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## Incorporating Community Based Participatory Action Research in Social Work Graduate Education

Sarah Moore <sup>a</sup> and Linda Plitt Donaldson<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Department of Social Work, University of North Texas, Denton, Texas, USA; <sup>b</sup>Social Work, College of Health and Behavioral Studies, Institute for Innovation in Health and Human Services, James Madison University, Harrisonburg, Virginia, USA

### ABSTRACT

Grounded in a framework of high-impact educational practices, this article offers a model for incorporating Community Based Participatory Action Research (CBPR) into the social work graduate curriculum. The authors review the history of CBPR in social work and social work education and identify challenges and gaps when CBPR has been used in university settings. Two case studies are then examined: a MSW course that conducted a study on youth experiencing homelessness and a doctoral course centered on a study of HIV in the Ethiopian immigrant community. Implications for social work education at both the MSW and PhD levels are discussed.

### KEYWORDS

doctoral education;  
community based  
participation action research;  
teaching research; MSW  
education

Preparing social workers to be savvy consumers and producers of research is a fundamental – and often challenging – goal of graduate social work education. MSW programs have incorporated a range of curriculum options to fulfill the Council on Social Work Education’s (CSWE) research standards and meet the profession’s ethical obligation to research based practice (NASW Code of Ethics, 2021). Yet, some argue that MSW graduates still lack important research skills (Drisko & Evans, 2018). Increasingly, social workers are called upon to incorporate research and evidence-based programs into their practice. This expectation of well prepared social work research consumers and producers challenges graduate programs to provide rich, meaningful, and rigorous research experiences for their students.

Incorporating hands-on research opportunities in graduate courses – even those that are not “research” courses per se, is one way to introduce a deeper research. Drisko and Evans (2018) note that in its most recent Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (EPAS), CSWE (2015) requires graduate students in their specialization year “ . . . to engage in and conduct research to inform and improve practice, policy, and service delivery” (p. 12). Graduate students in all accredited programs will be required to conduct research. Community-engaged learning is also identified as a high-impact practice

**CONTACT** Sarah Moore  [Sarah.moore@unt.edu](mailto:Sarah.moore@unt.edu)  Department of Social Work, University of North Texas, UNT College of Health and Public Service 1155 Union Circle #305370, Denton, TX 76203

(Kuh, 2008) because it teaches particular skills in a way that prepares students to become engaged citizens in the world. To achieve this outcome, this article offers a model for incorporating Community Based Participatory Action Research (CBPR) into the graduate curriculum, at both the MSW and doctoral levels.

## Literature review

Social work research has a history of tension between traditional, empirical and positivist research and the social justice, activist soul of the profession. Branom (2012) examines how philosopher and educator. Paulo Friere's (1970) work, critical theory, feminist research, and ecological systems theory each influence and lay the groundwork for the growth of CBPR as a social justice research framework for the social work profession. Jacobson and Rugeley (2007) explain that CBPR involves "people who are most affected by community problems as partners at the earliest stage of a project to help define the research goals, to decide how the project will be organized, and to provide their perspective in every aspect of the research process" (p. 24). Stoecker (2013) identifies the components of the CBPR research process as: (1) choosing the question; (2) designing the research methods; (3) collecting the data; (4) analyzing the data; and (5) reporting the results. He notes that "the community must always define the research question ... [and] consciously choose which decision points of the research process to control" (Stoecker, 2003, p. 107). Once a research question is selected, the university partner can help guide the community through decisions around whether quantitative or qualitative methods best suit the research question, and collaborate with the community in selecting and designing instruments. Ohmer et al. (2019) advise university partners to work closely with community groups in choosing, adapting, and designing selected instruments to ensure that measures chosen retain their reliability and validity, especially when incorporating quantitative methods. For the data collection phase, if community members choose to be involved, university partners are encouraged to develop joint training with the community partners in which all members of the data collection team would participate. For example, community members can address how one enters and engages with the community during data collection, and university partners can address human subjects' issues and ensuring reliability in the data collection process.

Participatory data analysis can be accomplished in a variety of ways and should be guided by the decision of community partners regarding their preferred role. For example, they may ask the university partner to collaborate on an iterative design for a participatory analysis process, or they may ask the partner to share the raw data, but then to take the lead in data analysis, checking in with community members along the way. Community members

may also ask university collaborators to present a final draft report of the analysis and findings for their review and revision. Finally, in reporting the results, community leaders may want to collaborate in the dissemination of findings from the CPBR process, including coauthoring manuscripts and co-presenting findings to community and professional audiences. Regular and deliberate communication with community partners through every step of the process is an important commitment for academics to make when using a CBPR methodology. Furthermore, in alignment with social work's strengths-based perspective, "community resources and strengths are as important to understand as are problems and concerns" (Jacobson & Rugeley, 2007, p. 24).

Branom (2012) argues that CBPR offers a research alternative especially relevant for the social work field because it addresses both research and interventions. What sets social work apart from many other disciplines is its focus and emphasis on action and intervention, rather than just knowledge generation (Delavega et al., 2017). Social work research often has a different aim than that of other disciplines and therefore needs tailored research methodologies, such as CBPR, to accomplish its goals (Delavega et al., 2017). CBPR is especially compatible with social work research due to the shared principles and values, including the strengths perspective, empowerment of the client, promoting self-determination, and cultural humility, as well as the dual goals of providing service and promoting social justice (Branom, 2012). Indeed, the NASW Code of Ethics (2021) highlights the responsibility of social workers to serve disadvantaged communities by pursuing social justice, and CBPR is a means for doing so in an empowering, justice-oriented, and culturally competent way (Branom, 2012).

### ***Challenges with CBPR in university settings***

The challenges surrounding using CBPR in a university setting are layered. One structural challenge includes its time-consuming nature, which may be prohibitive for faculty who are working within an academic system that requires them to "publish or perish" (Gebbie et al., 2003). Without changes to the way CBPR is viewed by tenure committees, some argue it is unlikely that tenure track faculty will teach or utilize this methodology (Martin & Pyles, 2013). Delavega et al. (2017) explain that tenure committees often misunderstand CBPR activities to be service (which holds less weight) rather than as research, which is typically weighted more heavily when reviewing faculty for promotion. This misunderstanding likely stems from historical emphasis within the academy favoring experimental over applied research (Delavega et al., 2017; Juliá & Kondrat, 2000). Another structural challenge is the lack of funding for CBPR projects (Polanyi & Cockburn, 2003). Frequently, funders' expectations of traditional designs for research studies are perceived as incompatible with CBPR, making obtaining funding for research more difficult

(Cornwall & Jewkes, 1995). A final dilemma to note is that some faculty teaching research methods may not have familiarity or experience conducting CBPR (Berge et al., 2009). The field of public health has overcome many of these challenges and gained great momentum, largely due the W.K. Kellogg Foundation making CBPR a funding priority for schools of public health at Johns Hopkins, the University of Michigan, and the University of North Carolina, starting in the late 1990s (Bowie et al., 2009). The Coombe et al. (2020) evaluation of community and academic CBPR partnerships in public health suggest that such collaborations enhance competence, and efficacy of the health research as well aid, in “establishing innovative linkages between academics and practitioners” (p. 552).

Social work can learn from the examples of the public health field in incorporating grassroots-driven research priorities and community leadership. These university/community partnerships present opportunities for CBPR to move more solidly into the academic realm, and beyond the research of direct social work practitioners who have always operated firmly within the community.

### ***Incorporating CBPR social work graduate education***

Historically, despite social work research’s emphasis on community and social change, there has been limited exposure to CBPR in social work education. Juliá and Kondrat (2000) analyzed syllabi and required texts for research courses at 75 different graduate social work programs across the country to determine the extent to which participatory action research methodologies were encouraged or taught. Of the 75 syllabi reviewed, only one mentioned participatory action research in the goals and objectives of the course, and CBPR was included in the reading lists of only four syllabi. However, in the years since Juliá and Kondrat’s study, there has been a growing university movement to focus on engaged scholarship (Martin & Pyles, 2013). Engaged scholarship is increasingly used as an umbrella term (or organizing framework) for methodologies such as CBPR that prioritize social change (Delavega et al., 2017).

In recent years, there are several examples cited in the literature of incorporating CBPR in graduate social work education. Ringstad et al. (2012) write about two professors at California State University (CSU) Stanislaus who were approached by local city representatives who asked for help in conducting a needs assessment to determine if a new homeless shelter was needed. They identified participatory action research as the best methodology for the project. Stakeholders were placed in various research groups with the intent that they would take ownership of the project and actively participate in the research process. Several MSW classes were formally included to help conduct each group’s proposed study. The collaboration provided students with hands-

on experience in data collection and analysis, and resulted in many of them expressing a newfound interest in research and macro practice (Ringstad et al., 2012). Similarly, Lundahl (2008) engaged a graduate research class in a research project from start to finish over the course of one semester. The course consisted of 18 MSW students who collaboratively generated hypotheses, developed a questionnaire, and then both collected and analyzed the data. The majority of students recommended offering similar courses in the future, and over 80% felt this method of learning research was more meaningful and effective than the traditional research courses they had taken in the past (Lundahl, 2008). Reinschmidt et al. (2019) also described a research methods class conducting a CBPR study over the course of a semester with reports of positive impacts on student learning.

Various outlines and models can be found in the literature for organizing and implementing CBPR course projects. For example, Shannon et al. (2012) describe a year-long service learning course for MSW students in which research methods and evaluation courses were taught together. Development of this course involved a 10-step process with the first 5 steps completed before the start of classes: (1) restructuring the courses to reduce redundancy; (2) forced registration to keep students on track for graduation and keep cohorts together; (3) development of assignments; (4) identification of interested agency partners; (5) determination of agency research needs and formal agreements; (6) formation of student groups; (7) student completion of IRB training; (8) clarification of agency needs in regards to evaluation and measurement; (9) collection and analysis of data; and (10) completion and presentation of evaluation reports. Reinschmidt et al. (2019) also outline four activity types that were necessary for successful implementation: (1) community engagement to identify community partners and needs; (2) laying the groundwork with students to prepare them for the research project; (3) administration and coordination of meetings and interviews as well as gathering needed supplies and resources; and (4) introducing students to the community so they may complete interviews, data collection, data analysis, and presentations of findings along with requests for feedback from the community.

There were similar challenges faced and lessons learned in each of the studies. For instance, it was found that one semester was not enough time to conduct a CBPR study from start to finish (Lundahl, 2008; McNicoll, 1999; Ringstad et al., 2012). Teaching CBPR is an extremely time-intensive endeavor and therefore changes may need to be made to faculty workloads (and class size) for those teaching such courses so they may adequately attend to student group dynamics and closely supervise the work being done (Lundahl, 2008; McNicoll, 1999; Shannon et al., 2012). Experience has shown that these courses are more time-intensive not only for faculty, but for students as well. Shannon et al. (2012) reported that students had to attend frequent meetings with their

assigned group and agency to properly coordinate the work being done. Moreover, they also reported challenges in communicating with assigned agencies, and were often navigating their agency's unreasonable expectations, changing demands, and fluctuating priorities (Shannon et al., 2012).

Despite the challenges inherent in incorporating CBPR, the importance of integrating research and practice is more important than ever for social workers. The CSWE (2015) EPAS increasingly recognize the centrality of social work research and practice, and emphasize that they are not separate.

CBPR is also considered to be a high-impact practice in higher education. Education researchers examine what educational activities promote student success, engagement, and retention. In his exhaustive work with the Association of American Colleges and Universities, Kuh (2008) identified high-impact practices in educating college students and argues that they are effective because they require substantial time and effort to complete meaningful, intensive tasks. These practices also require increased investment in interaction with faculty members and peers.

Students who do research with a faculty member spend a fair amount of time with that faculty member; as a result, students learn firsthand how a faculty member thinks and deals with the inevitable challenges that crop up in the course of an investigation. (p. 14)

The summary of high-impact practices includes three that are of particular interest to teaching research in social work graduate education: (1) research experiences; (2) collaborative assignments; and (3) community-based learning. Specifically, Kuh (2008) suggests that "working with community partners is good preparation for citizenship, work, and life" (p. 11). CBPR, in fact, meets these three criteria. This paper will examine two case studies, a doctoral research methodology course and a MSW elective course, each using a CBPR approach.

## **Case studies**

The following case studies detail CBPR projects which were community-initiated and subsequently incorporated into social work graduate courses at the Catholic University of America. Both of the research projects were approved by the University's Institutional Review Board, and all students who were involved in the projects completed Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative (CITI Program) training on human subjects research prior to participation.

### ***HIV/AIDS CBPR project in a doctoral course***

This case study is set in a required advanced qualitative research methodologies course in the social work PhD program at the Catholic University of



America. The course was redesigned by the first author, who was the course instructor, in order to incorporate participatory research involvement as a major course component. The course redesign was approved by the doctoral program's curriculum committee prior to its offering, with potential for replication in future semesters, pending IRB approval for each CBPR project.

CBPR in this case study was initiated by a group of Ethiopian immigrants in the Washington DC metro area who were seeking to form a nonprofit organization to address HIV/AIDS prevention efforts in the local Ethiopian community. They had all been involved in HIV prevention and promotion work when they lived in Ethiopia and were alarmed by the level of stigma and ignorance related to HIV transmission and treatment among their peers in the U.S. They approached the authors at the university to propose a study to collect the data needed to systematically understand the knowledge, behavior, and attitudes toward HIV in their own community, with the hope that the findings would provide the data needed to apply for funding to support local prevention, promotion and treatment interventions tailored to the Ethiopian community. Together, the community group and the university researchers created a mixed methods research design to engage 60 individual Ethiopian immigrants in face-to face interviews; individual interviews with religious leaders, social service providers, and health care providers; and a focus group with institutional providers. The community partners and University researchers worked collaboratively in every step of this CBPR project – including designing the research questions, research methodology, sample selection, interview guide questions, recruitment methods, data collection process, data analysis, and plans for providing feedback from the final report.

### *Student role*

Three doctoral students then were enrolled in the course, other graduate students in the School of Social Work were invited to participate as volunteers, and one student was a paid Research Assistant. A total of eight students (3 PhD and 5 MSW) participated as data collectors in the project. Explicitly in the syllabus, students were informed that this assignment would require significant out-of-classroom time, to be coordinated with the professor and other research collaborators. Once the course began, students immediately completed human subjects training as required by the IRB and then participated in additional in-person data collection training specific to this project. The training included a history of the project, data collection protocols, introduction of the interview guide, and opportunities for students to practice collecting data in mock interviews with one another.

Following the training, the student researchers went into the community and conducted the interviews with participants (as recruited by the community partners) at local coffee shops, restaurants, and churches. Following each interview, students summarized their notes and submitted them to the course



instructor/research co-investigator in compliance with confidentiality protocols. The doctoral students were also able to participate in reaching out to institutional providers to conduct interviews as part of the research plan.

### ***Course design and assignments***

In this course, students completed two major assignments. One was the Data Collection Interviews & Write up, which accounted for 40% of the course grade. The purpose of this assignment was to experience key components of the qualitative data collection process (gaining entry, engagement, documenting and recording data), and students were required to write up the interview exchange following the guidelines outlined by the professor serving as Principal Investigator. Students also were required to write an entry in a personal reflexivity journal after each interview. The second assignment was related to this journal entry. For this next assignment (worth 10% of the course grade) students completed a 5–10 page reflection paper reflecting on key components of the data collection process by comparing a paper based on their journal entries. They were encouraged to reflect on what surprised them, what was most challenging and rewarding, and what they learned about themselves as researchers. They were also asked to make recommendations to strengthen the qualitative aspects of the study, such as the research question, data collection plan, selection of participants, etc.

The data collected conducted during this class then were analyzed by the co-investigators and disseminated through a community report and scholarly publications (Oliphant & Donaldson, 2019). Several of the graduate students shared their experiences participating in the CBPR and won the university's Best Graduate Student Research Presentation at the University Research Day. One student also presented her learning experiences at an international conference.

### ***Youth experiencing homelessness CBPR project in a MSW course***

In the MSW program at the same university, another professor incorporated a CBPR research project into a course that was initially designed to be a one-credit course on homelessness offered in the Fall. In the spring of that year, however, a local homeless service provider explored the possibility of partnering with the professor and her students to undertake a study to explore the experiences and service needs of young adults (between 18 and 30) who were homeless, living on the streets, or in unstable housing. The agency's outreach teams had observed that this population was getting younger, and they wanted to better understand the experiences that contributed to homelessness among this younger population. They also wished to hear from these young adults themselves about the specific services that would best support them in getting

off the streets and/or into stable housing. To accommodate this request, the faculty member adapted her Fall course on homelessness to incorporate a CBPR project. During the spring and summer, the professor met with the agency representatives to design the research project – starting with determining the research questions, all aspects of methodology, and the process for training the students. (IRB approval was obtained prior to the start of the course.)

Along with the instructor, this graduate course on homelessness included six graduate social work students, five of whom were pursuing a master's degree and one a PhD. Over two months, the research team conducted 57 interviews with young adults who were living on the streets or in unstable housing. Participants were offered a \$10 McDonald's gift card for participating in the study.

### ***Course design and assignments***

The course included two extended didactic sessions wherein students learned about homelessness, housing first, and overall housing policy. Class sessions were also used for orienting students on IRB issues, how to use the survey instrument, and respectfully engaging with youth living on the street. Time also was spent in the field, with experienced outreach workers, in order to learn how to find youth experiencing homelessness and to conduct interviews with support of the outreach teams. After the first experience, students continued interviews on their own during designated hours when a licensed mental health professional would be available in the event someone needed immediate support. Interview opportunities were also scheduled on two evenings at a drop-in program for youth experiencing homelessness.

As part of the class assignment, students were required to conduct at least 5 interviews and to type up the survey responses. Each student also had to submit an 8 to 15 page synthesis of their interviews that included a demographics section; summaries of the domains explored in the interviews; past and present experiences of homelessness; experiences with housing; strategies for seeking support and coping; service needs; and participant recommendations. Each student completed between 5 and 10 interviews for a total of 57, well exceeding the goal of 30 interviews for the semester.

The professor and doctoral student analyzed all 57 interviews (along with the student papers) and prepared the first draft of a report that would be submitted to the community members. Students had an opportunity here to give feedback on the first draft. The final draft was prepared as a report to the community. The students presented their findings at a community-wide meeting held in the conference room of our project partner. It was attended by members of the city government as well as providers from the homeless community. At this meeting, the final report was also released. People who

had been interviewed for the project also were invited, but none of them chose to participate. Students also set up a poster session for the research project as part of University Research Day.

### **Discussion and implications for social work education**

Graduate social work curricula offer many natural opportunities to connect practice to research, well beyond the research courses. Incorporating a research project into a subject matter course teaches students about power, structural racism, disparities, group process, interviewing, macro practice, ethical practice, diversity, cultural humility, and many other areas of knowledge, skills, and attitudes important for them to gain. Folding a “live” research project into a research class is a high impact education practice that gives students a meaningful way to learn important material while contributing to social work knowledge building. In the case a CBPR project, collaborative knowledge building in the community is featured.

### ***Partnership with community***

True engagement with the community requires long-standing and meaningful relationships between researchers, community members, and grassroots leaders. In the case studies, the second author’s relationships with Ethiopian community members, and the service providers to youth experiencing homelessness, preceded any form of CBPR collaboration. These relationships take time and trust, and are what led the community members to approach the researchers with community needs and a desire to collaborate. Such is the foundation of CBPR collaboration where community members are identifying research goals, guiding project organization, and offering perspectives on every aspect of the study (Jacobson & Rugeley, 2007). Social work educators therefore must take the time and make the effort to cultivate relationships of trust with individuals and communities, otherwise attempts to partner for research risk being shallow and scholar-driven, rather than richly community driven.

### ***Advanced planning and coordination of research***

Arguably, the most challenging part of conducting a CBPR project in a graduate course involved significant work needing to be completed before the start of the course. The doctoral course case study required an approval of the course redesign from the curriculum committee. Almost a year prior to the course being offered, the instructor began this process. One of the challenges in obtaining the curriculum committee’s approval was overcoming the concern that it was onerous on the professor to have a current research project

each semester in which students could meaningfully engage. This could perhaps be addressed by having multiple faculty whose CBPR projects could be incorporated into courses in different semesters.

The importance of securing prior IRB approval cannot be overstated. In both of the case studies, the IRB materials – including sampling plans, support letters from partnering organizations, interview guides, and informed consent forms – were all submitted several months prior to the start of the course. Not only did this allow for high-impact learning for students, but IRB approvals and formalizing CBPR projects can offer legitimacy to this type of research in the eyes of sometimes skeptical tenure and institutional committees (Delavega et al., 2017)

### ***Communication with students***

An important additional component of incorporating a CBPR project in a graduate social work course involves clear, early communication with students about all elements of the project, and the prospective expectations of them. Not only does this course require new ways of preparing, planning, and conducting, from the instructor's perspective, it also demands a great deal of time and commitment from students – which they need to be aware of as early as possible (Kuh, 2008). Instructors can hold frank discussions with students at the beginning of the semester that highlight both the strengths and challenges of the course. Students should be aware that they will be required to spend time in the field with expected support of the professor and community partners. Indeed, in both of the case studies presented here, the students engaged directly with the community team as they worked together recruiting research participants and collecting data. Professors helpfully can frame these interactions for students as both requirements and unique learning opportunities. Students may also be invited to extend their participation in the project beyond the time of the course, which models the reality that research does not comply neatly with semester time blocks. It may also give students an opportunity for further engagement with faculty in disseminating findings.

### ***Course design and implementation***

The case studies here offer, we believe, lessons about designing and implementing courses to offer high impact educational experiences to students. Students must be prepared to be flexible to accommodate community partners' needs, availability, and optimal data collection times. Close CBPR designs must also give consideration to disseminating findings in partnership with community members and in ways that are useful to them. Sometimes the dissemination phase of the project occurs during the semester, and students of course should be invited to participate in post-course dissemination activities.

### **Limitations**

The two case studies presented in this article describe the incorporation of CBPR into graduate social work education within a school that has BSW, MSW, and PhD programs. The design relied upon the organizational skills and experience of a doctoral research assistant, and benefited from the social service practice experience of MSW students. Additional training and support may be needed when implementing a similar design within an undergraduate program. In addition, both projects were aided by the longstanding community presence and preexisting community relationships of one of the coauthors. Relationships built on trust and mutuality are critical to the success of CBPR projects, and because that trust existed prior to these projects, strategies for trust building or community engagement around partnership development are not offered here.

### **Conclusion**

Community engagement is a critically important method of education and considered a high-impact practice in higher education. However, it must be carried forward in a way that is authentically collaborative, clearly relevant, and respectful of community partners. CBPR is a research method that, when implemented with conscious and intentional input from community partners at every step, will reflect these principles.

Schools of social work are excellent vehicles for educating future scholars on CBPR methods because most students are situated in the community through required field education. Furthermore, social work education is guided by an ethical code that includes a set of core values that are reflected in CBPR practice principles. In addition, a CBPR methodology also provides a way for students to practice core social work practice skills, used in both clinical and macro practice environments, such as community engagement, collaboration, active listening, group work, participatory decision-making, and power analysis. Social workers are needed who know how to conduct rich, meaningful, and rigorous research – hand in hand with community members. By incorporating CBPR into graduate programs, social work educators can meet the call for preparing social workers to conduct rigorous, hands-on research; heed the profession's ethical obligation to master research based practice; and lead higher educational institutions in centering the voices of their communities.

As noted, the collaborative, process-oriented, and relationship-centered dimensions of CBPR, may create challenges for faculty incorporating CBPR (or using CBPR as a primary research methodology) in academic settings where quantitative methods and manuscript production are the currency for tenure and promotion. Research is needed to examine the valuation of CBPR

research in tenure and promotion processes, including exploring fair thresholds of scholarship using CBPR, barriers to adjusting tenure and promotion criteria to allow for more CBPR in academic units, and promoting community engagement strategies for potential CBPR projects. But overall, social work education currently has many of the right features in place to provide students with a solid foundation for CBPR processes and practices.

### Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

### ORCID

Sarah Moore  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-4961-9982>

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