themselves, play, and participate in important activities, such as religion or family.

Social constructionism is an epistemological assumption of CBPAR, that is, people actively construct their social reality and develop reflective processes for the interpretation and evaluation of knowledge (Montero 1996). Accordingly, community-based phenomena are assumed to be based on interactions and dialogical relationships between individual members. And since human beings are assumed to be the active creators of their own reality, many different expressions of actions must be acknowledged in CBPAR. To be sure, the focus on social constructivism ensures that the direction and modification of change are always derived from the community.

The political implications of the constructivist paradigm for community change are grounded in social action and the related non-dualistic epistemology. In fact, CBPAR is tied closely to an epistemology with a critical edge—at the heart of constructivism are interpretation and the implied reflexivity, since community members can respond to and constantly modify any constructed signifiers (Parr 2005). In other words, since norms are now viewed to be constructed, even those that sustain a repressive polity, these rules are understood to be signifiers that can be (re)interpreted or dismissed altogether (Guattari



1984). Because the social world consists of dominant signifiers that can be reinterpreted, or reconstructed, the symbolic nature of reality is revealed and available for change, if a community is properly mobilized to act in novel ways.

#### 4.2 A Collaborative and Sustainable Process

Two broad lessons have been put forward by the classical work of Fals Borda (1955) with respect to collaboration, which is one of the integral parts of CBPAR. The first is that collaboration is important for the interaction and organization of a project, and should be present at every stage of the researcher's work in a community. And second, collaboration is important in helping a community to understand itself within the larger contextual and historical framework. In this regard, the relationship of the researcher and the community becomes almost seamless and thus defies the traditional dualistic association that is thought to guarantee objectivity. To participate means to immerse oneself voluntarily in a community to obtain and disseminate pertinent knowledge (Adler and Haas 1992).

“Authentic participation” is defined as rooted in the cultural traditions and respectful of community members and their common history (Fals Borda 1985). Accordingly, the researcher must reduce the traditional tension that is created when communities are viewed as vulnerable groups who are guided through the research process. Such paternalism, even if implemented under the guise of scientific rigor, is no longer acceptable. Therefore, the distance must be reduced between grassroots communities and the academic researcher so that the unencumbered participation of citizens is possible.

The fact remains, however, that community members are best suited to describe their beliefs and situations, and therefore should have the most prominent role in transforming their reality (Salazar 1991). Due to this role, the researcher becomes a facilitator, or participant “conceptualizer” (Greenberg 2004). In other words, the researcher assists community members in putting the processes of understanding and knowledge gathering to work, and Fals Borda (1955) demonstrated the concept of authentic participation in Colombia, whereby the participants were able to describe their needs and give their communities a new directive grounded in their traditions and history. There is no need, as Fals Borda (1985) describes, to rely on distant philosophical referents derived from academic traditions, or from other places in the world that have little to do with the community in question. Such referents may supply legitimacy, but often misguide a project.

The process of collaboration has the potential for producing two important benefits, including the critical recovery of history and the value of applying local culture to the mobilization of the community (Rahman and Fals Borda 1991). In the case of critical recovery of history, there must be a conscious effort to invoke, through collective memory, relevant knowledge experienced in the past by the community and determine how this information is important to any future endeavors. For example, oral traditions, such as the accounts by older members of the community, may contain vital information with respect to how this group solved problems previously that have been forgotten or discarded. In this way, folk information can be discovered to contain regional and national historical importance and can become vital to the success of a CBPAR project.

History can also be used in conjunction with applying folk culture, through recognition of important traditional core values or beliefs to mobilize communities (Fals Borda 1985). By incorporating the traditions and important aspects of a culture, researchers are able to take into account practices that are ignored frequently by social indicator research, such as political practice, art, music, drama, sports, myths, and other expressions of the human condition. For example, Fals Borda's (1955) pointed out that religion and agriculture were vital cultural elements that needed to be incorporated into social projects to ensure their success. Specifically, workers are motivated by their religion and community members often looked to different saints for motivation and guidance.

A more recent aspect in CBPAR described by Minkler and Wallerstein (2011) is reaching equilibrium with respect to environmental aspects and other communities. An important theoretical consideration in any CBPAR project must be its environmental impact and how this endeavor affects other communities, and the world as a whole. These considerations have been demonstrated to be valuable, for example, in various projects concerning agricultural practices, since certain fertilizers and even the types of crops must be carefully evaluated for their environmental impact and possible agricultural runoff (Roling and Wagemakers 1998).

The goal is to reach equilibrium with nature and not to contribute to environmental damage or climate change. Other health aspects, such as using chemicals and building materials that could be potentially harmful to community members, or are produced in areas that use exploited labor, are important research areas to be considered (Israel et al. 2005). Furthermore, the energy use and waste levels of community-based

projects also must be evaluated in a collaborative and democratic way. In many cases, agricultural CBPAR projects that were assessed positively earlier are being rejected by communities with regard to sustainability and food safety, due to their methods of production and lack of humane treatment of animals (Fals Borda 1991)

With respect to other communities and equilibrium, communities that use CBPAR projects in diverse regions of India or Somalia demonstrate that they understand the needs of not only their community, but are sensitive to the religious beliefs and customs of others as well (Temple and Moran 2011). For example, migrant and refugee communities are not necessarily tied to a single geographic place and have diverse religious expressions, which must be in harmony with outside communities that interact with these migrant spaces. In this case, adaptation and evaluation are critical because of the potential interactions between new communities and established ones. Given this example, communities that are not new or temporary should take care to evaluate how different historical, cultural, or religious beliefs could potentially interact in ways that may disrupt the equilibrium between groups.

#### 4.3 Democratizing and Demystifying Community Involvement

Staying true to the concept of collaboration, “authentic participation” is necessary in order to achieve the goals of empowerment and recognition (Fals Borda 1985). But such participation is not just a matter of voting, or trying to establish a representative democracy, but rather the goal is developing a truly participatory process. This change in philosophy is important since CBPAR does not rely on representatives; instead, participation is encouraged at every level of a discussion from all interested stakeholders.

This idea of a “dialectical relationship” championed by Freire (1982) for participatory research serves as the foundational background for the democratizing process under which CBPAR works. By breaking down barriers between researchers and those who are part of the research, community members begin to view themselves as researchers who are able to investigate reality for themselves and develop a conscious awareness of their situation (Fals Borda 1985). For example, coal miners may discover a great deal of knowledge by investigating the habits of their employers, alliances may develop among field and office employees, and new skills may be acquired by community members.

This transformation of community members into researchers, or “organic” intellectuals, is a concept in CBPAR that enables community members to investigate their reality and come to conclusions in alternative ways (Rahman and Fals Borda 1996). Community members are capable of analyzing their own reality, but do so in a way that makes sense and is practical for them. Defining their reality does not occur in accordance with scientific rules, but rather through language, culture, feelings, and experiences that can be shared. Instead of adhering to foreign principles of verification, often imported through computer software or other technical means, community members rely on experience and interpretation that forms the basis of this “organic” alternative (Lingis 1994). Due to this alternative analysis, community members are able to develop solutions to problems that make sense and are contextually relevant to their situation.

In democratizing and demystifying knowledge, two important stages have been identified as essential to participation. The first is to “break” the linguistic code not only in terms of interpreting and mastering a horizontal communication process that

incorporates folk culture, but also in unmasking the linguistic code that has been used by elite groups to monopolize knowledge (Fals Borda 1991). These two goals are important to democratize culture and thus differentiate discourse from necessities, thereby eliminating erected or perceived barriers to communication and participation (Cornwall and Coelho 2007). Ultimately, the extent that participatory democracy is successful is judged on the level of participation in the public sphere. Furthermore, inclusion is necessary, but alone is insufficient to foster participation and the democratization of culture that is essential for the recognition of novel knowledge bases and proposals.

Participatory democracy depends on many contextual factors for encouraging participation. For example, the conjunction of enabling policies and legal frameworks, well-coordinated and articulate social actors, a theoretical design that encourages participation and collaboration, and empowerment of historically marginalized groups are among the issues that must be addressed (Cornwall 2002). Additionally, the avoidance of apathy and despair are important to bringing groups into a forum that encourages all stakeholders to be heard. In the case of Coelho's (2004) work in Brazil, democratic participation in projects depended on finding new spaces for democratic engagement, but also ensuring that social change is possible.

Democracy is not simply something superficial, but includes the right and ability of stakeholders to challenge existing barriers, such as paternalism, authoritarianism, and corruption. A guaranteed place in a discussion is an important first step, but expanding the participatory sphere is only one part of a much broader picture that includes a tolerance of diverse ideas, an understanding that change is possible, and the reality that institutions can be challenged by all stakeholders (Cornwall and Coelho 2007). While

holding true to the principle that knowledge is part of and belongs to a community, relationships and networks are also important in improving conditions (Tilakaratna 1991). The ability of community members to build skills, interact with appropriate groups, and establish democratic objectives are basic to the growth of a community.

#### 4.4 The Generation of Community-Based Knowledge

Following the recognition that community development proceeds hand-in-hand with historical and cultural sensitivity, the task of democratization and knowledge generation can take hold (Rahman and Fals Borda 1991). To this end, empowerment is the link between a community and how the knowledge generated in CBPAR is used. Basic to CBPAR is the fact that one type of knowledge production is not inherently superior to others, and as such no one particular political group, academic or political player, technocrat, or outside “expert” is better equipped to recognize or decide how to allocate resources within communities.

CBPAR researchers are especially concerned with the return of knowledge to communities. The goal of this process as noted in this quotation, is the emergence of counter-values established by this knowledge:

The legitimation of the counter-values, of course, is not found in the established social order but rather in the emerging one. And the effectiveness of the change may be measured to the degree that the reformist groups become reference groups within the framework of the emerging social order and finally become dominant groups therein. This occurs because traditional values at this time begin to be displaced or assimilated by the new counter-values that are legitimated now not by local traditional groups but by the reference groups representing change. (Fals Borda 1966: 190)

In turn, counter-values lead to counter-norms that are legitimate alternatives expressed by the community as a whole. The cumulative effect of these values leads communities to recognize their circumstances and alter their social reality.

Once this new knowledge base has been internalized, the dialogue changes to evaluate whether marginal or significant change has taken place (Fals Borda 1966). Significant change occurs when various sectors of the social order call for adjustments in the existing patterns of values based on collective aims that are disseminated through the return of knowledge to the community. Marginal change, on the other hand, is the partial or minor modification of the collective goals of a community. The determination whether partial and significant change has taken place is a reflexive process that shifts strategies and proceeds based on the democratic will of the community. At this juncture is where the patience, flexibility, and experience of the researcher pays off in working in a collaborative manner to move a project in a direction that is consistent with the feedback received from this reflexive process.

The introduction of democratic knowledge, in other words, will not necessarily result in the dissolution of relationships predicated on power. In many aspects, CBPAR is a political process that contains a political agenda for a community (Rahman and Borda 1991). Consequently, CBPAR should always be conscious of the political influences on a community. In the process of CBPAR, projects often affect vested interests that maintain political power. In order to mitigate the influence of these interests, and to judge their respective positions, engaging politicians and other political decision makers from the beginning of a project is crucial not only to secure their support, but also to find out if their backing is possible (Wilmsen 2005). If political groups and other powerful interests in a community can be involved and aligned with a project, they become important advocates that provide resources and input that may be important for an intervention to come to fruition.



Due to the potentially positive or negative impact of power brokers, their likely influence on CBPAR projects should be assessed. As part of their role as community facilitators, CBPAR researchers are concerned with empowerment and equalizing relationships between powerful interest groups and the members of a community (Wilmsen 2005). Often, however, the goal of effecting social change means taking further steps to create more equitable relationships of power within communities, or between them and external entities such as government agencies, corporations, or NGOs. Identifying and breaking these barriers down with participatory democracy is essential to dealing with the influence of political power (Fals Borda 1985). Along these lines, researchers should remember that there is no universal solution to challenge political power, as each CBPAR project presents unique challenges that must be grounded in the contextual values of a particular community.

#### 4.5 Perceived Limitations and How They are Addressed

Previous criticisms of CBPAR have stated that relying on the experiences of people as a basis of knowledge is too subjective and unscientific (Rahman 1991). Others have pointed out that democratizing participation has limits related to the fact that communities may produce or develop all the knowledge that is necessary for the success of a project, because relevant knowledge may exist outside of their realm of experience (Gaventa 1991). Certainly situations may arise where community members have a need for outside knowledge, and thus adhering rigidly to knowledge produced only within a community may be counterproductive. As should be understood, a key part of the collaborative and facilitative role of the researcher is the pursuit of appropriate

knowledge that is necessary for a CBPAR project to be successful, and if this process is truly democratic, then outside sources will not dominate the discussion.

Additionally, communities are expected to reach out to others through a communicative process, in accordance with the previously mentioned principle of equilibrium, to make sure that a CBPAR project is not affecting other aspects of society (Fals Borda 1991). In fact, part of “community building” is reaching out to the larger world. The most important consideration, however, is that the researcher does not set the agenda when this knowledge is returned to a community. In CBPAR, the goal of advancing this type of knowledge is providing greater justice, which can only occur if this process is built on collaboration, discussion, and if necessary, the inclusion of intermediaries (Gaventa 1991).

As for the criticism that CBPAR is subjective or unscientific, the basic position of this approach is that there is value and meaning in everyday activities, and that this reality guides the life of communities (Gevanta 1991). There is no doubt that this principle breaks with the Cartesianism that subtends traditional science, but is consistent with trends in contemporary social philosophy that disregards this position. Subsequent to the challenge posed to Cartesianism by phenomenology and symbolic interactionism, for example, validity should be tied to how community members construct their worlds. Allowing communities to determine an appropriate knowledge base is thus not an outlandish position, given the importance of human actors in current epistemologies (Rahman 1993).

#### 4.6 Social Justice

The concept of social justice, particularly the “just city” developed by Harvey (1973), is an approach to planning whereby citizens are involved to insure better outcomes. The notion of just outcomes, as they pertain to CBPAR, pertains to whether communities are achieving fair results, or an equal distribution of goods and services (Fainstein 2001). In this regard, social justice is contrasted usually with charity—social justice is collaborative while charity is not. Social justice, accordingly, encourages community autonomy, while charity fosters dependency (Fainstein 2000).

The field of service-learning highlights many social justice issues such as poverty, homeless, equality, and health (Cipolle 2010). Through service-learning programs, for example, CBPAR researchers can more thoroughly understand these issues and the methods used to solve social injustices. In particular, the collaborative process of CBPAR can give rise to a critical consciousness in communities that is essential for the promotion of social justice (Freire, 1982).

Staying true to the paradigm of constructivism, social justice is an outgrowth of discourse that is reflexive and recognizes ethnic and other differences (Fainstein 2001). In the process of participatory democracy, the existence of barriers or groups that stand in the way of social justice are revealed to be illegitimate and exposed to critique. Addressing social justice means reflecting critically on these barriers to participation, but in the end this insight must be translated into community action. The CBPAR researcher is a vital part of this sort of community-building and activism.

#### 4.7 Other Considerations

Contrary to some positions held in CBPAR literature, the position taken in this thesis is that the development of grassroots mobilizations and working communities is not something to be seen as easy, or a philosophy that researchers can easily adopt (Fals Borda 1985). Researchers may not be ready initially to enter communities, especially ones that are unfamiliar, due to their inexperience with any collaborative approach. Furthermore, they must keep in mind at all stages of the research that CBPAR values sustainability and equilibrium. The connection to a community, accordingly, is not determined, for example, either by data collection or funding requirements, but broader epistemological and ethical concerns. Additionally, potential CBPAR researchers need to recognize the scale of the project that they are initiating, and appreciate the barriers that may prevent community members from becoming involved. All of these interactions may not be visible at the beginning of a project.

Another potential consideration for a researcher that wishes to pursue CBPAR relates to the ties that are established with a community and often last for a lifetime (Fals Borda 1969). The selection of communities to develop CBPAR projects is not random and often represents a very personal experience for the researcher. As in the case of Fals Borda's (1955) work in Colombia, he has quoted family members with respect to their reactions to struggles within society. In this regard, he views the success of CBPAR projects in a personal way. This level of interest in the success of a community becomes a powerful factor for a researcher, and can be viewed as a source of motivation rather than a methodological flaw.

A final consideration pertains to the future of CBPAR, particularly following the success of various projects. For example, Rahman (1991) wrote that the CBPAR movement is threatening to become a respectable, institutionalized movement that would most likely benefit from an influx of resources such as money, publicity, and additional researchers. In gaining this status and no longer offering a “new” or “unique” perspective, some critics have questioned whether this respectability will corrupt the main epistemological foundations of CBPAR and the ability of this approach to empower communities through grassroots interventions (Nyoni 1991). Additionally, there will be researchers who will apply the assumptions of CBPAR to other fields, in ways that were never intended, to secure political power or economic gains. As potential CBPAR researchers grapple with whether the role of “community facilitator” is appropriate for them, they should be aware of the history and influences that may shape the future of this strategy.

#### 4.8 Chapter Summary

As demonstrated by this chapter, CBPAR is a continually evolving philosophy for the study and empowerment of communities, with the focus on the collaborative generation of knowledge used to support social action. Essential to this process is a substantial change in the traditional researcher/subject relationship. Particularly important is that the resulting knowledge is not brought to the community as a “gift,” and certainly not something that “armchair ideologists” or “urban experts” can produce with the most advanced computational statistics (Fals Borda 1985).

This philosophy seeks to give voice to those who have been previously disregarded or forgotten by the main power brokers in society, but when mobilized can

create their own destiny (Nyoni 1991). By exposing power structures to be counterproductive and unequal, CBPAR returns knowledge to the people who have the most to gain from reflecting on this information. The experiences of “common” or “peasant” individuals then becomes the basis of analyzing and reorganizing society in a way that promotes a democratic and accountable society.

The implications of the changes covered in this chapter, particularly the notion of participatory knowledge, are profound for public policy. In the next chapter the impact of adapting a CBPAR philosophy to community research will be examined, along with examples of success in empowering communities. Conversely, the dangers of basing public policy on social indicators will be discussed, with a review of several projects designed to illustrate a future path of research.

## CHAPTER 5: BEST PRACTICES

This chapter is where the epistemology of CBPAR meets practical application, as a review of various projects will demonstrate what has worked and outline some of the most creative solutions that have emerged. There are many best practices available that can impel potential researchers to learn how to come up with creative solutions in a collaborative manner, in order to address the complex needs of communities. Further, the training of new researchers is one of the most promising avenues to foster collaborative projects (Crane and O'Regan 2010). The emphasis, as such, should be on developing practical solutions to problems based on sound evidence. Relying on such information to guide planning, however, is not to suggest that data are used divorced from community action.

There are many examples of community-based projects that have failed, even when communities received exactly what they needed and wanted. But, since no attempts were made to engage or collaborate with the relevant communities, the implementation or planning of such projects did not proceed as intended or was rejected. These failures have serious implications for public policies and individual lives. A key concept is related to focusing on “concentrated poverty,” and the assumption that this indicator should be measured objectively, with interventions related to lowering this number (Sampson, Raudenbush, and Earls 1997). Given this assumption, problems emerge when researchers use social indicators to represent reality, and thereby introduce assumptions thought to be universal, but are foreign to a community. In both cases reductionism and the misapplication of knowledge are common.

Additionally, the ecological fallacy documented most prominently in epidemiology will be discussed to illustrate why individual findings do not automatically pertain to an entire community. In community-based research, the problems with discovering knowledge that is specifically relevant to individuals will also be discussed. Beyond this, the assumption academics harbor that the application of knowledge is not their responsibility, but is solely the responsibility of policy makers or government officials, will be discussed.

Specific examples of projects such as Moving to Opportunity (MTO) will be assessed with the goal of incorporating the earlier discussion of positivism, and thus showing how these interventions differ from CBPAR in application. In general, the focus of this chapter is to highlight the processes by which solutions were found and implemented using either social indicators or the collaborative process. With CBPAR, however, the task of dissemination is not left to outside groups to fill in the missing pieces or interpret the best course of action. CBPAR is an emerging alternative that intends to train new individuals who are personally invested in communities, so that action is carried out and “the equation is balanced” (Reardon et al. 2001).

### 5.1 Best Practices In Community-Based Projects

CBPAR should be undertaken in a manner that does not rely on the traditional method of expert analysis, but instead uses data that emerge from collaboration to evaluate and establish the direction of a project (Sackett et al. 2000). Borrowed from the health field, “best practices” is a term employed to identify evidence-based solutions that prove to be effective (Melnyk and Fineout-Overholt 2011). When adopting this approach, CBPAR researchers and communities come together, along with all relevant



stakeholders, to evaluate the impact of a project on a community. In this process, all relevant stakeholders must determine what should be viewed as evidence, how this information should be used, and how this knowledge will likely affect a community (Wallerstein and Duran 2010).

In this evidence-based approach, there are no set guidelines that communities must follow, except that researchers should relay all evidence to communities in ways that the members understand, are useful, and can be disseminated in a timely fashion (Casey 1998). Any overemphasis on technical terminology or traditional research language can be detrimental, because community members and other stakeholders do not necessarily adopt these terms. Additionally, the evidence must have a practical application (Kitson et al. 2008). In this regard, evidence should not be presented as existing *sui generis*, but should be adapted to the perspectives and needs of stakeholders.

The real challenge is when the evidence-based knowledge is turned to practice-based solutions (Macaulay and Nutting 2006). With the advancements in the theoretical tenants of CBPAR that foster the transformation of evidence into practice, most important is that problem solving and change are guided by stakeholders rather than abstract theories or other formulas. Indeed, the interplay between evidence and practice is quite special for CBPAR. Evidence influences practice, which in turn alters the research strategy in a reflective, ethical, and collaborative way. For example, when practice is changed, additional evidence is gathered on the effectiveness of this change (Kitson et al. 2008). This cyclical process of evaluation provides a sound method to examine community-based projects, given the ample opportunity for community consultation and feedback.

What separates CBPAR from other methods of qualitative evaluation and research is its incorporation of many different aspects of approaches to research, and while also utilizing a different method of inquiry (Patton 1990). While some areas of qualitative research incorporate participant observation in communities, they refrain from actively developing community-based projects with a specific political agenda. Other theoretical orientations incorporate participation and action, but do not introduce a collaborative level of inquiry. In turn, some research agendas cover participation, action, and collaboration, but they may neglect sustainability, return of knowledge to the community, or even equilibrium (Minkler and Wallerstein 2011). CBPAR incorporates all of these perspectives into a single philosophy for empowering marginalized groups while seeking social change.

The final stage is turning practice-based solutions into public policies. One of the most successful examples of this process is the program of the National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute that establishes a network of community-based organizations that provides heart health education strategies aimed at changing physician practices and patient behaviors, in order to provide communities with better health outcomes (National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute 2012). Working in various communities to raise awareness about health, the institute sponsors healthy and fun recreation, sport, and leisure activities for community participation. For example, in the Hearts N' Parks Program, the goal is to provide a venue for creative expression so that each community chooses its activities in a democratic way and involves community leaders, businesses, and members to increase participation. The program encourages people to walk in parks to raise awareness about cardiovascular disease, while also allowing them to spend time

with their friends and families in activities they enjoy. Additionally, by choosing outdoor activities, these programs cultivate, maintain, and protect natural and cultural resources (National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute, 2011).

Community-based research has become an important consideration of the World Bank, and accounts for a portfolio of \$7 billion in projects, as poverty reduction strategies have shifted based on evidence and practice-based solutions (Mansuri and Rao 2004). This approach has had specific implications around the globe. For example, the World Bank has focused on reaching indigenous populations with targeted health and poverty reduction grants. If these programs had relied only on geography, or focused on social indicators, researchers never would have been able to engage smaller pockets within a larger group. Using averages, some communities like Braun, Thiele, and Fernandez (2000) examined would have been completely ignored. For example, local farmers can be incorporated into a pest management control strategy that accessed their local knowledge. Without a philosophy that incorporated these farmers, they would have never known about the habits of local pests, or about the knowledge or interests that indigenous groups harbored.

The philosophy of CBPAR in research fundamentally challenges the traditional basis of knowledge in a community, giving voice to groups such as indigenous populations, racial minorities, and those in poverty (Naples 1998). The analysis of social change starts with the formation of the everyday world of experience and uses these insights as valuable knowledge. This shift in epistemology, in effect, challenges traditional power structures, so that marginalized groups around the world are given a place in the participatory democracy.

## 5.2 The Dangers of Social Indicators: Moving to Opportunity

At the time Freire (1982) was writing about groups becoming conscious of their oppression in the 1980's, discontent was emerging with community-based projects. The public began to believe that money spent to address many pertinent issues, such as poverty, health, education, and sanitation, were not producing the intended results (Mansuri and Rao 2004). What these large-scale, government-initiated projects lacked went beyond the fact that they performed poorly or depleted community resources. The problem was that these projects disempowered the people they were intended to help (Scott 1998). Even though the goal was to improve communities, without involving the people that are affected by such policies, these programs were destined to have mixed results at best.

According to the work of Olson (1965) and Hardin (1982), these projects used social indicators to determine who received intervention, the intensity of these programs, and finally how these services were delivered. This methodology favored government programs to protect under-represented groups from larger more powerful interests. Later on, the work of Wilson (1987) took the use of social indicators and government intervention even further in his research on "concentrated poverty." His thesis is that poverty has become increasingly concentrated since 1970, and thus certain communities cannot avoid problems such as violence, drug activity, and unemployment.

No project typifies the process of disempowerment and minimizes the human voice more than the Moving to Opportunity Act (MTO). Enacted in 1992 on the principle of concentrated poverty, this program provided low-income families in areas of concentrated poverty with the opportunity to obtain a housing voucher to move to a low-

poverty neighborhood (Goering and Feins 2003). Unfortunately, the results of reducing poverty with such a strategy have been mixed at best and disastrous at worst (Goetz 2004).

MTO has demonstrated serious limitations for the practical application of the thesis of concentrated poverty (Clampet-Lundquist and Massey 2008). In MTO, the dangers of interpreting social indicators are exposed. In particular, the assumption is that the actual space or neighborhood is influencing the poverty level of the community. Also, there are serious consequences for the neighborhood that remains, since the individuals who may be best suited to improve the living conditions are removed from the community. For example, children are removed from their friends and families and are separated from their communities. In the end, instead of improving communities, this program moves people around without addressing the real reasons for concentrated poverty (Goetz 2004).

Similarly to the MTO project, the Ford Foundation's Gray Areas Program began with good intentions, only to suffer many of the same problems (O'Connor 1996). Because its poverty initiatives are based on social indicators, the Gray Areas Program spent large amounts of money on anti-poverty programs that were only marginally successful because the community members were not engaged. Eventually, the Gray Areas Program began incorporating elements of CBPAR and switched away from the "top down" approach of distributing resources in areas that were identified as problematic according to social indicators (Mossberger 2009). The program, since employing a smaller, community-based effort, has developed new relationships and engaged locally-embedded institutions that are interested in the success of communities.

These programs are led astray by social indicators because they do not represent how a community thinks, acts, or interprets their social reality (Fals Borda 1985). Even the most carefully crafted program, with the most finely tuned social indicators, cannot be successful without collaboration. In some regards, knowing averages may be useful, such as certain health affliction levels of a community, but basing interventions solely on these abstractions has demonstrable shortcomings. In reality, with collaboration, all of the same findings may be uncovered, as if a researcher had been using social indicators, but with the obvious advantage of engaging the community. In this regard, the collaboration process can uncover creative solutions and other questions that “objective” researchers may never consider due to fact they enter communities with pre-determined social indicators.

### 5.3 The Ecological Fallacy

As concerns were raised about the effectiveness of large government programs, another epistemological matter arose that indicated an additional danger in using social indicators. This concern, called the “ecological fallacy,” was coined by Robinson (1950) and results from thinking that relationships observed for groups necessarily hold for individuals. For example, Robinson studied literacy and found that the greater the proportion of immigrants, the higher the literacy rates. However, this finding was due to the fact that immigrants happened to reside in states where the population was already the most literate. Due to this finding, he cautioned against coming to conclusions about individuals on the basis of population-level or “ecological” data.

In this classic example, overestimating adult literacy rates for immigrants did not carry any serious repercussions for the population. Alternately, other social indicators

have more serious implications. Over the years other examples have been examined with more serious problems such as alcohol consumption, cancer, and smoking rates that are of great interest to public policy makers (Piantadosi et al. 1988). For example, when researchers looked at the alcohol consumption rates for a population, these levels were overestimated for the population. Again, these averages did not hold true at the individual level. Modern statistical approaches that attempt to solve this problem have suffered from aggregation bias that contains additional repercussions (Finney et al. 2011).

A growing number of epidemiologists support a shift in philosophy, and argue that the application of risk-factor paradigms overemphasizes the individual level risk due to the emphasis placed on population averages (Susser and Susser 1996). To really address the social dynamics of disease, epidemiologists are moving toward CBPAR principles of collaboration and participation, and thereby incorporate organic researchers with the goal of becoming more sensitive to community risk factors (Cook 2008).

What the ecological fallacy demonstrates is that focusing on large populations and averages may yield statistical results, but taken by themselves have almost no meaning (Inhorn and Whittle 2001). Without engaging biases and potentially underrepresented groups, studies based on social indicators will likely misrepresent a community. This awareness is particularly important because the impetus is provided to scale back projects that have gotten so large that they work with averages and thus simulations of communities, rather than the social reality in question (Chambers 1983). The key point in the example of the ecological fallacy is that an aggregate is not the same as a community, despite the fact that in traditional sociological theory these elements are often treated as synonymous (Giddens 1987).

#### 5.4 Creative Solutions and Successful Projects

As CBPAR has advanced in recent years, so have the creative solutions to difficult problems. These solutions are discussed among CBPAR researchers not necessary for replication by another community, but rather the process that allowed researchers and communities to come up with creative ideas. The goal of sharing these stories is to encourage researchers and communities to adopt CBPAR, while illustrating the success of the resulting programs. Furthermore, beneficial projects encourage members to stay active and even engage others who were never informed initially about the project (Leung et al. 2003).

There are many thought-provoking ways in which Water For People (WFP) has incorporated CBPAR to collaborate with communities, in order to ensure that members agree to use latrines and implement appropriate hand-washing techniques (Oldfield 2006). The residents of Guatemala demonstrated that neither a well-designed latrine nor the benefits of hand-washing will be accepted unless these “improvements” become a part of their culture. The task then becomes finding a way to pass the information on inter-generationally, especially in areas where hand-washing is not something that is regularly practiced and access to uncontaminated water is difficult. Through collaboration, researchers found that hand-washing could become a family activity, where children taught parents, or *vice versa*, as a tradition before meals.

Other CBPAR projects in mental health, as outlined by the Cook et al. (2010), illustrated the importance of removing the stigma of illness by using prepaid debit cards, so that clients feel comfortable when buying goods with public funds. Other examples include the Francisco Department of Public Health’s Transgender Community Health



Project (Clements and Bachrach 2003), whereby CBPAR led to securing funding for new health and prevention services, improving gender discrimination protection, and raising sensitivity awareness for this population.

Finding creative and sensitive solutions has been particularly important when working with groups that have been historically marginalized. One such example is described by Eng, Briscoe, and Cunningham (1990) in their project in Indonesia, where active participation improved water sanitation and immunization rates for the population. Another example comes from CBPAR initiatives in Native American communities, where active participation can be effective in poverty reduction (Wallerstein and Duran 2006). Due to particular mandates, Native American communities now require that researchers must turn over all project data to tribal members for dissemination. In agreeing to any CBPAR project, tribal members now stipulate that they are involved at every stage of a project.

Other creative solutions to problems like violence in the community have been addressed in CBPAR by McKay et al. (2011), with the reintegration of young mothers who have been affected by war violence in Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Uganda. These researchers found that a creative solution was to form group businesses, or work cooperatives with the young mothers, so that they could pool their resources to form successful enterprises. Further, these young mothers also learned new skills and were able to share these abilities with others who joined their group at a later time.

Sometimes there are obstacles to participation, specifically if an idea is introduced that may be beneficial but is not part of a particular culture. This introduction can even be something that is disruptive to existing relationships (McCormick et al. 1998). In

these situations, finding alternatives through a collaborative process is essential. There are almost always more than one or two ways to address a situation, and despite an urge by the researcher to advocate a position or approach that he or she thinks is appropriate, the collaborative process must be carried out.

### 5.5 Training Researchers To Solve Problems Creatively

In addition to finding creative solutions in research, one of the most promising avenues of advancement in CBPAR has been in training new researchers. In order to implement the creative solutions previously discussed, researchers must be trained properly to collaborate with communities. One of the more recent developments has been the establishment of training centers for potential researchers to learn about CBPAR and observe how the collaborative process functions (Seifer and Calleson 2004). By observing successful projects and the entire collaborative process, potential researchers can learn how to engage communities.

The skill set required of a CBPAR researcher is complex and includes patience, the ability to collaborate, and cultural sensitivity (Israel et al. 2001). As opposed to traditional positivistic research, the researcher is encouraged in CBPAR to become completely immersed in the community. Sometimes the researcher is already familiar with the community, but if not, then special attention must be given to gaining access to this group and all of the relevant stakeholders. In addition to knowing and understanding how to collaborate, researchers need skills in group communication, specifically using language that is understandable and respectful, as well as understanding conflict resolution, appreciating multicultural contexts, engaging in self-reflection and admitting

mistakes, and having the capacity to work within different power structures, and humility (Israel et al. 1998).

Along with a change in training, Wallerstein and Duran (2006) contend that the traditional tenure process for junior faculty may be viewed as detrimental for the development of potential CBPAR researchers, due to publishing requirements. Simply put, research output from CBPAR may not be compatible with traditional methods of evaluating research faculty, due to the requirements linked to collaboration. As an alternative to spending time in a training center, potential researchers can also be encouraged to join in-progress projects, or engage in evaluating interventions, to meet departmental requirements, while acquiring the expertise necessary to be a competent CBPAR researcher.

Another idea proposed by Seifer (2003) relates to rethinking the ideas of evaluation and promotion of researchers to accommodate CBPAR. This alternate way to advancement would emphasize excellence in practice and the results of social change, such as providing safe drinking water to a community or educating new mothers about proper nutrition. But perhaps the most creative and beneficial aspect of CBPAR is the willingness to support other researchers whenever possible. Building partnerships across universities and supporting other researchers' projects, as they become involved in the daily struggles of communities, may be the most valuable asset available to CBPAR researchers.

## 5.6 Chapter Summary

There is growing evidence that CBPAR is not only successful where other traditional community-based approaches have failed, but is gaining traction in areas

ranging from epidemiology to poverty reduction (Wallerstein and Duran 2010). As this chapter has demonstrated, the implementation of a project is vitally important to its success, and collaboration with the community is crucial to such an application.

Accordingly, previous community-based work is now taking notice of the successful and creative solutions that CBPAR projects have developed.

Developing creative solutions by developing training centers where researchers can share ideas, and build on their collaborative efforts, is an emerging avenue for individuals who would like to plan, implement, and evaluate community interventions. Also, encouraging students or faculty members to work with current projects is an excellent way to train researchers and expose them to the rigors of CBPAR.

Moving forward, as CBPAR gains attention in other areas of research, the principle of participatory democracy should not be compromised. Accordingly, as government organizations and NGOs step back from large poverty initiatives to return communities to their members, the important lessons learned from the public-private partnerships implemented by CBPAR should not be forgotten. For only through an approach that involves communities will their members realize the benefits of a project.

What must be kept in mind is that CBPAR must always be about social change. But the nature of this change depends on the will on a community. Specifically important is that this approach is grounded in constructivism that contains a critical component that must not be lost. Participation is a necessity, but social justice cannot be ignored. That is, power relations must be addressed, and collaboration is necessary but not sufficient to drive the research process. In the end, social change must be linked to social justice, so that autonomous and self-sustaining communities can emerge.

The point is that CBPAR is both practical and critical. The ultimate aim of this philosophy is the creation of autonomous communities. This goal should never be lost. The important issue, nonetheless, is the form that this process takes. The idea behind CBPAR is that communities can organize themselves and take steps, often which appear to be very pragmatic, to reach self-determination. Within this space of opportunity is where the CBPAR researcher operates. Those who are in power can facilitate this goal, and are often engaged, but never guide the process.

CBPAR represents the optimal way to study communities that fosters meaningful social change. While the issue has been raised about the scalability of CBPAR projects, there is no reason that this philosophy cannot be applied to any project to benefit a community (Montero 1996). The philosophy that underpins CBPAR is not limited in this respect. Overall, CBPAR may succeed where social indicator research alone has failed, since the human element of research and planning is not obscured behind irrelevant but objective data and abstract reasoning.

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