

RESEARCH METHODS for COMMUNITY CHANGE

A Project-Based Approach



Randy Stoecker



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Acknowledgments

Little did I know nearly 20 years ago that my career would become focused on finding ways for community organizations to do and use research. I thought I was training to be a regular professor at a regular university, learning the techniques of traditional sociological research, classroom lecturing, and institutional committee work. To the extent that I am able to survive in a traditional university environment, I must credit my university-based mentors in giving me the tough skin and intellectual self-defense skills needed for the task. But the most important mentors who have guided me down the path that led to this book were not from the academy but from various communities. Many of them, such as Tim Mungavan and Dave Beckwith, you will meet in the pages of this book. They didn't just *ask* me to contribute to the important work of community organizing and development they were doing, they *expected* me to contribute. It was Tim and Dave who first got me thinking seriously about what a new model of research, which served the goals and practices of community organizations, might look like.

But there were also those in the academy who helped me figure out how to be an academic outside of the ivory towers of the university. When I was just a young assistant professor, Barry Checkoway, the former director of the Edward Ginsberg Center for Community Service and Learning at the University of Michigan, graciously invited me to participate in a faculty seminar on participatory action research, where I could learn from those who had gone before me. I am forever grateful to him and his colleagues for allowing me to hang out with them and learn that there were in fact models for academics working with communities. Not long after I began participating in that seminar, I was asked to share a room at a sociology conference with John Gaventa, who at that time directed the Highlander Research and Education Center, which you will also read about in these pages. I felt like a Little Leaguer invited into the dugout with a World Series pitcher. John was the role model for

many of us—someone who had risked his career by using his skills to further community-based social change and had been able to work both inside and outside of the academy. And then there was Phil Nyden, the director of the Project Research Action Group, who gave me my first opportunity to look at university-community collaboration from the outside when he invited me to facilitate PRAG's evaluation process.

But the most recent impetus for this book has come from the privilege I had working on a project led by Bobby Hackett, the Vice-President of the Corella and Bertram F. Bonner Foundation. The Bonner Foundation, at the time, had embarked on a project supporting higher education institutions to develop community-based research programs. And he found me money to follow the progress of those institutions over the five years the program continued. It gave me the opportunity to take a step back from my immersion in my own work to see how others did it. It was through this program that I met so many important role models—Marie Cirillo, Frankie Patton Rutherford, Steve Fisher, Tal Stanley, George Loveland, Susan Ambler, Larry Osborne, Tom Plaut, Kerry Strand, Sam Marullo, Nick Cutforth, Pat Donohue, Barbara Ferman, Dan Dougherty. There are many others whom I encountered less frequently through the project but whose work has remained an important influence.

One thing I noticed as I spent more and more time among academics working with communities, and among community-based activists, is what wonderful people they are. Absent is the petty political bickering that occurs far too frequently in higher education and also far too frequently among progressive political activists not rooted in communities. These are the most genuine, caring people I have ever encountered, and I continue to aspire to the standards of human dignity that they set.

All of these people and the many other communities I have worked with are the reason for this book. I have written a great deal with many of them about the process of how academics and communities collaborate—the challenges and benefits of combining talents. But I increasingly noticed that what was lacking was writing on the actual research being done in those community settings. So much of the writing is about the partnership rather than the process. And much of it is also written for the academic side of the aisle. There was no work between two covers that talked about how to integrate research into a wide range of community change projects. So I set out to fill that gap.

As I put the idea together, and started talking with publishers, I was helped along by Stan Wakefield. His is an interesting position—helping authors find publishers and helping publishers find

authors. He helped me find C. Deborah Laughton, the Senior Editor at Sage. I have learned from my past successes and failures at writing books how important the editor is to the process. And for me personally, the most important thing is not how much they know but how excited they get about the ideas. C. Deborah got excited, and it kept me excited. As she left Sage halfway through this project to pursue other endeavors, Lisa Cuevas Shaw took her place and thankfully maintained that excitement. Her exuberance about the project maintained me through the awful process of dotting Is, crossing Ts, formatting references, and all the other detail stuff that is so difficult for me. She also found me a solid set of reviewers—Christina von Mayrhauser, Elisia Cohen, and Robert Silverman—who understood what I was trying to do and were engaged in helping me to do it. Sage's Margo Beth Crouppen and Melanie Birdsall should not go without mention for motivating me through the final copy preparation and guiding me through the bureaucratic maze of permission gathering toward a clean and legal final copy. And Bill Bowers was not only eagle-eyed but was perhaps the most gentle copyeditor I have ever encountered. Thanks also to Kelly Spivey, who brought her real-life experiences in the nonprofit world to a careful critique of an early version of this book and the wonderful graphic in Chapter 8.

Of course, projects like this don't happen in a vacuum—they must be juggled and keyholed in among life's many tasks, not the least of which is family. At various times during this project both Tammy Raduege, my life partner and wife, and Haley, my daughter, have had to endure me sequestering myself away while I ignored everything but the writing. My thanks to them are for much more than their simply putting up with me through this. During those dark early days of writer's block, Tammy would lean over my shoulder and ever so gently ask me how it was going—knowing full well how badly it was going but never offering advice on what to do or reminding me of the time I was wasting that could have been better spent on things like laundry and dishes. Her wisdom and gentle encouragement were the only things that got me through those hours of staring at a blank computer screen. Haley, who was writing her own research papers during the time I was working on this book, was an important source of commiseration as we traded stories on what a pain in the butt this work can be. And silly as it might seem to some of you, I must also recognize Lady the Wonder Dog, our 50-pound standard poodle, in these pages. Lady has been my constant writing companion. As I would fight writer's block by giving up on the desktop computer and shifting to a laptop in another room, she would

get up and follow me. It didn't matter—upstairs, on the porch, in the office—she was there with me. There is barely a word in this book that she has not been party to.

The more I work with these things called communities, the more I also realize I only recognize them because of the place where I grew up. Mukwonago, Wisconsin didn't get its first stoplight until I left. You could ride your bicycle from one end of the town to the other in ten minutes. Of course, small doesn't make the community, the people do. It is ultimately because of the example my parents, Rex and Joan Stoecker, and their neighbors set that I know a community when I encounter it. All those neighborhood block parties, birthday parties, cookouts, late-night card parties, and bartered labor as neighbors collaborated to repair broken pipes, install basketball hoops, and all manner of other do-it-yourself activities set the example.

Finally, this book is only possible because of the many community organizers and leaders I have had the privilege of working with these many years. They have trusted me in ways I could not have imagined and hit me upside the head when I screwed up. People like Terry Glazer, Rose Newton, Larry Stillman, Ramon Perez, WilliAnn Moore, Madeline Talbott, Tim and Dave mentioned above, and many others have taught me more about how to do research in community settings than I could have ever imagined. A number of the research approaches and techniques you will find in the coming pages were developed with them in their communities. So as you read the pages that follow, please remember that this book is as much about what I have learned from them as it is for them and the many other communities out there faced with the research tasks necessary to win political battles, secure funds, create local development, and build local pride.

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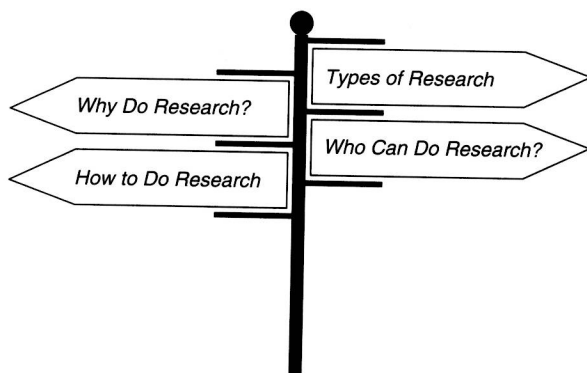
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One

“But I Don’t Do Research”



“BUT I DON’T DO RESEARCH”

A few years ago I attended a workshop at the Highlander Research and Education Center in the Tennessee mountains. Highlander, if you are unfamiliar with it, is a famous place in American history. It was a primary influence in the development of a racially integrated union movement. It was centrally important in the civil

rights movement, having spread the song “We Shall Overcome” throughout the world and provided education and training that impacted such luminaries as Rosa Parks and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Most important, it has been a place where grassroots people come together to do the education and research necessary to win battles for social justice and equality.¹ Grassroots community activists and leaders travel from far and wide to this inspiringly beautiful rural setting to learn how to study, research, and tackle the important social issues of the day so they can return to their communities and make a difference.

To get to Highlander, if you fly into Knoxville as I did, you travel through the city and then out of town into the countryside. Eventually you turn onto a dusty gravel road that connects the main buildings of the Center, including the central meeting room, remodeled from an old round barn and furnished with a large circle of rocking chairs in the upstairs. It was in this meeting room, in our rocking chairs, where our group of academic researchers and community people met. For two days we talked, drew pictures representing our work, and developed models of how to conduct research that empowered grassroots communities. About halfway through the weekend, it became clear that the academics in the room were very comfortable using the word “research” to describe what we did. But the community members and community workers regularly prefaced their statements with “Well, it’s not research, but . . .” or “It wasn’t scientific, but . . .” After each “but” would come amazing tales of careful, sophisticated, sometimes unorthodox research practices that won victories in legislatures and courts.²

This sentiment is often echoed by my students, many of whom are community workers of various stripes—social workers, nonprofit managers, activists, community organizers, and community development professionals. When I ask them about their career aspirations, most of them plan to work “on the ground” in the nonprofit or government sectors, and some of them are there already. But very few can imagine doing any research in those professions. I have heard the phrase “But I don’t do research” enough that it sounds like a mantra. Yet, when I probe, I find that many of them have to collect data on client outcomes, do case histories, conduct investigations, and engage in a wide variety of other things that are fundamentally research activities. Others have to write grant applications that require them to gather needs-assessment data, or conduct an evaluation. Our textbooks and syllabi, however, don’t speak to these forms of research and thus don’t prepare people entering the nonprofit and community organization world to do this kind of research.

It is a shame that only academics are seen as doing research, and that it has consequently developed an undeserved reputation of being at best useless and at worst a distraction from doing real work that matters for real people. Saul Alinsky, one of the 20th century's most famous community organizers, was fond of saying that "another word for academic is irrelevant."³ And it is an even greater travesty that the research that real community workers and community members do on the ground does not get recognized as producing legitimate knowledge.

What is the research done on the ground in communities? One of the most important stories comes from the small community of Yellow Creek, Kentucky, where residents became concerned about the health of their livestock and even themselves. They began with a basic and admittedly unsophisticated public health survey of their community that found higher-than-expected levels of cancers and other afflictions. They began to suspect the upstream tannery of poisoning their drinking water but lacked the credibility to make the case stick. Needing assistance, they were able to enlist the services of faculty and students from Vanderbilt University, who helped them conduct a more detailed study. Together they established a link between the illnesses and the tannery, and eventually won their case in the courts.⁴

Neighborhood planning is another area where research occurs and often goes unrecognized. In the 1980s the Cedar-Riverside neighborhood of Minneapolis had just won an important battle preventing their community from becoming a victim of urban renewal which, in this case as in so many others, was literally urban removal. As a result of their victory, they attained the unenviable position of having to rebuild their dilapidated single-family housing, which had been left to atrophy by the original urban renewal plan. To rebuild the housing they had to do a complete housing study, determining which structures could be rehabbed with limited funds, which were too far gone to save, and where new homes could be built. To deal with the cold Minnesota winters, they did a sophisticated study of superinsulation, passive solar construction, and other cold-weather construction designs from around the world. Today, the neighborhood remains an important role model for neighborhood-based redevelopment and winter weather resistance.⁵

The arts provide another important source of unrecognized research practices. In the early 1990s in western Massachusetts, Mark Lynd helped organize a popular theater group composed of adults with developmental disabilities. Entitled *Special* and built on the experiences of the cast, the play was also built on research. The

cast members interviewed experts in the field of developmental disabilities, and as the research progressed they began to explore more and more deeply the politics of the treatment, and mistreatment, they were receiving at the hands of professionals. The resulting performance then exposed and explored those treatment politics, changing forever the understandings of the cast members and, for many members of the audience, removing the stigma previously associated with developmentally disabled adults.⁶

Perhaps one of the most important examples of research that was only much later recognized as such comes from the very earliest stages of the modern women's movement. Suburban women, comparing experiences about their feelings of isolation, their interactions with Valium-obsessed physicians, and their lack of self-fulfillment, were some of the very first practitioners of the research and education practice of consciousness-raising that would coin the term "sexism" and transform American culture.⁷

"SO WHAT IS RESEARCH?"

That gravel road leading up to the Highlander Center is symbolic of so many of these examples, for none of them was clean and easy research. They often challenged established political and cultural bases of power and developed new ways of doing research not readily accepted by established social scientists. And the process of doing and using the research in making social change did not go off without problems and challenges. In many ways, the entire process traversed a path of loose gravel. And it is on that loose gravel that much of this book will concentrate.

From the outside, things may look more like pavement than gravel. All of these projects began with the needs of real people trying to understand what was happening to them and what they could do about it. In some cases the people themselves did the research. In other cases they enlisted skilled outsiders to assist them. But in every case the research served a goal—eliminating a public health hazard, rebuilding a neighborhood, educating to combat discrimination, and achieving emotional health. On the face of it, these research processes are not that different from traditional academic research. They all began with a research question: Why are our livestock getting sick? How can we save our housing? How do we reduce discrimination? Why do we feel emotionally unhealthy? Now, those questions had to be refined to actually make them researchable, and this is where the research began to differ from traditional academic research. In contrast

to what academics call *basic research*, this form of research is often referred to as *applied research*. And it is in traversing the gully between basic and applied research that you first begin to notice that you are driving on gravel.

What are the differences between basic and applied research? Applied research has historically been seen as research whose question comes from a practical problem that someone wants to solve. It typically involves working with some corporation, government, or other organization. Basic research has historically been seen as research with no immediate application, though of course having potential applications. In basic research the researchers are mostly

Basic Research

- Driven by researcher interests
- Unrelated to immediate practical issues

Applied Research

- Driven by organizational interests
- Closely related to immediate practical issues

in control of the research questions.⁸ Think of research testing AIDS drugs as applied research and research to map the human genetic structure as basic research. AIDS drug research is directly tied to helping people with the disease or in danger of contracting it. Human genome research may have all kinds of benefits down the road, even potentially for treating AIDS, but the research is not driven by a specific practical concern.

The belief among traditional academic researchers is that basic research is more *objective*, or less subject to being contaminated by the biases of the researcher. It is too easy, they fear, for a researcher trying to solve a problem to *bias* the results—set up the research to get the data they want to prove their point rather than find out what is really happening. Thus, they believe, basic research in which the researcher is *objective*—not hoping for any particular outcome—is actually more useful in the end, even if it doesn't generate immediate benefits. In addition, because basic research isn't tied to a particular set of circumstances, it is seen as more *generalizable*—applicable to a wide range of situations. Hence the common perception that people doing real research in real settings on immediate and pressing human problems are not really doing research—a belief that many community-based practitioners have bought into.

Over the past few decades, however, we have discovered both of these beliefs to be problematic. First, a number of people have shown that the standard of *objectivity* is a confused and self-contradictory concept. It is confused because objectivity was never meant to be

more than a method for achieving accuracy. The approach of objectivity was to achieve as much emotional distance as possible between the researcher and the person being researched. This is the source of the famous “double blind study” so popular in drug research, where neither the patient nor the physician knows whether a patient is receiving the treatment or the placebo. By not knowing the research subject, proponents of objectivity believed, you could get more accurate information.⁹

But scientists gradually forgot that objectivity was but a means to accuracy and increasingly saw it as an end in itself. By distancing yourself from the research question, and consequently from the people you were researching—i.e., practicing objectivity—objectivity could be assured. What practitioners, particularly feminist researchers, showed was that the creation of emotional distance in fact often made the research less accurate. Because the researcher refused to build trust with the research subject, the research subject withheld information from the researcher, essentially spoiling the results. These feminists and other critics were able to show objectivity’s self-contradictory nature and break forever the assumed link between objectivity and accuracy.¹⁰

Second, a number of research methodologists have called into question the assumed *generalizability* of basic research. Generalizability is closely related to objectivity. The idea here is that good research will be applicable to a wide variety of similar situations. If, for example, you want to know whether police foot patrols reduce property crime, you should design your research so the findings can apply in a variety of places. That is why so many traditional researchers rely on statistical studies involving large data sets. They believe that, if the data is gathered randomly from a wide variety of situations, the chances are greater that the findings will also apply to a wide variety of situations.¹¹

As statistical studies took precedence over research involving fewer cases but more detail, the belief in the generalizability of statistical studies grew. But an important work by Andrew Sayer¹² showed the illogic of that assumption. He stood the usual distinction between *qualitative research* and *quantitative research* on its head. Qualitative research has typically involved interviews or document research or observation that a researcher then interprets rather than counts. There are usually only one or a few cases involved. Communities, organizations, families, and other social groups are favorite objects of those defined as qualitative researchers. Quantitative research typically involves counting characteristics of something and then conducting a statistical analysis to see if there are any patterns. Surveys,

such as one to test whether level of education and amount of income are related, are a favorite tool of quantitative researchers. It is even possible to take qualitative data, such as interview transcripts, and turn them into quantitative data by counting the occurrences of specific phrases and thus turning a few interviews into a large data set. This form of research is also often called *positivistic*, since it tries to eliminate interpretation in favor of strict, predefined hypotheses and measurements.

Traditional positivistic researchers had assumed that qualitative research was only good for generating tentative cause-and-effect hypotheses that could then be tested by more sophisticated statistical research on large samples. Sayer, however, showed that *intensive research*—focusing intensively on one or a few cases—was better for studying cause and effect than *extensive research*—studying superficially a large number of cases. He argued that intensive research allows the researcher to actually follow a cause-and-effect trail in a specific situation, similar to how a criminal investigator follows a crime trail or how a physician diagnoses an illness. Extensive research, on the other hand, is particularly good for mapping the characteristics of a population. Consequently, large-sample extensive studies are useful for suggesting cause-and-effect relationships that can then be tested in real-world settings, much the same way that large-sample epidemiological studies are used by physicians in diagnosing an individual's illness. The research that community workers do is more in line with this division of labor between intensive research and extensive research than the division between qualitative and quantitative research maintained by traditional academics. Academic researchers have often seen qualitative research on a few cases as good only for suggesting variables that can be better studied by large-scale quantitative survey research. But community workers trying to find out what is causing a real community problem are more likely to use the general results obtained by such large surveys to suggest things to look for in tracing the causal path of crime, or housing deterioration, or teen pregnancy, or other problems in their own community using an intensive research model. Community

Intensive Research

- Focuses on one or a few cases
- Strives for detail and depth of analysis
- Good for causal analysis

Extensive Research

- Focuses on large number of cases
- Limits analysis to a few characteristics
- Good for mapping population properties