

Community-Based Research as Pedagogy

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This paper focuses on the value of community-based research (CBR) as a pedagogical strategy for courses in social science research in an effort to show how service-learning can enrich discipline-based learning. Community-based research introduces an experiential component that helps students acquire research skills and makes research more appealing and accessible to students, especially those who prefer "connected" modes of knowing. But the more distinctive value of CBR is that it engages students with some important epistemological debates surrounding the production of knowledge in the social sciences by modeling alternatives to conventional assumptions about why we do social research, how best to study humans and society, and who should control the research process and the knowledge that is produced.

Recently, advocates and practitioners of service-learning have proposed that we explore ways of describing and promoting it so as to broaden its appeal to the higher education community. Edward Zlotkowski (1995) and others (e.g., Lenk, 1997) suggest that one way to do this is to make clear how the pedagogical value of service-learning lies not only in its capacity for reinforcing moral and civic values, but also in its potential for enriching more traditional, discipline-based learning. Our general failure to make clear how and why service-learning can serve the pedagogical needs of our discipline-based courses might help to explain why "so many faculty members have adopted a posture of general approval but personal indifference" (Zlotkowski, 1995:16) toward service-learning in the academy.

I aim to contribute to the ongoing dialogue about how and why to incorporate service-learning into discipline-based courses by demonstrating how some important pedagogical goals of my basic and advanced undergraduate courses in social science research methods are achieved by means of one kind of service-learning—community-based research (CBR). First I will briefly explain what CBR is and describe how I incorporate it into my teaching. Then I will explain how the acquisition of practical research skills, as well as an understanding of epistemological issues surrounding knowledge production in the social sciences, are greatly enhanced by students' experience of doing research with and for the community.

Community-Based Research

Community-based research involves collaboration between trained researchers and community members in the design and implementation of research projects aimed at meeting community-identified needs. CBR differs from traditional academic

research in two substantial ways. The first is that CBR is done *with* rather than *on* the community. Instead of treating communities as "laboratories" and community members as convenient samples, as is more typical in conventional research, CBR holds as a central tenet the involvement of community members in every stage of the research process, from identifying the research question to formulating action proposals that derive from the research results. In practice, and for different reasons, community members' actual involvement in the research may be somewhat limited. However, the goal of CBR is to carry out a project that meets some community need as it is defined by that community—not by the researcher or other "experts"—and, on a broader scale, to democratize the production and control of knowledge. This is achieved by recognizing the legitimacy of the knowledge and world views of powerless people and by sharing authority wherever possible in every stage of the research process (Ansley & Gaventa, 1997; Stoecker & Bonacich, 1992).

The second essential difference between CBR and traditional academic research is that an explicit goal of CBR—indeed, the central purpose for doing such research—is to contribute in some way to improving the lives of those living in the community. In other words, CBR has a critical *action component* such that the knowledge produced has the potential to bring about some positive social change. Typically, CBR practitioners work in the interest of social, economic or environmental justice and their community consists of the powerless and oppressed, or those working on their behalf. Community-based research, carried out to help the community acquire some information that they see as important to their ongoing work, is typically (though not always) one part of the community's larger action agenda. This

social change goal of CBR even more dramatically distinguishes it from conventional academic research, whose purpose is “understanding for its own sake,” or to test hypotheses and develop theory in a discipline, and whose rationales are rarely cast in explicit political and ideological terms (Hall, 1992; Murphy, Scammell & Sclove, 1997; Porpora, 1999; Stoecker & Bonacich, 1992).

Community-based research has a rich history and diverse roots. In Latin America, Paulo Freire (1970), Orlando Fals-Borda (1984) and other activist educators and researchers used what they called “participatory research” as an organizing and transformative strategy for the disenfranchised. Participatory research emerged in the 1960s and 1970s in Europe and North America during an era of challenge to the dominant positivist paradigm, as critiques posed important questions about the purposes of research, the role of values, the distinction between researcher and researched, and the relationship of knowledge creation to social power (Green *et al.*, 1997; Hall, 1992). In the United States, different versions of “action-oriented” research-participatory action research (PAR), action research, empowerment research-evolved somewhat independently in response to dissatisfaction with the inability of traditional social science methods to inform policy and practice and lead to social action (Small, 1995). Academics engaged in CBR argue eloquently for its contributions to forging critical partnerships between colleges and universities and the communities in which they are located. For too long, they maintain, universities have neglected their civic mission, and CBR is an effective way to share resources in a common effort to produce relevant information and identify solutions to pressing community and societal problems (Nyden, Figert, Shibley, & Burrows, 1997; Porpora, 1999).

Although scholars and activists inside and outside the academy have long engaged in various forms of action-oriented research with communities, CBR’s iteration as a form of *service-learning* in higher education is a relatively recent one. As a result, little has been written detailing the “how to’s” and distinctive challenges of involving students—especially undergraduates—in this kind of experiential education (for an excellent recent exception, see McNicoll, 1999). And although a fair amount has been written about the benefits of CBR for communities and their university partners (e.g., Stoecker & Bonacich, 1992; Nyden, Figert, Shibley, & Burrows, 1997), little attention has been given to how and why involving students in CBR can also be a highly effective teaching strategy, particularly in courses in social science research.

I have held major responsibility, over the past fif-

teen years, for the social research methods courses offered at the small women’s liberal arts college where I teach. The first level research course, “The Philosophy and Methods of Social Research,” is a sociology course that is designed to meet the research requirement for majors in sociology, social work, law and society, and political science. Students from other fields, including psychology and education, also occasionally enroll in the course on an elective basis. The beginning research methods course enrolls about 30 students each fall, about half of whom go on to take a course in basic statistics. Both the basic research course and statistics are prerequisites for the advanced-level Practicum in Social Research, a two-semester course in which students work on collaborative research projects with agencies and organizations in the community. The year long advanced course is required of sociology majors, but also enrolls students from a variety of majors who elect a minor in social science research.

Although the advanced-level practicum is the “centerpiece” of my CBR teaching, students in the basic research methods course have the option of meeting the course’s independent research requirement with a smaller-scale CBR project. Students from both the basic and advanced courses have completed over a half dozen projects in the two years that I have used CBR in my teaching. Following are short descriptions of the student projects to which I will refer:

An Assessment of Child Care Needs of Low-Income Mothers, a project undertaken by five advanced-level students with the Department of Social Services. This research involved focus groups, followed by semi-structured interviews with about 65 mothers of children under 12. The purpose was to ascertain the unmet child care needs of women in light of recent concerns about the impact of welfare reform; and to help the D.S.S. Business/Child Care Liaison work with local businesses to better meet the child care needs of area workers.

An Exploration of Reasons for the Low Participation Rates of African-American Women in Breast Cancer Screening Programs, undertaken by five advanced-level students with the Breast and Cervical Cancer Unit of the local Health Department. Respondents were identified through pastors and health care liaisons at local churches with sizable African-American memberships. Women participated in focus groups and completed self-administered questionnaires about behavior and attitudes connected with breast cancer and mammograms with the aim of finding out why Black women in the county seem to utilize free mammography

screening in lower numbers than White women in the area, and how the Health Department might increase their participation in these programs.

Needs Assessment of the Hispanic Community. Two students in the basic research methods course, both of them non-Hispanic but fluent in Spanish, worked with the recently-formed Hispanic Concerns Committee on a multi-method study to find out about the characteristics and needs of the small but growing Spanish-speaking community in the county.

Programs and Services for Incarcerated and Previously-Incarcerated Women Struggling with Alcohol and Drug Problems. This study involved lengthy interviews with current and past female inmates of the local Adult Detention Center to find out what programs and services are available to them to help them deal with substance use problems. The study was initiated with Church Women United, a local grass roots ecumenical organization involved in issues relating to poverty and justice which is seeking to establish a “safe and sober home” for women and their children.

Explaining the High Injury Rate Among 18-24 year-old Bicyclists and Pedestrians in the County. Three students in the basic course conducted short interviews, mostly in area malls, with young adults with the purpose of finding out what accounts for the exceptionally high injury rate of young adult pedestrians, and bicyclists in the county. This study was conducted in cooperation with the county’s Task Force on Bicycle and Pedestrian Safety so that they might know what measures to take to combat the high injury rate.

Social Research Methods: Course Content and Learning Goals

The content of social research courses falls into two general categories: the *methodological* and the *epistemological*. The first refers to what is the most widespread objective of courses in social research methods: that is, helping students acquire a basic appreciation for and understanding of the research methods that social scientists use to study social life. Here we hope that students will become informed consumers and critics of extant research, but also acquire a *working* knowledge of research design and techniques of data collection and analysis. To this end, many instructors of undergraduate social research courses supplement textbook and classroom learning with an experiential component that requires students to design and carry out a small research project of their own. This way they acquire firsthand experience in every aspect of the research process, from formulating a viable research question to analyzing and presenting results. Community-

based research projects are one form of this very common experiential teaching strategy.

A second aim of undergraduate social research courses is somewhat less common but, I would argue, equally important: to help students understand social research not just as a collection of methods and strategies, but also as the way that knowledge about the social world is produced. I do this partly by means of assigned readings and classroom lecture and discussion that critically examine the epistemological assumptions underlying different modes of research design and data collection. My goal is not only to enable students to make informed choices about appropriate research methods to use for different kinds of research questions and purposes, but also to help them acquire a larger and critical understanding of different research paradigms, including alternatives to the one that dominates in Western social science and social thought. To do this is to invite students to participate in a vigorous and ongoing intellectual debate that features some of the most fundamental assumptions about knowledge production in the social sciences. I also see this as a means to empower students by helping them to see themselves as researchers—potential participants in the production of social scientific knowledge. Community-based research can be an enormously effective strategy to achieve these pedagogical ends because it “models” alternatives to conventional social science.

Teaching Methodology through CBR

The benefits of involving students in CBR for are the same as those accruing to any sort of experiential work in some important respects. That is, when students must actually do what they have read about—in this case, select a sample, develop a questionnaire, conduct an interview, take field notes, identify ethical issues, analyze data they have collected—they are inclined to approach their work with extra amounts of care and enthusiasm. They also learn better than if their learning is classroom- and textbook-bound, where their only responsibility is to absorb information long enough to regurgitate it on an exam. This bit of wisdom appears over and over in the work of researchers and theorists on learning: that the most effective learning takes place through “combinations of thought and action, reflection and practice, theory and application” (Jacoby, 1996, 6-7; see also Kolb, 1984). Judging from the popular practice of requiring that students design and complete a research project on their own, we can infer that most instructors of social research methods share this widespread recognition of the benefits of hands-on learning.

Students doing community-based research have

an added benefit—their learning is also invigorated by real accountability and a heightened sense of purpose. They are doing the research and writing the final report not for the professor, but rather for and (ideally) with the community partners—and sometimes for others who they hope will be inspired or pressured to take action on their findings. And their research has a purpose—improving a program, exposing an injustice, documenting a need—beyond simply demonstrating their mastery of course material. Time and time again, I’ve been taken aback by the energy and creativity with which students have undertaken their CBR work. I see this as attributable to their desire to “make good” on their commitment to people that they have come to know in the community, the greater autonomy associated with learning off-campus, and the recognition that comes with having completed a meaningful project for someone other than the professor and for a purpose other than a good grade. All of this makes CBR highly motivating in ways that conventional classroom instruction simply is not.

By way of example, often the first data collection stage of my students’ research projects have involved focus groups, unstructured group interviews held with a half dozen or so members of the community with whom the students will be working. Focus groups are useful both because they help the students come to know the community better and because these meetings serve a “sensitizing” function. That is, they provide insights, about things such as the language that participants use to think and talk about a topic, that inform subsequent stages of the research, including the development of survey instruments and strategies for sampling and data collection (see Lynch, 1993). So far in my experience, the students have taken on the task of organizing and running these focus groups with great aplomb, despite having virtually no training in focus group research, which is barely mentioned in their text and with which I also had no experience. In every instance—focus groups with service providers, with African-American church women, with low-income single mothers—the students devoured whatever books or articles they could get their hands on, organized participants, developed questions, facilitated dialogue, and transcribed and interpreted data with remarkable success and with a minimum of guidance from me. In every case, their efforts produced rich data that proved invaluable to the respective research project.

Community-based research enhances learning about other dimensions of research methods as well. The ethical concerns and dilemmas that are discussed in their textbook truly come to life when students are asking questions of vulnerable people in

the community or having to request permission to undertake research from the college Institutional Review Board or from people in the community who must answer to litigation-fearful bureaucracies. And they also have occasion to see how politics can impinge on the research process at every stage. Students often must negotiate project parameters with two or more conflicting parties—e.g., a community task force whose research goals are slightly different from those of an equally-committed social service provider—and in other ways they discover the importance of qualities such as diplomacy, perseverance, and flexibility in seeing a project through from beginning to end. In one case, the political and ethical challenges of community-based research came together when a community partner—a social service professional committed to child care issues—asked to be present in a seemingly “neutral” setting where students were pre-testing an interview schedule about child care needs to a small group of low income mothers at a local community college. Only when the interviews were underway did the students realize that the women were very uncomfortable answering questions about their situations in the presence of a person from the agency that deems them eligible or ineligible for government aid. This incident led the student researchers to rethink much about their research plan and taught them more than any chapter or lecture on research ethics could have.

The *collaborative* nature of community-based research also gives it special pedagogical value, as students have many opportunities to learn both from each other and from community partners with whom they work. Students often have different strengths and characteristics that, taken together, help them carry out a project with much greater success than if they were working alone. For example, students with good social skills might take on more phone calling, interviewing, and public presentation responsibilities, while students who are most comfortable with computers and quantification might assume greater responsibility for numerical data entry and analysis. Better questionnaires are developed when students work with each other and with community members who—sometimes to the students’ mild surprise—provide valuable suggestions about the research instrument based on their own knowledge about the language, worldviews, and situations of the respondents as well as the policies and programs in the community (what CBR practitioners call “local knowledge”). This sort of collaborative work that draws on the strengths and competencies of different members of a “team,” of course, models the way that most research and other kinds of projects are done in the “real world”—another

benefit of this approach.

Finally, students engaged in CBR learn that social research is seldom as linear, systematic, and subject to the researcher's control as textbook discussions would have us believe. Research in the real world invariably brings with it the unexpected, unpredictable, and uncontrollable. Although unanticipated problems in the research process might mean that a project must be abandoned, more typically, students—perhaps with the help of the professor and community members—must re-think and re-design some aspect of their original research plan. My students have had to change course because of a variety of “glitches” of the sort that seem to be common in CBR: a community contact who failed to produce the groups of respondents that she promised; the dismal failure of a sampling strategy that relied on tables in front of area supermarkets (where, it turns out, people who will stop to buy Girl Scout cookies will not do so to answer a short questionnaire); bad weather; and irresponsibility of a key member of the research team. Every instance imparted valuable lessons about doing social research.

CBR and “Connected Knowing”

Some of the distinctive pedagogical value of CBR has to do with its compatibility with certain preferred modes of learning that our students are likely to bring to social science research classes. This compatibility is suggested both by the service-learning literature and by recent research that looks at connections among “ways of knowing,” teaching strategies, and student achievement in mathematics and science.

Drawing on the work of Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule (1986), educators have recently argued that the conventional approaches that predominate in formal education favor “separate knowing” over “connected knowing.” Both are forms of “procedural knowledge,” procedures that people use for making meaning. *Separate knowing* stresses things like logic, abstraction, rationality, certainty, deduction, absolute truth, formality, power, and control. Separate knowers are those who are most comfortable adopting an impersonal stance toward the object of knowing and relying on reasoned procedures for making meaning. They are more likely to thrive in classes where lecture, individual effort, competition, and abstract learning are the norms and where feelings and personal beliefs are rigorously excluded in favor of highly codified and elaborated ways of organizing knowledge. Some researchers and educators have suggested that conventional strategies for teaching mathematics and science greatly favor separate knowers, who are more likely to be male than connected knowers (Boaler, 1997;

Becker, 1995).

In contrast, *connected knowing* emphasizes intuition, creativity, experience, induction, context, and relativism. Connected knowers rely more readily on personal experience and empathy than on impersonal, authoritative reason in their quest for understanding, and they perform and thrive in learning contexts that utilize hands-on experiences, collaborative rather than competitive learning, an emphasis on practical applications and real understanding, and work in groups. Connected knowers are inclined to find conventionally-taught courses in areas like science and mathematics particularly unappealing, intimidating, and even inaccessible as knowledge is presented as abstract, linear, disconnected from their own experience, and at best remotely relevant to human—including their own—goals and interests.

Belenky and her colleagues maintain that neither of these two types of procedural knowledge is inherently superior and that, in fact, people need to develop as both connected and separate knowers before they can reach the last stage in their model, “constructed knowing,” in which the rational and emotive dimensions can be integrated and the knower can appreciate the complexity of knowledge formed from various perspectives (Becker, 1995, p. 168). Because of this, service-learning advocates maintain that the emphasis of service-learning on connected knowing makes it a much-needed counterpoint to the separate mode of knowing that predominates in the traditional academic community (McEwen, 1996).

This fit with connected knowing seems to characterize community-based research, as well.¹ Students work with one another and with community partners to design projects that arise out of real community needs. Action-oriented researchers tend to focus on “ill-structured” problems: ones that do not have well-defined or reliable methods of determining either the problem or its solution (Small, 1999). Because their community partners and research participants are likely to be very different from themselves, students must develop empathy with their community partners so that they are able to “see the world” through their eyes as well as take into account a variety of perspectives. And because the goal of their research is to benefit the community and its members, students focus on the interests, feelings, and goals of the research participants rather than simply on results or outcomes. Students are also working together toward a mutual goal, not competing with one another for a good grade—which, again, favors connected knowers, who prefer cooperation to competition. Their research is shaped and informed, at every stage, by interactions with real people and they are likely, at least to some

extent, to be using the kinds of interpretive research methods that most appeal to connected knowers. And even when the research uses conventional, quantitative approaches—typically survey—students are developing questions collaboratively with community members who have a stake in the information they yield. They are interviewing people in whose lives and social worlds they are truly interested. And they are compiling, interpreting, and presenting data imbued with meaning far beyond mere numbers and with potential to bring about needed social changes consistent with the students' own values. While some of these ends might be achieved by means of independent research projects in more conventional research courses, they are *trademarks* of community-based research.

The fit of CBR with connected knowing makes it an effective strategy in another respect as well. Their bias toward separate knowers means that conventional teaching strategies in mathematics and science courses implicitly favor males, which may be helping to drive girls and young women away from science and math fields. Although this might suggest that CBR is of particular value to those who are teaching research methods to women (including those of us teaching at women's colleges), I think it has relevance to everyone teaching social science research. Most of us are keenly aware that, despite our best efforts, our research methods courses are widely feared *rites of passage* for college students majoring in fields such as sociology, psychology, social work, criminal justice, and politics. Many students, of *both* genders, who are reasonably comfortable learning about welfare policy, deviant behavior, child abuse, and Marx' theory of surplus value become immobilized when the course content turns to the language and logic of science: variables, hypotheses, probability samples, control groups, bivariate tables and the like. If we assume, as I believe we can, that many of our students—male and female—share many characteristics of connected knowers, then we can begin to understand why involving these students in community-based research can help counteract the dislike and discomfort they feel in our research classes. This is not to suggest that we should avoid teaching conventional social science methods in conventional ways, but rather that students' learning of quantitative as well as qualitative methods is enhanced by the chance to apply their newly-acquired research skills in meaningful settings.

Teaching Epistemology using CBR

Community-based research, I have argued, is a very useful way to teach the *methodology* of social research. Now I turn to my second point, which is

that CBR is even more valuable as a means to bring to life questions of *epistemology* surrounding the practice and meaning of social research. More than just a collection of techniques, social research is also a process for producing knowledge about the social world—a process that is shaped by particular interests and points of view that, in turn, reflect wider social arrangements, including prevailing hierarchies of power and prestige. Recent historical, sociological, and feminist analyses of science have raised provocative questions with far-reaching implications for social science methodology—questions about the nature of objectivity, the construction of facts, and the biases and values that shape scientific interpretations, agendas, investigative tools, applications, and the rules governing who is and is not allowed into the world of science (see e.g., Laslett, Kohlstedt, Longino, & Hammonds, 1996; Ross, 1996). Although clearly there are limits to how much we can include in a course in social research methods, it seems irresponsible not to engage our students with at least some of the questions that these “critical science studies” pose: For what purposes do we produce social scientific knowledge? Who controls the production of knowledge and who owns—or ought to own—the knowledge that is produced? What are some consequences of that control? Is value-free science possible, or even desirable? Whose interests are served by conventional research paradigms and approaches? How might the research enterprise be democratized? How can we best know about human behavior? What are the strengths and limitations of different research methods for acquiring valid information about social life? How are research findings shaped by the values, worldviews, and interest of researchers and research participants?

The Positivist Paradigm²

Since the middle of the previous century, social scientific inquiry has been dominated by a positivistic paradigm whose methods and logic are modeled on the natural and physical sciences. This model presupposes much about the social world and about how social science research might best study it. Positivism assumes that the purpose of social research is to discover and document what are assumed to be universal laws of human behavior. The goal of social science research is to describe and explain the social world—not to change it. Social scientists do research to build theory; to contribute in some way to the “store” of knowledge—universal probabilistic laws—about human behavior and social life. They do this by systematically and empirically testing hypotheses that are deduced from more general theories that constitute knowledge in each

discipline.

Researchers in the positivist tradition use what are currently the most common methods in social research—mainly survey and experiments, but also other methods (e.g., content analysis) where systematic observations yield patterns that are expressed in the form of numbers. They rely on precise quantitative measures and statistical models to explain, and make predictions about, humans and the social world. The laws that such analysis yields are expressed in the form of probability statements, which both explain what exists and predict what will occur in the future. This approach is predicated on a view of human beings as rational, self-interested actors who are largely shaped by external forces; and systematic observations of their behavior, rather than any aspect of their internal, subjective reality, is the appropriate stuff of social analysis.

Conventional social science also makes a number of related and important assumptions about *the researcher*, who is assumed to be objective, detached, neutral and disinterested, i.e., able to achieve distance from the object of the research and willing to suspend her or his own values in the interest of exerting no undue influence on any aspect of the research process. The notion of “value-freedom” is critical to positivism, and the researcher has prime responsibility to ensure that research is objective and free of human biases and values. To that end, the strategies and instruments of quantitative research are designed to achieve unbiased results, and they must be administered by a trained and objective researcher to ensure that the results reflect accurately the social reality being studied.

Because researchers are the trained experts, they also are seen as the sole *possessors* of knowledge about the research process and should, therefore, have total control of its design and implementation. The researcher should also be the sole *gatekeeper* of knowledge so that “the decision about whether, to whom, and how research findings should be disseminated rests entirely with the researcher” (Small, p. 1995, 18). By implication, the major beneficiaries of the research are the scientific community generally (as research contributes to the knowledge base of a discipline) and the researcher, who receives recognition, and perhaps other professional benefits, as a result of her or his contribution to scientific understanding.

The Interpretive and Critical Alternatives

The central premises of a positivistic paradigm have gone largely unchallenged for much of the history of social science in the United States. However, two alternative approaches to understanding the social world have slowly gained more than a small

measure of stature over the past few decades: interpretive social science and critical social science. Each raises provocative questions about the purpose, conduct and control of social science research, and each poses challenges to the dominant research paradigm in the social sciences.

Interpretive social science—which includes such theoretical orientations as symbolic interactionism, constructionism, hermeneutics, phenomenology, and ethnomethodology—sees social reality not as external to and imposed upon people, but rather as something that humans construct as they interact with one another. Within the interpretive paradigm, then, social research most appropriately involves “...the systematic analysis of socially meaningful action through the direct detailed observation of people in natural settings in order to arrive at understandings and interpretations of how people create and maintain their social worlds (Neuman, 2000, p. 71). Interpretive social scientists use qualitative research methods—field research, participant observation—in order to understand how humans, in interaction with one another, create meaning in everyday life.

The positivist/interpretive debate is a longstanding and acrimonious one, and the interpretive paradigm offers a compelling critique of the central tenets of positivism. From this perspective, social reality does not consist of observable “facts,” but can be understood only as embedded in meaning and accessible by means of *Verstehen*, or empathetic understanding: accessing people’s subjective, inner reality. Moreover, the interpretive approach argues that research cannot be value-free, as values are central to all human action. Consequently, the researcher’s values, experiences, and personal points of view are as much a part of the research process as those of the people studied, and they should be discussed and acknowledged. Interpretive approaches emphasize deep understanding rather than generalizability, a sensitivity to context and connectedness, bias toward the point of view of the people studied over that of the researcher, data in the form of words over numbers, and the inadequacy of research strategies borrowed from the natural and physical sciences to understand much beyond the most superficial aspects of human behavior. While this approach has fallen far short of displacing positivism, it has forced critical appraisal of some of the central tenets and assumptions underlying conventional social scientific inquiry.

The other alternative to conventional research, critical social science, has its roots in Marxism and takes as its focus issues of power and inequality. In contrast to the critique of positivism that comes from the interpretive approach, critical researchers are

less concerned with questions of *how* to do social research than with questions of *why* to do it and *who* is entitled to shape and control the research process. The purpose of all social inquiry, they argue, should not simply be to describe the world, but to change it. Most research approaches grounded in critical social science share an ideological commitment to obtaining and using knowledge to bring about more equal social relations by empowering oppressed groups. And in response to the charge that overtly politicized research goals make “science” impossible, critical researchers argue that, in fact, no knowledge is neutral. The supposedly neutral “facts” to which positivists lay claim—along with the whole of the institution of science—also serve ideological purposes in their justification of existing social and cultural arrangements: “The belief that knowledge is merely technical, having no ideological function, is refuted by the ways in which science has played handmaiden to social values, providing an aura of scientific authority to prejudicial beliefs about social groups and giving credibility to certain social policies” (Riger, 1992, p. 730).

A number of action-oriented research approaches—or what Small (1995) calls “postpositivist paradigms”—derive from critical social science, including feminist research, participatory action research, and empowerment research in psychology. While there are slight differences among them, they share some important features (Green, 1997; Neuman, 2000; Small, 1995):

- An action-orientation so that the value of research findings rests on their potential to be used to help bring about social change,
- The need to use research methods that are not exploitive but are sensitive to the special characteristics of the people and situations under investigation,
- A recognition of the value and legitimacy of experiential knowledge of the research participants,
- Shared power and control of decision-making throughout the research process rather than domination of the process by researchers,
- The collective ownership of knowledge produced by research, which belongs as much to the research participants as to the researcher.

Although interpretive and critical social science approaches have held their own at the margins of social science *theory*, they have been largely unsuccessful at making much of a dent in the hegemony of positivistic social science *research*, particularly in the United States. Here most social scientists who work in the positivist tradition rarely question

nor even seem to be aware of the precepts underlying their research practices, and it is still the case that positivism is widely taught as *what science is* (Neuman, 2000, p. 69), with little or no attention to alternatives. This deference by default to what Addelson (1991) calls the “cognitive authority” of conventional science is, she maintains, bad for our disciplines and for scientific research generally. Community-based research, an *alternative way of doing and thinking about social research*, is an especially effective strategy to bring alive for students the questions that are central to this debate: *Why* should we do social research? *How* we can best know about humans and society? and *Who* should participate in the production of knowledge?

Why Should We Do Social Research?

The purpose of doing social research, according to the dominant social science research paradigm, is understanding for its own sake: describing the world, rather than acting on it, and contributing to the development of theory, not bringing about social change. When we fail to challenge this kind of thinking, we essentially communicate to our students that social science research, while it might be the most reliable means we have for learning about the social world, nonetheless has little to offer in the way of finding answers to really important questions or shedding light on solutions to pressing social problems. Community-based research poses direct challenges to these assumptions about the purpose of social science research. As a result, students may, for the first time, come to see research as having the potential to alleviate problems they have studied in their social science classes—racism, sexism, family violence, poverty, educational inequality, or problems faced by groups such as people with disabilities or the aged—as well as more delineated problems such as the kind that my students have addressed: the availability of affordable child care, the adequacy of programs and services for groups such as female addicts and non-English speakers, and access to health care for women of color. When students are able to apply their newly acquired research skills to problems that are of real concern to them and to others (and get academic credit for it), they acquire a broader—and surely more positive—view of what social science is and what it can do.

Because community-based research is change-oriented, researchers go a step further and identify and analyze links between their scholarly inquiry and social action. My students, as the final step in their research project, must formulate policy-related suggestions from their results. For example, students who assessed the child care needs of low-income women recommended, in a public forum and in the

presence of a high-level social services administrator, that local welfare reform policies were seriously flawed as long as they failed to provide child care benefits to low-income mothers enrolled in college. Students who completed a study of African-American women's knowledge about breast cancer boldly suggested that the Health Department's initial assumption—that race was the variable shaping different attitudes and determining differential utilization of screening programs—was misguided, as they found that working-class and middle-class Black women had rather extensive knowledge about breast cancer. Even when research results are not very meaningful, or when recommendations are limited or unrealistic, the process of connecting research outcomes to social action powerfully illustrates to students that social science research can, indeed, have relevance to people's lives. Those students whose study results were largely limited to the finding that young adults didn't know the traffic laws governing bicycles knew they were not changing the world when they suggested the need for a radio-based public education campaign about bicycle and pedestrian safety. However, they did acquire a new appreciation for the potential of social science research to affect some, albeit small, improvement in the life of a community.

So entrenched is the disconnection of research and action in modern scientific thinking that we are led to believe that any research with a social change goal—achieving social justice, uncovering inequities, improving social services—is suspect, invariably lacking rigor and unlikely to give sufficient attention to issues of bias and validity. However, students involved in community-based research can't help but question the faulty notion that action-oriented research is not, or cannot be, rigorous and objective. My students come to their collaborative community-based projects having completed basic courses in research methods and statistics. They are knowledgeable about research protocols and sensitive to the myriad ways that bias can influence outcomes at every stage of the research. And they soon realize that the same standards and accepted research practices that they have learned are not at all abandoned when the research is done with and for the community. Instead, they realize early in the process that community members expect research that is rigorous and of high quality. This is not surprising; communities want results, after all, that are credible and persuasive. Nyden, Figert, Shibley, & Burrows, (1997) make the same point:

Research is only useful to a community if it is accurate and provides information that is an honest representation of the issues being studied. Quality collaborative research does not

abandon accepted research practices. . . If the research is done well, it should point the organization and community toward more effective alternatives to current strategies. . . Thus, objectivity in collaborative research does not mean consciously ignoring how the research might be used to a particular end, such as improving the quality of AIDS/HIV prevention education, increasing public acceptance of group homes for delinquent youth, or improving race relations in a community. Objectivity means exposing collaborative research to as much of the critical standards of social science research as possible. (1997, pp. 8-10)

Or, as one of my students said about community-based research, "It really makes you think."

How Should We Do Social Research?

Experimental design, structured interviews, self-administered questionnaires—research methods that count, measure, and produce numerical data that yield probability statements and statistical patterns—have long defined social science methodology. Interpretive and feminist social scientists have been the loudest voices in opposition to the superiority claims of quantitative research methods. Interpretive theorists argue that quantitative methods produce simplistic and superficial data and ignore the role of values in the research process. Feminists add that quantification creates distance and even an exploitive relationship between researcher and researched, denies agency and voice to research subjects, and embodies the masculine values of autonomy, separation, distance and control. Respondents are reduced to variables and numbers, and the researcher assumes all the power—to shape questions, to structure responses, to interpret thoughts and feelings and behaviors—thus denying any voice to the people being studied (Mason, 1997; Riger, 1992).

Despite these criticisms, these same feminist critics and others partial to qualitative approaches acknowledge that quantitative approaches have some value in social science research and that the best-designed projects are often those that combine different methods (Jayaratne & Stewart, 1993; Reinharz, 1992). I think this is especially true in community-based research, where quantitative data is often more effective than qualitative at demonstrating the scope of a problem or otherwise revealing overall patterns that are more reliable than individual cases as a basis for action or policy (Reinharz, p. 80). Moreover, we would be naïve to ignore the power of numbers to persuade—not a small consideration when research is aimed at influencing public policy decisions.

Consequently, my students doing community-based research almost always utilize some conventional quantitative methods in their research—usually structured self-administered questionnaires or interview schedules. However, most employ some qualitative methods as well. We have found that techniques such as focus groups, intensive interviews, and other more loosely-structured modes of communicating with community members are essential to the goals of community-based research, as they narrow the distance between the researcher and the researched, give real “voice” to participants, and allow access to some of the subjective understandings and local knowledge that are critical to analysis. In fact, when students take on research projects with the community, they usually end up with multi-method research designs, which help them to see both the value of triangulation and the distinctive strengths and weaknesses of diverse research techniques.

Working in groups, with each other and community members, simplifies for my students’ to use of both qualitative and quantitative methods in their research. Some projects involve focus groups followed by more structured survey design, where the focus group allows students to get acquainted with members of the community, to receive input or feedback about questionnaire items, to develop mutual trust, to solicit suggestions about sampling and access to other community members, and to recruit people to help with the data-gathering. We also have found other ways to create multi-method research designs. In the study of women struggling with drug and alcohol problems, students conducted half-hour interviews that were both qualitative and quantitative in nature. That is, a number of open-ended questions about the women’s experiences with programs and services in the community were followed by a page of short and structured questions, designed to gather demographic data (number of children, residence, age, and so on) for the purpose of describing the characteristics of the population that needed to be better served. The needs assessment of the area Latino population involved a range of methods utilizing different languages—English or Spanish—depending on the respondents. These included a focus group with area service providers, a long structured interview schedule for Latinos in the community, and participant observation on the part of one student, a Spanish-speaker who worked throughout the study in an area restaurant alongside a number of Latino men from the community.

A secondary pedagogical benefit of using both quantitative and qualitative methods, of course, is that students gain experience in each. In my case, that includes the important aim of getting students to

develop some facility in using the computer to compile and analyze survey data along with other research skills, such as taking and transcribing field notes, observing, developing research instruments, and writing and presenting results.

Who Should Do Social Research?

Conventional social science assumes that trained researchers ought to assume total control over the design and conduct of research, and that they should be the ones to control access to whatever knowledge the research produces. In this regard, undergraduate students involvement in community-based research implicitly challenges this conventional thinking; students who are themselves powerless especially when they are female, as my students are, participate as full partners in the community-based research. As a feminist instructor at an institution dedicated to the education of women, I consider this form of empowerment to be one of the major pedagogical benefits of community-based research.

My students reveal their feelings of efficacy and enthusiasm for research in different ways. A few students become so energized by small projects that they expand them into larger-scale independent study projects in the subsequent semester. Others volunteer with organizations that they come to know through community-based research projects. And more than one student has confessed that she was “sure she wasn’t going to like social research” until she became involved in her CBR project. Although it is too soon to know how many students will go on to careers as activists or action researchers, I am inspired by reactions from students such as the one who completed a small project for the local food bank, then sent me the following note:

I have been trying to contact a few agencies to work on a research project for the summer. .My dream research project would be an examination of the conditions faced by African-Americans in the areas of housing, education, and the economy and organizations that are fighting to correct any problems. It would be a “State of Black Pittsburgh” Report. I want to really get into this stuff. I am not sure if this is something that is feasible for the summer. I am trying to plan a very interesting project that will be useful for the city and to me. I want to build my research skills and design an extraordinary project. I need some advice...

This student went on to complete a summer-long CBR project, working with staff and clients of a recently-established community center in a depressed area not far from where she grew up—not her “dream project,” but one step toward what I expect will be a notable career in social justice-ori-

ented activism.

In other ways, community-based research models non-conventional thinking about the role of the researcher and the social relations that govern the research process. One is that the prestige hierarchies that define relations in conventional science are largely irrelevant to research involving undergraduates and the community. Students are usually younger than community members, and many other status differentials—such as social class, education, gender, and ethnicity—are absent or, in some cases, somewhat blurred. Moreover, the local knowledge of community members carries considerable weight for students, who usually come into the project relatively uninformed and without any sort of professional or intellectual agenda. I also identify or create opportunities for my students—often with their community partners—to present their research findings in public forums. This sort of recognition underscores for them the value of their efforts and publicly identifies them as social researchers and equal collaborators in the research process.

Community-based research means a different, more democratic research model in which people participate in key deliberations and decisions about research that has the potential to affect their lives. When undergraduate students are the trained researchers, it is a model that stands in particularly stark contrast to the rigid prestige and authority hierarchies that characterize conventional scientific research, in which research is largely the “business of experts trained in specialized domains of knowledge” (Gaventa & Ansley, 1997). As such, it is a pedagogical strategy that helps to empower the students we teach—as well as the community members with whom we work.

Conclusion

Although I focus here almost exclusively on the pedagogical value of community-based research for undergraduate students, I do not mean to suggest that what students gain from this experience is either the only, or even the most important, reason for getting involved in it. Nor should that be the only criterion for measuring its value. On the contrary, I agree with service-learning advocates, such as Harkavy (1996, cited in Leeds, 1999), who argue that service-learning ought to be about the needs of communities rather than primarily about the benefits to our students or our institutions, and that we should do more to ensure that our students’ service-learning efforts are truly beneficial to the communities where they work.

At the same time, as Leeds points out, to expect any sort of service-learning to affect meaningful social change is “placing a large bet and a large

burden on what in the end is a pedagogy. Maybe a good and important one, but a pedagogy just the same” (1999, p. 120). If we wish to encourage more faculty members to take on the challenges and extra work associated with service-learning, then I believe we must make clear the ways that it supports our pedagogical goals and enhances our teaching effectiveness. For a great many of us at small liberal arts colleges, teaching is the most important work that we do. And if our purpose in teaching is to help develop students’ capacities and dispositions for leading meaningful lives and to contribute to making the world better after they graduate, then incorporating community-based research into research methods courses is a very good way to help achieve those aims.

Notes

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¹ Community-based research may fit even better with the last stage of knowing—“constructed knowing”—as it combines the best of relationship-based knowledge and rigorous research principles—an idea suggested by an astute anonymous reviewer.

² The brief discussions that outline major features of positivistic and interpretive social science research draw heavily on Neuman (2000, Chapter 4). He notes that these are idealized, simplified models that are distilled from more complex arguments that can be traced to early social theorists and philosophers including Weber, Dilthey, Comte, Durkheim, and Mill. For some more recent elaborations of the positivistic versus interpretive approaches, see Ritzer (1975), Giddens (1976), Turner (1985), Berger & Luckman (1967), and Wilson (1970).

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