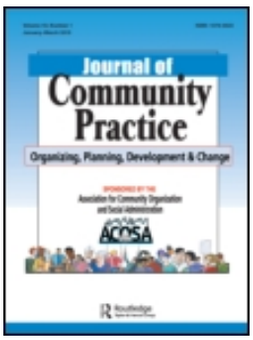

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Community-Based Participatory Research as a Social Work Research and Intervention Approach

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Social workers are now often expected to base their practice on solid empirical findings, but research can vary in terms of its usefulness and relevance to practice. Some social workers have criticized traditional research approaches, suggesting that they are not consistent with the profession's mission to serve vulnerable and disadvantaged populations (e.g., Finn, 1994). Community-based participatory action research may be an appropriate alternative that is participatory, empowering, and committed to social justice (Minkler & Wallerstein, 2008). This article explores the connection between social work and CBPR, illustrating how CBPR can contribute significantly to achieving the field's goals.

KEYWORDS community practice, community research, human services, social action, social welfare, university–community partnerships

INTRODUCTION

It is becoming increasingly essential for social work professionals to use research to support their practice. For example, research is often needed for determining the most effective intervention or for obtaining insurance reimbursement and other funding. However, there continues to be a debate about what kinds of research are most appropriate for the social work field. Finn (1994) suggested that research in social work should be change-oriented and serve the needs of oppressed groups. Community-based participatory action research (CBPR) is one promising approach that meets

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Finn's criteria (Altpeter, Schopler, Galinsky, & Pennell, 1999; Hicks, 1997; Houston, 2010; Mathrani, 1993; Sarri & Sarri, 1992a; Sohng, 1992; Strier, 2006). Rather than a specific research method, CBPR is an orientation to research that aims to be participatory, cooperative, empowering, and justice-oriented (Minkler & Wallerstein, 2008).

Despite the fact that CBPR and social work share many core values, including service, social justice, and empowerment, it has been used infrequently in social work; instead the majority of social work research has relied on traditional top-down empirical approaches (Jenson, 2005; Lawler & Bilson, 2004). Critics of traditional social work research have also argued that much social work research falls into the trap of blaming the victim (Herr, 1995). In response to this deficit-based approach in social work, Dennis Saleebey (1992) advocated for a strengths perspective that recognizes the assets that exist in all individuals and communities. CBPR may be a relevant, strengths-based research alternative for social work in that it empowers communities and contains elements of both research and intervention. Its social justice and service orientation may make CBPR particularly attractive to social work researchers and practitioners. This article examines the relationship between CBPR principles and social work values, and the contribution CBPR can make to the social work field.

SOCIAL WORK AND CBPR: SHARED THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Social work and CBPR derive from similar theoretical and philosophical roots and share common core assumptions (Healy, 2001; Hicks, 1997). For example, CBPR and contemporary social work are inspired by the work of Paulo Freire (1970), who advocated for the empowerment of disadvantaged and disenfranchised persons (Carroll & Minkler, 2000; Healy, 2001; Saleebey, 2009; Wallerstein & Duran, 2008). That is, social work and CBPR aim to help people gain power and control over their own lives and circumstances (Barbera, 2008). Adopting Freire's listening–dialogue–action approach, social workers and CBPR researchers (a) listen to the community to understand their needs, (b) facilitate dialogue with and between community members about how to address these needs, and (c) take action with the community to resolve problems and promote growth (D'Cruz, Gillingham, & Melendez, 2007; Sachs, 1992; Sachs & Newdom, 1999; Wallerstein & Auerbach, 2004). Drawing on Freire's concept of conscientization, they also encourage communities to gain critical consciousness, or an awareness of their condition. Once consciousness is raised, CBPR and social work respond to the community's issues with praxis, repeated cycles of reflection and action (Friere, n.d.; Sakamoto & Pitner, 2005).

Critical theory is another framework used by CBPR and social work to promote social change (DePoy, Hartman, & Haslett, 1999). This theory questions the philosophy that *truth* can be known only through positivism (Hall, 1979). Instead, it recognizes that knowledge is socially constructed, held, and shaped by those in power. Accordingly, social work and CBPR aim to give voice to the oppressed and honor diverse ways of knowing (Lee, 2001; Sakamoto & Pitner, 2005; Wallerstein & Duran, 2008). They realize that those who are best equipped to investigate and report on an experience are those closest to it.

CBPR and social work have also been influenced by the work of feminist theorists, who have challenged patriarchy, oppression, and discrimination (Collins, 1986; Gentlewarrior, Martin-Jearld, Skok, & Sweetser, 2008; Hyde, 1989, 2008; Wallerstein & Duran, 2008). For CBPR researchers, a feminist approach takes into account gender in examining power relations (Maguire, 1987, 2006). Feminist researchers include women's voices and attend to gender equality throughout the research process. In social work, the feminist perspective is key to using one's practice to promote democracy and justice (Baines, 1997; Carr, 2003; Collins, 1986; Dominelli, 2002; Gutierrez & Lewis, 1998; Hyde, 2008). Collins (1986), in fact, argued that "social work is fundamentally feminist in its nature" (p. 214). Feminist social work practice also involves advocacy for gender equality and the elimination of all power differentials (Dominelli, 2002; Hyde, 2008).

Finally, the ecological perspective is a basic foundation of CBPR and social work practice (Israel, Checkoway, Schultz, & Zimmerman, 2008; Rothery, 2008). Bronfenbrenner's (1990) ecological systems theory suggests that individual and community needs are best understood when one considers the effects of the microsystem (the immediate context in which a person lives), the mesosystem (the interrelationships among immediate settings), and the macrosystem (the greater socio-cultural context). Some scholars have expanded Bronfenbrenner's original theory to include other sources of influence. For example, McLeroy, Bibeau, Steckler, and Glanz (1998) suggested the theory should take into account intrapersonal, interpersonal, institutional, community, and policy influences. CBPR utilizes ecological theory to recognize the factors involved in creating or maintaining community challenges (Israel et al., 2008). It, furthermore, sees communities as dynamic systems with multiple factors influencing health and well-being (Buchanan, Miller, & Wallerstein, 2007). Social work has also long used the ecological approach (Rothery, 2008). Research and practice in social work adopt the conceptually related person-in-environment framework, taking into account the interrelationships between people and their surroundings (Germain & Bloom, 1999; Norton, 2009). Recent social work scholarship has looked at the person-in-environment perspective through a critical theory lens, focusing on how individuals construct, maintain, or change the larger social structures that, in turn, affect individual behavior (Kondrat, 2002).

SHARED PRINCIPLES AND VALUES

CBPR is an approach to research that is consistent with social work's core values and principles, which include recognizing strengths in all clients and cultures; collaborating with individuals, groups, and communities to achieve desired change; and practicing with cultural competence (National Association of Social Workers [NASW], 2008). The similarities between the principles and values of CBPR and social work suggest that CBPR is an appropriate approach for social work research and practice.

CBPR and social work both build on strengths and resources to effect change. Emphasizing community strengths is, in fact, a core principle of CBPR (Israel et al., 2008; Minkler & Hancock, 2008). CBPR contrasts with traditional research and evaluation methods that focus on community problems and deficits (Smith, 2006). Likewise, Saleebey's (2009) strengths-based perspective counters the field's increasingly disease-focused medical model of social work. The strengths perspective strives to achieve justice by: (a) recognizing the skills and capacities of all persons, (b) eliminating the power differential between professional helpers and their clients, (c) drawing on the strengths of communities to overcome disparities and oppression, (d) respecting all cultures and experiences, and (d) specifically advocating for social justice. Saleebey has contended that individuals and communities have resources and insights that may not be easily observable. In fact, even the problems faced by clients and communities may be opportunities for building skills and capacity.

Social work and CBPR are also concerned with equalizing power relations. CBPR distinguishes itself from other research processes in that it attempts to establish egalitarian relationships between researchers and community members (Cornwall & Jewkes, 1995). Moreover, CBPR is not merely conducted in the community, but rather with the community (Israel et al., 2008; Jones & Wells, 2007). In social work, the practitioner also serves as collaborator and partner in helping the client overcome challenges. Collaboration supports the social work value of self-determination (NASW, 2008; Sullivan, 1992). In practice, the voice of the expert may need to be quieted so that the knowledge, perspectives, and expertise of individuals and communities can be heard (Graybeal, 2007).

Finally, working with cultural competence and humility is an important value for both social workers and CBPR researchers. CBPR researchers must be prepared to communicate respectfully and appropriately with people from various cultural groups. Researchers should also recognize that communities are not monolithic entities and that each member brings a unique background and experience to the partnership. CBPR's ecological approach furthermore involves appropriate adaptation of research to the culture and context of the community (Kelly, 1966, 1988). Cultural competence is an important ethical principle in social work as well. The NASW (2008) Code

of Ethics calls on social workers to (a) understand culture and appreciate the role it plays in human behavior and society, (b) learn about their clients' cultures, and (c) become more aware of the nature of social diversity and oppression. Culturally competent social workers are aware of their own values, backgrounds, and biases; have an understanding of the client's world view; and deliver culturally appropriate services (Sue, 1981). In 2001, the NASW developed *Standards for Cultural Competence* to encourage social workers to treat people of all cultures, languages, religions, and backgrounds with respect and dignity.

SHARED GOALS

In addition to sharing principles and values, social work and CBPR have common overarching goals. For example, they are both concerned with social justice and service to others (NASW, 2008; Stringer, 1996). In CBPR, these goals are captured by the core principle that calls for a balance between research on one hand and social action on the other (Israel et al., 2008). CBPR is devoted to reducing resource disparities and promoting opportunities for all, particularly those who are disadvantaged and oppressed (Chavez, Duran, Baker, Avila, & Wallerstein, 2008). Power in CBPR is also transferred from the hands of the researchers to the local people, so that the research process itself is socially just (Cornwall & Jewkes, 1995). Likewise, social justice and service have long been central objectives of social work. Bertha Capen Reynolds (1963), one of the first social workers to advocate for social justice, argued that social justice meant working on behalf of oppressed groups, including the working class and poor. Similarly, other social workers have defined social justice in terms of equality, positive social change, and the inclusion of marginalized voices (Reisch, 2011). According to the Code of Ethics, social justice involves reducing and eliminating "poverty, unemployment, discrimination, and other forms of social injustice" (NASW, 2008). CBPR is a research process that is attuned to this important social work mission.

CONTRIBUTION OF CBPR TO SOCIAL WORK

Many scholars have recognized the contribution CBPR can make to the social work field (e.g., Alvarez & Gutierrez, 2001; Maguire, 1987; Park, Bryden-Miller, Hall, & Jackson, 1993; Ristock & Pennell, 1996). Consequently, some social work scholars argue that it is important to teach the community-based participatory research approach in social work education programs (Anderson, 2003; Hyde & Meyer, 2004) and strengthen the connections between university social work departments and their surrounding

communities (Bembry, 1995; Harkavy & Puckett, 1994; Rogge & Rocha, 2005). To facilitate such collaboration in social work, Rogge and Rocha (2005) recommended the formation of university–community partnership centers.

When successful, CBPR may even be conceived of as a social work intervention (Altpeter et al., 1999; Herr, 1995; Molloy, 2007) and a contemporary extension of the work of the early settlement house movement (Sarri & Sarri, 1992a). It involves building relationships, being reflexive, listening to disenfranchised voices, and building human capacity—key elements of social work (Atkinson, 2005; Barbera, 2008). It is particularly akin to community social work, in which professionals form alliances with community stakeholders and use policy work, advocacy, and resource development to enhance community capacity (Alvarez & Gutierrez, 2001). The CBPR researcher is also similar to a community organizer. Community organizers, who are sometimes referred to as practice researchers, use research to inform action, question existing systems and structures, and pursue social change (Couoton, 2005). Like the community organizer, the CBPR researcher brings diverse people together to address common concerns and uses research for social action. Similarly, Alice Johnson (1994) recommended using a scholar–advocate approach in community social work practice, which involves listening to the community and helping members determine and implement solutions to their own concerns. In addition, both the CBPR researcher and the community organizer promote ties among members of the community to build collective power and influence. CBPR further allows social workers to fulfill their obligation to engage in social and political action. Reynolds (1963) argued that social work entails promoting social justice through activism and advocacy. Additionally, the NASW (2008) Code encourages social workers to pursue social action to ensure that all have equal access to needed resources and services. CBPR may be one way to accomplish this.

CBPR's basis in critical theory may also help separate social work research from the oppressive traditions of most social science inquiry (Strier, 2006). Strier even defined action research as a form of antioppressive social work research, which aims to study social systems with the purpose of liberating people from oppression. Several other scholars have crafted models of participatory action research specifically for social work, arguing that CBPR provides an approach that is consistent with the mission and goals of the field (e.g., DePoy et al., 1999; Hicks, 1997; Houston, 2010).

One early example of participatory research in social work adhered to these principles and resulted in an intervention to address the needs of the homeless population (Yeich, 1996). Yeich used a participatory research approach to create the Homeless Persons Union, a union of homeless persons that was intended to fight homelessness and empower individual participants. Consistent with the principles of CBPR, current and former

homeless persons were fully involved throughout the research process. For the participants and researchers, the project was an opportunity to create and share common knowledge and heighten critical consciousness. The union was also a means for the homeless population to organize for political action.

An increasing number of participatory research projects have been conducted in social work since Yeich's (1996) early work. In the last few years, for example, the CBPR approach has been used by social work scholars to examine and amelioriate cancer disparities (Gehlert & Coleman, 2010); increase awareness of grief and loss issues and improve end-of-life and bereavement social work practice (Jones, Pomeroy, & Sampson, 2009); and address systemic barriers to community reintegration for persons with psychiatric disabilities (Mizra, Gosset, Chan, Burford, & Hammel, 2008). Gehlert and Coleman's (2010) CBPR study on breast cancer disparities also demonstrated how social workers can collaborate with researchers and practitioners in other fields to achieve critical change. Their study was conducted within the Center for Interdisciplinary Health Disparities Research, which employed social, behavioral, and biological researchers to work with women in Chicago. The CBPR team held focus groups with patients, developed a community advisory council to advise the investigators, and established partnerships with community organizations to develop intervention strategies. Specifically, the goal was to better understand and address the role that the social environment plays in racial disparities in the breast cancer mortality rate. Through close work with the community, this CBPR project not only contributed importantly to science of breast cancer, but it also led to changes in breast cancer practice and policy. Furthermore, the authors acknowledged that, without community involvement, the research would have been misguided and uninformative.

LIMITATIONS OF CBPR FOR SOCIAL WORK RESEARCH

Although it may be a useful method for social workers, CBPR has some limitations. For example, CBPR researchers are ethically responsible for any change that they initially promise to community partners (Strier, 2006). Unfortunately, researchers may overpromise benefits or come across unforeseen barriers to achieving desired goals. At all times, researchers should be honest and realistic with participants about what kind of change is possible. Furthermore, they must follow through on their promises to the extent possible.

CBPR also takes a significant amount of time and resources. Researchers may find that participants don't have the time to invest in the project or that the resources available are not adequate to achieve the project goals (Sarri & Sarri, 1992b). The substantial amount of time required for these projects also creates problems for some researchers, particularly those facing

professional pressures from the academy. For example, CBPR is less feasible for faculty members struggling to earn promotion or tenure, who must meet high publication demands (Gebbie, Rosenstock, & Hernandez, 2003).

Another obstacle to conducting CBPR is lack of support from the larger social and political systems. For instance, it may be challenging to balance the demands of funders for traditional research designs and narrow program objectives with CBPR's principles (Cornwall & Jewkes, 1995). This challenge may fade as government organizations and philanthropic agencies begin to support CBPR (Minkler, Blackwell, Thompson, & Tamir, 2003). However, because of the lack of funding opportunities for CBPR relative to those for traditional approaches, faculty members are less inclined to engage in this type of research (Polanyi & Cockburn, 2003). Similarly, other researchers may question the scientific rigor and legitimacy of CBPR (Cornwall & Jewkes, 1995; Strier, 2006). Major academic institutions may not value or understand CBPR as it differs from commonly accepted perceptions of academic research.

Ethical concerns also arise in CBPR projects. As Minkler (2004) argued, tensions may emerge between community "insiders" and university "outsiders" that can interfere with CBPR's goal of equitable power relations (p. 688). For instance, long histories of trauma and racism experienced by communities can contribute to resistance against working with outside researchers (Cochran et al., 2008). Even when communities and research teams have built trust and partnerships, tensions may persist (Minkler, 2004). One source of tension may be differences in the priorities held by the community and researchers. Frequent meetings and clear communication may be needed to ensure project priorities are fairly negotiated. Another potential source of tension may emerge if participants are not fairly compensated for their efforts (Minkler, 2004). Consequently, CBPR researchers must be conscious of participant–researcher dynamics and aim to address, rather than ignore, these tensions.

Although CBPR strives to be culturally sensitive, racism or cultural conflict may, nevertheless, endure in CBPR projects. Researchers must be aware of ways in which the philosophy and procedures of CBPR conflict with community culture (Healy, 2001). For example, Healy (2001) suggested that CBPR approaches which question authority or attempt to eliminate power differentials may seem inappropriate to some Asian communities, who value respect for authority and social harmony. Moreover, because CBPR researchers and community members typically come from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds, the risk of cultural misunderstandings and racism is often present (Minkler, 2004). Rather than striving for cultural competence, which is likely unattainable, researchers should adopt cultural humility, reflecting on their own biases and privilege and

supporting community members as equal partners (Tervalon & Murray-Garcia, 1998).

Finally, it may be challenging for researchers and their community partners to define the meaning of core CBPR terms such as *community* and *social change*. Community, for instance, is not a uniform, stationary entity (Israel et al., 2008). It may be defined by shared interests, language, culture, or other features (Israel et al., 1994). Importantly, it is sometimes defined differently be researchers and community members. Researchers may need to adopt a flexible definition of community that changes as the project progresses. They should also be prepared for, and sensitive to, diverse perspectives and priorities within communities. It may also be challenging for CBPR researchers to define social change in the context of their projects (Healy, 2001). From the beginning, researchers must work with community partners to define what kind of social change is practical and desirable. These challenges need not be prohibitive as long as the dialogue between researchers and community partners remains open and ongoing.

CONCLUSION

In spite of its limitations, CBPR research has applications in a variety of fields, including social work. It is also important to note that many of the CBPR projects that are conducted in other fields, such as education and public health, are relevant and applicable to social work. Therefore, rather than confining themselves to disciplinary silos, CBPR researchers in different academic departments would benefit from collaborating with one another. It is also important to recognize that the limited number of social work CBPR studies in the literature may not signify that CBPR projects aren't being conducted in social work, but rather that they are not being published. Social work CBPR researchers should attempt to publish more of their efforts so that awareness of CBPR in the field may be heightened. In addition, social work researchers might conduct multimethod case-study analyses of projects that have been conducted, but not yet published. Including community partners in the author list may add visibility to their work in a time of limited and constricting resources.

As this review has demonstrated, CBPR is an approach to research that is highly applicable to social work research and practice. With CBPR models, social workers can effectively pursue their mission to address social problems by drawing on communities' strengths and resources, giving voice to community members, and promoting empowerment and cooperative social change. As the principles, methods, and objectives of CBPR projects are consistent with social work's core values, CBPR shows great promise as a relevant social work research and intervention approach.

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