

Editorial

Promoting and Advocating for Ethical Community Engagement: Transparency in the Community-engaged Research Spectrum

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Progress in Community Health Partnerships: Research, Education, and Action emerged in 2007 as the first scholarly journal dedicated to community-based participatory research (CBPR) in response to its rapid growth. The journal aimed to promote adoption of CBPR, advance the science of CBPR, and provide evidence for the value of CBPR in advancing health equity and improving health outcomes.¹ CBPR and other forms of community-engaged research have become increasingly common in health research, as communities, scholars, and funders recognize the importance of community engagement in improving health research, health services, health equity, and population health.²⁻⁷ Community-engaged health research synthesizes the knowledge and experience of academic, community, and practice partners to create culturally competent, rigorous, relevant, and beneficial health and social services.^{8,9} Since its inception, the journal has supported this synthesis and continued to disseminate research

illustrating the importance of collaboration and partnership for connecting research, education, and action. With the growing expectation that institutional researchers¹ involve those affected by research, the journal has explored other approaches to collaboration and partnership beyond CBPR and to highlight research that models true community-engaged partnerships, however they are manifested.¹⁰⁻¹²

In our continued efforts to advance the field of community-engaged research and promote health equity, we believe that a nuanced understanding of the role of partnership in this process is critical. Thus, the journal remains committed to fostering transparency in the partnership process alongside the presentation of research methods, results, and translation to practice. Through this editorial, we hope to facilitate this transparency in the research published through the journal by reflecting on the continuum of community-engaged research and the role of context. We aim to provide guidance for authors, institutional researchers, and community members as they engage in and disseminate community-engaged research. Transparency is an invaluable aspect of determining the alignment of context and level of community engagement.¹³ Institutional researchers must be transparent with community members and funders and in their scholarly output to facilitate alignment. Scholars in the field of community engagement have worked toward addressing these issues by clarifying the community-engaged research continuum, providing tools for institutional researchers to understand where they fall on the continuum and emphasizing the importance of context and transparency in their process.

The Continuum

¹ We acknowledge community members as researchers and avoid using the term 'researcher' to only include researchers outside the community. Thus, we define institutional researchers as researchers housed in or funded by academia, governmental organizations, think-tanks, and research organizations.

Community-engaged research exists on a continuum from less engaged (like outreach and advisory committees) to the more collaborative and fully engaged (like shared leadership).^{13–15} In nonparticipatory research, institutional researchers assume the role of sole generators and arbiters of knowledge, hold all the power, and maintain control over the research decision-making processes, from setting the research agenda to controlling the diffusion of knowledge. The institutional researcher is central, and the role of community members is as a data source and an object of study.

In community-engaged research, by contrast, the knowledge, power, and decision-making dynamics are central, with power shared between community members, practice partners, and institutional researchers along a continuum, starting with valuing input from community partners to full community ownership of research projects.^{16,17} Minimal engagement involves community members only on the ‘bookends’ of the research process—creating research questions, and interpretation and dissemination of findings,¹⁸ whereas full engagement is transversal and involves community members throughout the research process, from posing research questions and choosing the study design and analytic methods to the interpretation and dissemination of findings. Shared decision-making and equitable involvement of community members vary in degrees across community-engaged research and even within projects across time.^{19–21}

Given that community-engaged research truly is a continuum, there are no boxes into which we can neatly fit scholarly works. As a paradigm, community-engaged research is fluid in nature, always evolving and always open for interpretation. As Nicole Brown¹⁵ (2021) argues in her work on *The scope and continuum of participatory research*, this fluidity is necessary to provide the space for institutional researchers and community members to adapt the level of

engagement to meet the needs of community members, fit the context of the research, and protect the rights of participants. As much as the fluidity of community-engaged research provides flexibility, it also causes consternation. Funders and journal editors increasingly call for community-engaged research but provide little guidance on the level of engagement. This can lead to unintended consequences like tokenism²²⁻²⁵ and harm to community members.¹⁵

To address this, Key et al.¹³ proposed a community engagement model that includes seven defined designations for community-engaged research, starting with “no community” involvement and moving through “community informed,” “community consultation,” “community participation,” “community initiated,” “community based participatory,” and finally “community driven or community led” research (Figures 1 and 2). Grounded in previous research on public engagement and public participation,^{22,26} this framework was co-developed with both community and academic partners within the Healthy Flint Research Coordinating Center, and was then vetted, presented, and revised with input from more than 300 community and academic participants from varied sectors in multiple research partnership events.

Key et al.’s^{13(p.429)} model builds on “lessons learned” from CBPR, often referred to as the “gold standard” in community-engaged research. Integrating a focus on equity indicators that affect successful community-academic partnerships (e.g., resource sharing, power and control, mutual benefit, ownership) and highlighting contextual factors that affect points of engagement (e.g., strength of relationships, trust, transparency), the current continuum addresses challenges faced with conducting community-engaged research which include time needed to establish trusting relationships with community and sustaining relationships, especially those associated with control, power dynamics, and experiences of discrimination and racism.

The unique conceptualization of this community-engaged research continuum provides much-needed clarity and flexibility, whereby community members and researchers can understand where they are on the continuum and determine if the research is appropriate for the different stages of community engagement.¹³ A clearly defined continuum is beneficial for both community and research partners alike and can build community research capacity that is free from tokenism.^{13,27} Community partners can work with institutional researchers with a clear knowledge of the points of engagement. Similarly, institutional researchers planning to be involved in community-engaged research can clearly identify entry points for community involvement without the added stress of not meeting the CBPR benchmark.

Figure 1 provides examples of the level of activity and involvement of partners as well as the activities and actions of the institutional researcher at each point of engagement along the continuum. Figure 2 provides an explanation of how the various forms of community-engaged research are displayed from either the perspective of the community or the researcher. This is a valuable tool that will support community partners and researchers in better understanding each other’s perspectives and provide insight for their actions in a transparent, trusting, and equitable manner.

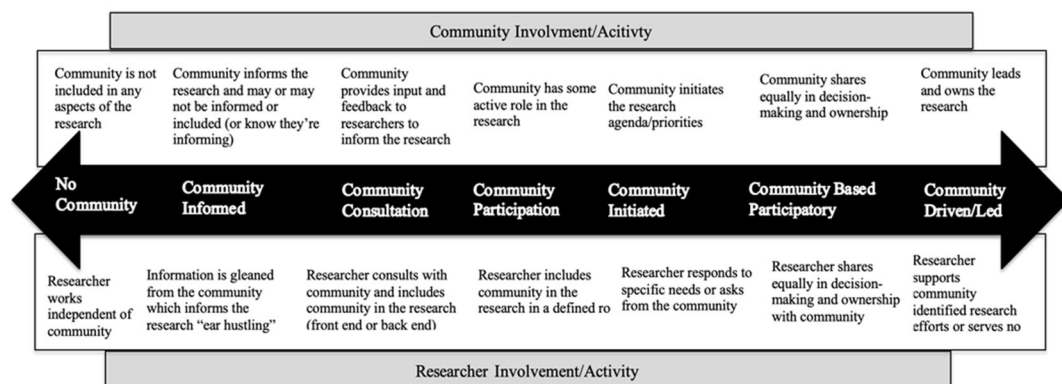


Figure 1: The Continuum of Community Engagement in Research: Involvement and Activity
Source: Key et al., 2019 (with permission)



Figure 2: The Continuum of Community Engagement in Research: Perspective and Experience
Source: Key et al., 2019 (with permission)

The Role of Context

More engagement is often seen as better—but community-engaged research should not be measured by the extent of engagement. Instead, it should be measured by the fit between the context and level of engagement.^{13,21} The scope and extent of engagement in community-engaged research should be determined by the context in which the research is conducted. It is important to balance scientific rigor and community needs and take into consideration the influence of power dynamics and costs to community members,^{28,29} as fully egalitarian community-engaged research may be unethical and harmful to community members.¹⁵ As Brown¹⁵ points out, in some contexts it is okay to not be fully participatory.

There are forces pushing researchers to be more engaged. But as researchers we have a responsibility to not cause harm. Sometimes it is ethically and morally wrong to demand full engagement and full participation at every level of the research process.

—Nicole Brown

In “good” community-engaged research, the community-academic partnership is based on the fit between the level of engagement and the research context.^{13,15,21} Contextual factors can assist institutional researchers in determining where their research should enter the continuum.¹³ This can depend on the research questions, the methods used to address the research questions,¹⁸ the health issue’s importance,³⁰ the scale and scope of the research,²¹ community partner capacities,^{21,30} and the sociopolitical context.^{13,21,30} Community members may have little to gain from involvement in complicated, resource-intensive research methodologies, for example, and more to gain from involvement in determining research questions and dissemination efforts.¹⁸ The consideration of the sociopolitical context can include the historic relationship between the community and the institutional researcher this relationship may be built on trust or mistrust.^{13,30}

The Importance of Transparency

Transparency is vital to healthy community engagement, given the fluidity of community-engaged research. Transparency is a goal of community-engaged research and creates space for reflection, openness, and growth. While engagement is not necessary or even desired in every research project and in every research process,^{15,28} whenever there is any engagement, it is important for institutional researchers to be transparent.^{13,15} This involves full disclosure of research processes and clear procedures for decision-making, research activities, respecting community experiences and knowledge, and dissemination of research outcomes.^{31–33} Even in projects modeled on community ownership where community control is purposefully

incorporated into every aspect of research, there is still the threat of inequitable power distribution.¹⁷ Transparency and reflection on community-engaged research processes brings these issues to light, so the field can move toward authentic working relationships with community partners that serve to further the interests of the community.² Without this transparency, researchers run the risk of unintentionally, through lack of awareness, causing harm to communities.¹⁵

The Position of Progress in Community Health Partnerships

Progress in Community Health Partnerships: Research, Education, and Action, as a journal that promotes community-engaged research to address health inequities and improve the health of communities, provides guidance on publishing health-focused research conducted with community members in our journal. These standards address the continued need for community-engaged research that is transparent, ethical, and foremost beneficial to communities. As gatekeepers to the dissemination of scholarly work, we believe it is our obligation to use our position to influence the field and mitigate the risks associated with a lack of understanding of the community-engaged continuum, tokenism, and a simplistic “more-is-better” mentality in community-engaged research. Considering best practices in the field, we encourage authors to be transparent in their community-engaged research practices, identify their work along the continuum, and carefully consider the role of context in assessing the fit between their research and the level of engagement. We value transparency in where research falls on the continuum and the research context over a quantitative amount of community engagement. Research engagement description and justification should include how the engagement processes occurred, when engagement took place, why engagement took place, and the degree of alignment and engagement among academic-community partnerships.¹³ Manuscripts should show the reader

where partners were engaged at what stage(s) of the research process, and what that engagement looked like. The more explicitly defined the roles are in a partnership, the better. Descriptions and justifications should also include a rich description of the role of context in the engaged research that considers the contextual factors we highlighted. When we understand the context, we have a better understanding of why partnerships were formed a certain way, and whether that formation was mutually beneficial and ethical.

We emphasize that full engagement is not an obligation for every research project, nor is it necessary for publication in *Progress in Community Health Partnerships*. Limited engagement is acceptable,¹⁵ but should be fully described and justified. It is not enough to mention that there is a partnership or that community members were engaged. We need to understand how the partnership developed and why, the evolution of the partnership, and who was involved in the partnership. We want to know where the power lies in the partnership. For example, is there co-ownership or co-decision-making? Why or why not? In fully describing and justifying the level of engagement of scholarly output, use the correct type or model of engagement, and use the continuum and guidance provided in this article to develop the most accurate depiction of where your scholarly work is on the continuum and in what context. Importantly, don't claim to do CBPR if your work is not CBPR! CBPR is not the "gold standard" or the "best practices" of community engaged research. This is harmful to communities and the field of community-engaged research.

Progress in Community Health Partnerships remains committed to promoting ethical community-engaged research, advancing the science of community-engaged research, and providing evidence of its value in advancing health equity and improving health outcomes. As the field has advanced, the journal has adapted and will continue to adapt, to remain true to this

vision and mission. As such, over time we have broadened our initial focus on CBPR to include research occurring along the community engagement continuum. In doing such, we aim to advocate for research that models true community-engaged partnerships, however they are manifested, in the effort of advancing health equity.

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