

Levels of Community Engagement in Youth Violence Prevention: The Role of Power in Sustaining Successful University-Community Partnerships

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Abstract Previous research indicates that communities can be engaged at various levels in research to reduce youth violence. In this paper, we argue that the method of power sharing among partners is a central factor distinguishing different levels of engagement. Using cases from the Nashville Urban Partnership Academic Center of Excellence, we identify *community initiation* and *community collaboration* as distinct approaches to community engaged violence prevention research. The power relationships among partners are analyzed to highlight differences in the types of engagement and to discuss implications for establishing and sustaining community partnerships. Also, the implications of levels of engagement for promoting the use of evidence-based practices are discussed.

Keywords Community engagement · Youth violence · Power · Community partnerships

Examination of the literature on research involving communities reveals an assortment of related terms that often are used interchangeably. These include community participation, community engagement, community-based participatory research (CBPR) and community-engaged research (CER). Somewhat distinct definitions have been provided for each of these terms. For example, Israel et al.

(1998, p. 173) define community-based participatory research (CBPR) as a partnership in which researchers and community members “contribute their expertise to enhance understanding of a given phenomenon and to integrate the knowledge gained with action to benefit the community involved.” However, in practice, terms such as CBPR, CER, community participation, and community engagement have been used to refer an array of research practices ranging from conducting traditional research in a community setting to actively engaging community members in the conceptualization or implementation of a research program (Viswanathan et al. 2004).

The underlying premise of these approaches (regardless of the preferred terminology) is that community partnerships and collaborations can provide a foundation for the implementation of empirically-grounded, evidence-based programs (EBPs). There is growing consensus on the principles and practices associated with effective partnerships. Koné et al. (2000) indicated that successful community partnerships require moving from traditional approaches to research to strategies that value the diversity of perspectives and are proactive in facilitating community members’ participation in the research. Stoecker (1999) suggested that researchers might assume different roles in the partnerships ranging from initiator to consultant. Baker et al. (1999) emphasized the need to acknowledge the needs and agendas of each partner, and the need to establish trust among partners. Although many reviews have acknowledged different levels of engagement and the power differentials created among partners (Baker et al. 1999), few have explored implications for establishing and sustaining community partnerships designed to facilitate implementation of EBPs for youth violence prevention. We attempt to do so in the present review.

In the development of the Nashville Urban Partnership Academic Center of Excellence (NUPACE) we found two

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levels of community engagement that supported the NUPACE goals: community initiation and community collaboration. In this paper we define these levels of engagement. Using case examples from NUPACE, we illustrate how power sharing among partners around three issues (research objectives, administrative decision making during implementation, and data analysis and feedback) differentiate levels of engagement, and how these issues have unfolded during the planning, implementation, and evaluation of NUPACE's youth violence prevention efforts. We conclude by discussing lessons learned and providing suggestions for promoting continued community involvement and the adoption of empirically validated interventions.

Community-Engaged Research

We define community-engaged research (CER) as a collaborative approach to research that democratically involves community participants and researchers in one or more phases of the research process. Partners share responsibilities and leverage their unique strengths to enhance understanding of the target of research (often a social or cultural dynamic of the community) and integrate the derived knowledge with action to improve the well-being of community members.

At the most abstract level, there is some disagreement on the philosophical orientation in which CER should be grounded. Horelli (2002) articulates two types of approaches that illustrate this divide: a “practical” approach and a more “emancipatory” one. This dichotomy also has been framed in the context of the philosophical scuffle between pragmatism and critical theory (Johansson and Lindhult 2008). Practical CER typically involves facilitating dialogue between all relevant partners with the goal of achieving consensus on the best way to structure the inquiry, interpret the results, and formulate action. For example, Green et al. (2001) emphasize the need for a rapprochement of goals between communities, academics, and the political power structure in the course of public health intervention. Finding common ground between relevant stakeholders is seen as the surest way to effect real change. The emancipatory approach, by contrast, encourages dissent and examination of power differences between stakeholders. Stoecker and colleagues (Stoecker 1999; Stoecker and Bonacich 1992) contend that democratizing knowledge and resisting oppression should be the main priorities of CER. Often implied in this approach is that communities are somewhat unaware of how power and structural forces influence their lives, and this awareness must first be addressed via empirical evidence in order to provide a foundation for subsequent critical action. This dichotomy between practical and emancipatory approaches

is, of course, a false one in reality; however, it is a useful heuristic for exploring different approaches to CER.

Further, these philosophical orientations have implications for the way that engagement with communities looks. Given that an emancipatory approach often assumes the need for consciousness raising amongst marginalized groups to identify problems, the researcher in this tradition may more actively seek out groups with whom to partner, take the lead role, and introduce certain forms of intervention (e.g., EBPs) that may be otherwise unknown to collaborators. On the other hand, in the case of a community organization soliciting partnership with a researcher, the researcher may be compelled to take a more pragmatic approach to helping the group work toward their pre-identified goals. In this arrangement, the researcher may suggest the adoption of EBPs but may have to negotiate their use, especially if the partner community is skeptical of their validity. A pragmatic approach may also require a perspective that EBP *becomes* evidence-based as a result of tailoring it to community idiosyncrasies and testing and validating it in reality.

Biggs's (1989) typology of modes of participation has helped practitioners conceptualize the role of communities in CER. Biggs describes “collaborative” and “collegial” modes as both involving high degrees of participation throughout the research, with the former mode typically being conceived of and initiated by the academic partner and the latter mode having more organic origins in the community (his “contractual” and “consultative” modes allow merely for nominal community involvement). Breadth and depth of participation may be partly borne out of where the research originates. In a review of CER literature, Viswanathan et al. (2004) found that most partnerships began with a researcher reaching out to community members, often in the form of recruiting members for a community advisory board; incidents in which community organizations took the lead and approached researchers about priorities and desired research were less common.

These philosophical and practical diversions in CER suggest that it means different things to different people. We welcome these differences and suggest that they allow for a menu of approaches to CER given the demands and allowances of different contexts in which it may be employed. In second part of this article, we present case examples of two different forms of CER, referred to herein as community initiation and community collaboration.

Community Initiation: Alignment Nashville and the Middle School Project

Community initiation is a type of CER in which community partners have mobilized to address a need prior to the

involvement of researchers. Because they are organized prior to engaging in the research partnership, communities tend to have the most power in this type of CER. For researchers this frequently means that the community partner has the final say on important decisions related to the research. Consequently, the researcher may have to negotiate issues like research design and accommodate decisions that may make the research more difficult. Further, whereas researchers may hold empirical findings and EBTs in high esteem, community partners may be more skeptical, necessitating a give-and-take regarding program implementation choices.

In the case of the Alignment Nashville Middle School Project, the community engagement grew out of the recognition that middle schools in Metropolitan Nashville Public Schools (MNPS) had relatively high rates of bullying and victimization. In response, the school district, city government, and the chamber of commerce formed a partnership, Alignment Nashville, to synergize community-based resources in order to promote positive educational outcomes with an additional emphasis on promoting positive social and emotional adjustment. Using a committee structure, Alignment Nashville brought together principals and school personnel, non-profit service providers, civic leaders, and parents to examine the problem and develop an intervention strategy. The first issues identified by the middle school committee were a need to decrease disruptive, aggressive, and violent behaviors among students, and to promote a positive school climate. The committee spent a year developing a “home grown” intervention called Alignment Enhanced Services (AES) reflecting the idea of synergy through cooperation. Similar to the empirically validated Olweus bullying prevention model (1993), AES sought to expand the ways in which the school social environment is engaged to promote positive behaviors. More specifically, AES proposed that an array of services already provided within the schools might be realigned to address individual, relational, and contextual factors conducive to bullying and other aggressive behaviors (for a full description of the program see Nation et al. in press).

The research team was invited to participate in the project after community members had agreed upon the intervention goals and objectives. The committee was very invested in the AES intervention, and was resistant to adopting the Olweus Program or other EBP because they were concerned that adopting an EBP:

- Would marginalize the involvement of the community partners. Most committee member perceived EBP as “canned” programs that would minimize involvement of parents, non-profit service providers, and businesses. In contrast, AES was designed so that these partners could continue to contribute during the implementation

and in some instances would provide and receive intervention.

- Would preclude the possibility of substantial tailoring of the intervention to address the differences across the schools. The committee discussed school differences in student characteristics, organizational culture, and the conceptualization of the cause of their behavioral problems. Consequently, the committee feared that selecting a single strategy would not address the needs of some schools.

The specific charge for the team was to develop a rigorous evaluation and to utilize evidence-based practices to help develop the intervention. The middle school committee made it clear that the goals, objectives, and the AES strategy were not negotiable; however, the research team could negotiate specific aspects of the AES intervention and assist with the evaluation of the intervention. This required the research team to consider empirical evidence that supported specific program components rather than an entire prepackaged EBP such as Olweus. Also, the research team suggested comparing the intervention to Olweus so that there would be some benchmark for evaluating AES. Overall, the negotiation process focused on three decisions: (a) research design, (b) hiring and supervising project staff, and (c) collection and feedback of data.

The middle school committee had established the group of schools that would participate in the project. We discussed the merit of random assignment of schools to conditions; however the committee had several practical concerns including the desire to not risk having some schools have to wait for intervention, and the desire to leverage existing programming in certain schools. Therefore a quasi-experimental design was selected with AES, Olweus Bullying Prevention (an EBP benchmark), and “treatment as usual” as the conditions. However, all schools would eventually have the option to receive AES.

AES staff (called coordinators) were hired and supervised by a community agency; however the research team was involved in drafting the job description, and in interviewing and hiring decisions. Most of the negotiation related to this issue focused on selecting the coordinators and the proportion of their jobs that would be dedicated to direct service to youth versus the coordinating of services for the school. The research team advocated for a larger coordinating role for these staff people, based on empirical support for such a model. Disagreements among committee members regarding applicants increased the research team’s influence in the decision making because we could offer an empirically grounded rationale for the specific skill sets needed for the position. Committee members varied on whether coordinators should be involved in any direct service with students, and many of the applicants possessed

such skills as evidenced by their degrees and work experience that emphasized counseling or social work. Once all parties agreed on a job description, the research team used the description to remind the committee of their original goals and objectives, and made recommendations for minimal direct service as suggested by the job description.

The project evaluation included surveys of students and teachers, and school district data on attendance, achievement, and disciplinary referrals. Of particular issue was negotiating the items to be included in the student and teacher surveys, and concerns around the ownership and use of the data. The research team developed a comprehensive survey to assess both mediators and outcomes related to the intervention. The middle school committee rejected the initial draft because of its length and because it appeared to assess issues that were politically loaded and not directly related to the outcomes. A revised and much shorter version was accepted with the understanding that it would limit some of what we could learn from intervention. We agreed to revisit this decision after the first year of intervention, but this initial compromise reflected a tension between empirically derived indicators and those viewed as contextually relevant.

An even more difficult issue was the use of the data. Members of the committee recalled past experiences in which researchers collected data and disappeared. Therefore, they were very clear that MNPS would own the data and that its primary use would be to support the project. Secondarily, it could be used for publication preferably in consultation with the committee. We negotiated a process for providing feedback on the progress of the project and to allow representatives to review papers and presentations utilizing the data.

There were numerous advantages of the community's depth of engagement in the middle school project. The advantages included broad investment among the many stakeholders in the research process and in promo. Also, it allowed the research team opportunities to share EBP with community partners. These partners have in turn utilized EBP in their intervention. However, there were numerous problems that emerged, due in part to the level of community engagement. During the implementation several issues specifically arose in the power sharing arrangement related to the AES coordinator positions. These issues included accountability and role ambiguity.

The AES coordinators found themselves having to answer to four entities, the supervising agency, the middle school committee, the research team, and the principal. For the most part, the school/agency/committee/research team collaboration worked well; however, there were tensions related to the chain of command for AES coordinators. Constant communication within the committee about the AES coordinators and their activities, the establishment of

an organizational chart and chain of command for the AES process alleviated some of the tensions around accountability. Additionally, regular accountability meetings with the school administrator in which the coordinators convey their activities regarding the school were helpful.

Despite the written job description, the role of the AES coordinators was somewhat amorphous. The coordinators were supervised by an agency with a long history of providing student assistance programs. Once the coordinators were in the schools, the school staff assumed that the AES coordinators functioned in the same capacity as student assistance counselors. School staff then began referring students for individual interventions. Also, principals enjoyed having extra support for providing direct service. On the other hand, the middle school committee and the research team were attempting to focus the coordinators on addressing systemic issues. The tensions that developed around this were diminished through regular meetings with all the partners during which the job description and the objectives of the project were revisited. Developing an intervention protocol for the AES coordinator based on their concerted activities helped the coordinators to not only establish their role within the school but also articulate it to school staff and community agencies. In addition, the point of entry period allowed coordinators the time to develop relationships within the school and distinguish their function as a coordinator from the student assistance specialists who are employed by the management organization. Ultimately, school staff ceded that AES coordinators' time would be best spent in a non-service-provision role.

In addition to these issues, there were changes in the funding structure for non-profit service providers that eventually affected the power sharing between AES coordinators and non-profit service providers with which they collaborated. The middle school committee invited a major funding organization to become a part of the committee, introducing yet another collaborator into the equation. As a result one funding agency changed its funding requirements to give attention to agencies that provide interventions in middle schools with coordinators. A separate community funding foundation offered a large amount of grant money for agencies who were participating in the AES project. The sudden influx of funding created opportunities for community agencies to provide school-based services and presented another opportunity to promote EBP, since the funding sources prioritized proposals that used EBP. However, the refocusing of monies led to an increase in interests in the schools without a developed infrastructure to manage it. The AES coordinators were placed in the position of determining whether some of the agencies represented on the middle school committee would receive funding. Since the AES coordinators were

also accountable to the middle school committee, it created a conflict of interest. The research team worked with the committee to address this by developing some objective criteria to evaluate funding request including the theory- and evidence-base supporting proposal. However, that did not resolve all of the tensions between partners.

In sum, the community-initiated CER observed in the course of the Alignment Nashville Middle School Project brought to light several considerations related to the implementation of EBPs. The community partner—the Alignment Nashville committee—was organized prior to the commencement of the project and they initiated the collaboration with the research team. This position afforded the committee a degree of power such that they were able to set certain “non-negotiables” related to project implementation, even when these criteria ran counter to otherwise empirically grounded points conveyed by the research team. A less organized group may have adopted an EBP like *Olweus* in full, but the desire for contextual relevance among the committee forced an examination of empirically supported program principles that could be reconfigured in fashion acceptable to the committee. This reconfiguration was further negotiated with the AES program’s introduction into the school buildings, as school staff reconsidered the role of student assistant specialists. The pragmatic approach taken by the research team in this example furthermore allows for the validity of the AES intervention to be assessed, perhaps lending evidence-based support to this new program.

Community Collaboration: The Organizational Networks Project

The organizational network project aligns with the NUPACE goal of fostering collaborative action among local organizations involved in youth violence prevention (YVP) work and between local organizations and academic partners. Although the study was not community initiated, it was CER in that it has solicited and received substantial ideas and direction from the Nashville Community Coalition for Youth Safety (NCCYS), a coalition of youth-development-oriented organizations established in conjunction with the NUPACE. The Organizational Networks project has provided regular empirical reports and suggestions to the leadership and members of the coalition on how local organizations and other coalitions nationally have collaborated and addressed youth violence. By monitoring and analyzing collaborative networks of local public and private nonprofit organizations engaged in YVP, the project identifies and illuminates structural characteristics of that complex system and how relationships among organizational actors change over time.

The analytical purposes of the project are fourfold: (1) to identify the different kinds of local organizations engaged in YVP; and to describe as specifically as possible (2) the ways they address the problem of youth violence; (3) how their staffs think about their own YVP interventions; and (4) how they collaborate with other organizations in their YVP efforts. For the past 3 years the research team conducted annual interviews with approximately 70 local non-profit and government organizations that self-identify as being involved in YVP work. Each year the research team worked closely with the NCCYS Chair to develop survey questions relevant to coalition efforts, participated in coalition meetings and events, and reported study findings to the coalition through presentations and written reports. Ultimately, the team hoped to work with the NCCYS to utilize this information to promote EBP among coalition members, especially focusing on advocacy for state and local policies that have been shown to reduce youth violence.

While we consistently achieved the explicit research aims of the project and have received positive feedback from our reports and presentations, we have experienced important limitations in our efforts to engage community partners in considering how this research could inform practice. Although the specific nature of the limitations we encountered may be idiosyncratic to this particular project, we believe our experience speaks more generally to challenges that arise when working to engage community partners in a community-collaboration model of CER and merits further consideration.

The research team, working in limited association with the NCCYS, initially envisioned two potential contributions the research could make at the community level. The first relates the use of survey data to identify gaps in how the community was addressing youth violence. It was hoped that the research documenting the local organizational YVP landscape (i.e., the level and type of organizational engagement in YVP activity) would serve as a starting point for discussion among partners and support a collective inquiry process that would lead to the new directions for collective action. This model has received much support (e.g., Butterfoss et al. 1996; Wolff 2001) as a mechanism by which community coalitions better achieve desired outcomes. In the Organizational Networks project, however, this process has not been explicitly realized. In making sense of our efforts and our failure to realize this contribution, we are aware of three relevant factors that hindered our effectiveness.

The first concerns how the structural dynamics that arise during the initial formation of the research partnership, whether it is researcher- or community-initiated, can influence the perceived relevance and usefulness of the research, even if the methodology has a strong empirical basis. Unlike the middle school project discussed above,

the Organizational Networks project was originally conceptualized by the researchers, subsequently presented to community partners, and ultimately established as part of the NUPACE grant, underlining our aforementioned distinction between community “initiation” and community “collaboration” in CER. Although we envisioned our research as serving a community need, the research team developed the research agenda and identified the questions to be asked. As a result, it has been difficult for our partners to share ownership of the project. Despite the fact that we have worked with our community partners subsequently to identify meaningful avenues for inquiry that better represent their interests, it has been difficult to renegotiate this relationship and build a research agenda that reflects the collective interests of our partnership and is perceived as relevant by the community.

This highlights a second source of tension related to differences in how community partners and researchers understand the problem of youth violence and potential solutions and interventions. Based on experience and research, the research team’s framing favored a systemic understanding of YVP and an interest in exploring how setting level interventions can effectively address embedded social problems (e.g., working within a school setting to create a climate that does not support bullying or working at the policy level to explore enforcement of current guns laws). Through our research we have learned that most of our partner organizations work primarily with individuals and their families and seek change at the individual level by providing treatment or youth development opportunities. This is not surprising given current funding opportunities and the emphasis of individual-focused conceptualizations social problems. In relation to EBP, the partners who were aware of EBP tended to be aware of the individual-focused programs (e.g., mentoring programs). Thus, the team has not realized the goal of promoting strategic, evidence-based, systemic intervention.

In hindsight, our assumption that our community partners would share our interest in macro-level systems interventions was perhaps unrealistic given the context in which practitioners work. The evidence-base for some systemic interventions may be less familiar to community partners. Also, community-level interventions require sustained effort over time and, even when effective, the positive outcomes for communities may not be immediately apparent. This may make it difficult for non-profit organizations to invest in distal community-level interventions when their funding is tied to more proximal interventions and outcomes.

A final structural issue concerns ownership and confidentiality of the data. Like all university research projects, we are governed by the regulations of our institutional review board and as a result must adhere strictly to

regulations concerning the confidentiality of our participants. In this study, we realized that many organizations would be reluctant to participate if they were not guaranteed anonymity and so made the decision in our results, particularly in the social network maps, to identify each organization by type of organization (e.g., school, human service organization). While this is commonly accepted academic practice and, in most cases, does not detract from the potential usefulness of the data, in this case it may have been more useful for our partners to know the identity of participating organizations, which were already collaborating in particular areas (e.g., program/service delivery, advocacy/policy), and their structural positions in the network. So for example, some organizations may fall between the path of other organizations more frequently (i.e., have high “betweenness centrality”) and serve important bridging roles in the network. This information could be used to recruit organizations to assist in efforts to get information out about coalition activities. Unfortunately, we could not share this type of information. From this perspective the data relating to organizational patterns of collaboration and activity were more abstract, not as easily acted upon, and as a result perhaps seen as less relevant.

We saw the research as, not only informing collective action, but also potentially inspiring critical reflection about the strengths and limitations of current YVP efforts and the role of the NCCYS. We hoped that the social network data could serve as the starting point for exploring and understanding the structure or system in which coalition partners engage in their work. This use of the research presupposed that coalition members saw themselves as part of a larger system of organizational actors and would be interested in reflecting on how to engage the system. As a meta-cognitive process, this type of reflection challenges community members to consider that a potential target of intervention is the system of intervention itself and the patterns of social regularities (e.g., collaboration) that have formed to support the status quo (Seidman 1988). Intervention in the system might entail taking actions within the framework of the existing system in order to strengthen services and programs that support individual-level change efforts, or it might entail rethinking the paradigm of practice upon which YVP interventions are based. Although we had hoped our participation and research would lead to reflection at this level, we have only experienced it on the periphery of the coalition’s activity. That is, we might have an interview in an organization isolated on the periphery of the network or a side conversation with a coalition member that ventures into this territory, but moments of reflection have not become systematically incorporated into the coalition’s activities, despite the evidence base for such practice.

In making sense of this challenge, we again understand it in relation to the issues of relevance and timing, yet also attribute its absence to the coalition's current meeting structure, which does not support a collective space for discussion or reflection, and to a paradigm of practice that values action or doing over reflection. Without a norm or structural mechanisms to support reflective practice about the work of the coalition or a means to integrate coalition action through reflection, it is unlikely that members will see reflection as a value.

Discussion and Implications

As illustrated in these examples, we found the process of engagement raises different issues for researchers involved in community-initiated and community-collaborative CER projects. The community-initiated project was high in ecological validity, but required the researchers to participate in a community process as opposed to facilitating a community process thereby making certain accommodations to empirically supported practices. This difference was fundamental in terms of the power wielded by the researcher. As participants, the researchers contributed their ideas and expertise along with other members of the community, and then accepted the results of the process as the basis for answering the research questions. Under these conditions, researchers must be flexible and pragmatic in how they conceptualize key aspects of the research including the research design, implementation, and data analysis. If the researchers had assumed the role of facilitator (along with power usually associated with that role), in this case it would likely have disrupted the project and endangered the relationship between the partners.

The community-initiated project also illustrated that communities are not monoliths. The sharing of power with community partners illustrated that there were several community constituencies who both contribute and (at times) compete to influence the project. Because of this, many of the issues that develop are not tensions between the community partners and the researchers, but instead among community partners. Best practice and/or ethical practice for researchers in these situations is unclear. By pushing a certain EBP, a researcher may give the impression of choosing sides among various constituencies thus inadvertently marginalizing certain groups within a community; or it could create a conflict of interests for researchers in that it may further the research agenda at the expense of the community process. This issue seems particularly important since many community-engaged partnerships are conducted in historically marginalized communities.

In the community collaboration example the goal was to answer research questions related to the characteristics and

structure of inter-organizational YVP collaboration in consultation with community partners. The power dynamics between the research team and community partners highlights the complexity of CER. Although the research team invited input from community leaders and adopted many of the suggestions, it maintained clear control of the research questions and design. This allowed the research team to identify and explicitly promote the evidence-based practices to the community partners. The literature examining effective strategies for working with community coalitions provides clear support for the methodological approach adopted by the research team (Roussos and Fawcett 2000). However, as seen in this case, this approach can also reduce the opportunity for engaging community members in a participatory process and, as a result, ultimately has the potential to limit the adoption of evidence-based approaches to community change. In addition, this approach can result in the community being perceived as a monolith because the community partners may not differ substantially on the characteristics salient to the study. In this case, most of the partners were non-profit service providers who provided direct services. Individual community partners' perspectives on YVP work were more similar to each other than to the perspectives of the research team. This may have been the source of some of the difficulty in having the community partners establish a collective understanding of the problem and their failure to utilize the results of the data analysis.

The differences we experienced across these projects suggest the need for researchers to reflect upon their goals when contemplating involvement in community-engaged research and to be purposeful in pairing their goals and their CER strategies. In promoting EBPs, researchers will likely need to adopt different strategies across different types of CER given the differences in the role of the researcher. For example, Backer and Russ (2007) found that one of the challenges that communities experienced when adopting EBPs is balancing implementation fidelity with the need to tailor the program to local populations. Since the tailoring process requires sharing power in how the problem and intervention is conceptualized, this challenge presents an opportunity for community-engaged researchers to participate in a partnership without imposing a preconceived conceptualization. In relation to community collaboration, Rotheram-Borus and colleagues (2000) suggested that community engagement in EBPs promoted by researchers can help to establish a community infrastructure that supports engagement with clear roles among partners. In this example, the researchers set the agenda, but are purposeful in soliciting and utilizing feedback from community partners. Both examples illustrate that researchers can establish effective partnerships and use those partnerships to make important contributions to community life.

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