

# Hypothesis: The Research Page

## Participatory methods to facilitate research

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Primary health care is a practical approach to making essential health care universally accessible to individuals and families in the community in an acceptable and affordable way and with their full participation.<sup>1</sup>

—*World Health Organization*

Medical literature most often describes participation in research in terms of how much end users, stakeholders, or communities participate in the research.<sup>2</sup> Low participation often occurs because research that is done to, on, or about the people is researcher- or research team-driven.

Participation would be described as medium when a researcher or research team invites end users to assist in one or more of the tasks to be undertaken, such as in a focus group or consultation. Participation would be described as high when end users, stakeholders, or communities are involved in all aspects of the process: developing the questions, arranging the questions to be asked in a way that would be respectful within the community, collecting the data, interpreting the information gathered, critically reflecting on the information, and developing strategies for working with the community.

High participation promotes self-sufficiency and sustainability by linking end users to the wisdom of the community. It is from this collective wisdom that relevant, effective community-based programs can be developed. These programs need to be developed with communities, thus ensuring a sense of pride and ownership in the programs and a sensitivity about how the programs can be presented to the community in a respectful, culturally sensitive way.

Empowering individuals often requires letting go of one's own power or, at the very least, sharing the

power that one already has. This remains a great challenge for institutions or organizations unaccustomed to working in a truly collaborative way. The voices of key informants do not necessarily reflect the voices of the community for a variety of reasons, be they political or personal. Creating a transparent environment is very important to maintain participatory principles. Everyone should have the opportunity to influence and shape programs in their communities.

Researchers using participatory methods should have a broad base of knowledge and experience as adult educators and have a reasonable grasp of both qualitative and quantitative methodology. Capeling-Alakija and colleagues<sup>2</sup> indicate that researchers must also have the capacity to do the following.

- Listen respectfully.
- Guide and facilitate discussion, ensuring that key questions to be answered have been thoughtfully considered.
- Encourage trust.
- Delegate tasks and responsibilities.
- Act to help bring together the views of various people involved in the process.
- Create an environment for dialogue, sharing, and reflection.

Research investigators or other academics become facilitators in a participatory process. Facilitators act as catalysts, confidantes, negotiators, collaborators, and builders of bridges between researchers and subjects. Facilitators take direction from and work with stakeholders, participants, and communities. Facilitators also maintain the integrity of the process by ensuring data are maintained and secure. By actively involving the community, a sense of ownership is created, capacities are built, individuals and organizations are empowered, and learning is more likely to be applied.



Capeling-Alakija and colleagues<sup>2</sup> suggest various steps for participatory research. We have adapted their methods to recommend five steps: planning and preparation, generating questions, gathering and analyzing data, returning data to the community, and reflecting and taking action.

**Planning and preparation**

Planning and preparation should involve community participants in the following activities.

- Outline a workable framework using agreed-upon principles.
- Define how the entire research process will unfold.
- Assess challenges and opportunities or enabling and inhibiting factors.
- Identify members of the team responsible for facilitating research.
- Negotiate the purpose and objectives of the research with the community.

**Generating questions**

Generating questions to be researched is most easily done at workshops in the community that include members of the research team. Team members must collectively identify the main focus of the project, which often evolves or shifts over time.

**Gathering and analyzing data**

Data gathering and analysis involves several essential tasks.

- Provide necessary training in data-gathering techniques.
- Gather data together.
- Provide regular feedback on the quality of data gathered.
- Analyze data together.

Raw data could require organization into readable narrative description with major themes, categories, and illustrative examples that have been abstracted through content analysis. The emphasis of the qualitative aspect of a project will be on illumination, understanding, and extrapolation rather than causal determination, prediction, and generalization.<sup>3</sup>

**Returning data to the community**

Data should be returned to the community for participants' consideration and reflection. Participatory research aims to work with participants and communities to

achieve outcomes that are acceptable to both.<sup>2</sup> Community meetings are one way to share information with people who participate in community-based research, as well as to provide them with an opportunity to reflect upon the data, interpret the findings, and make recommendations for change. Insight and prioritization of ways to address the health and wellness of communities should be identified with them and subsequently disseminated appropriately.

**Reflecting and taking action**

Reflection and taking action are crucial in participatory research.

- Prioritize challenges so that they are considered opportunities for change.
- Coordinate resources for resolving conflicts and challenges during the process.
- Take action together.

**Greater benefit**

One of the challenges and subsequent opportunities of working with this method is that the process requires trust built upon relationships that can be sustained over time. This method can then be applied to other research. Both participants who reside within communities and health care practitioners who facilitate the research gain a greater appreciation for the roles and responsibilities of various members of interdisciplinary teams that include participants from the community.<sup>4</sup> ♦

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**References**

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