Mobilizing, educating, and engaging with policy: The power and limits of community-based and participatory action research

Associate Professor Shauna Butterwick
Department of Educational Studies
University of British Columbia, Vancouver (Canada)
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The Power and Limits of Community-Based and Participatory Action Research

Shauna.butterwick@ubc.ca
Key Arguments

- CBR and PAR are overlooked forms of knowledge mobilization (KM)
- CBR and PAR can help to re-conceptualize /expand notions of KM
- Policy engagement key arena of KM
- CBR’s role (openings & limits) in policy engagement
Key Questions

- What is the dominant discourse about KM?
- how can CBR and PAR help to reframe policy discourse?
- What are the limitations of using CBR and PAR in policy transformation?
Key Concepts

Knowledge mobilization & capacity building

CBR & PAR  Reframing
Community-based and Participatory Action Research

- Research done by, with and for community
- Issues identified by community (internally)
- Participatory, collaborative
- Power sharing
- Cycle of knowledge creation, taking action, reflection, knowledge creation - action
Participatory Action Research

Research which involves all relevant parties in actively examining together current action (which they experience as problematic) in order to change and improve it. They do this by critically reflecting on the historical, political, cultural, economic, geographic and other contexts which make sense of it. … Participatory action research is not just research which is hoped will be followed by action. It is action which is researched, changed and re-researched, within the research process by participants. Nor is it simply an exotic variant of consultation. Instead, it aims to be active co-research, by and for those to be helped. Nor can it be used by one group of people to get another group of people to do what is thought best for them - whether that is to implement a central policy or an organisational or service change. Instead it tries to be a genuinely democratic or non-coercive process whereby those to be helped, determine the purposes and outcomes of their own inquiry.” – Wadsworth, Y. (1998)
"process of developing and strengthening the skills, instincts, abilities, processes and resources that organizations and communities need to survive, adapt, and thrive in the fast-changing world."

Knowledge mobilization

- Moving knowledge into active service for the broadest possible common good (SSHRC)
- specific research findings
- accumulated knowledge of researchers
- accumulated knowledge of stakeholders
Social Construction of Knowledge

An ongoing process of judgment making

Conceptual & Strategic Knowledge Mobilization

Conceptual (more common)
new ideas generated from research lead to new and different ways of thinking, new horizons for policy & decision makers

Strategic (rare)
knowledge generated by research leads directly to decision and policy changes

Dominant approach to KM

- Exchange between producers of research (knowledge) and users of that knowledge
- Knowledge producers are usually academic or scientific researchers
- KM is about getting practitioners to understand & use research
- Knowledge created by non-academic communities not recognized
- Knowledge created by non-academic communities, if recognized, considered less rigorous and ‘objective’
Policy Makers as Users of Knowledge

Attention is paid to research when:

- Research is timely, evidence is clear and relevant, and the methodology is relatively uncontested.
- Results support existing ideologies, are convenient and uncontentious to the powerful.
- Policy makers believe in evidence as an important counterbalance to expert opinion: and act accordingly.
- Research findings have strong advocates and are endorsed by opinion leaders (personal contact is most effective).
- Research users are partners in the generation of evidence.
- The results are robust in implementation and implementation is reversible if need be.

(Source: *Using Evidence: How research can inform public services* (Nutley, Walter and Davies, Policy Press, 2007))
"frames facilitate our most basic interaction with the world--they structure our ideas and concepts, they shape the way we reason, and they even impact how we perceive and how we act"

George Lakoff
Reframing Policy Discourse

- Lakoff: conservative ‘deep’ frames have dominated policy development e.g. ‘war on terror’
- Need to operate at this level to shift policy towards more progressive goals
- Focusing on issues works at intermediate, not deep, level and constrains possible solutions
Filipino Community and Beyond: Towards full Participation in a Multicultural Canada
Background

- 4th largest immigrant group in Canada (.5 M)
- Most live in Montreal, Toronto, Vancouver
- highest and most educated of immigrants
- Among visible minority, they are the poorest
- 65% of all Filipinos in Canada are women
- Most women arrive through Live-in-Caregiver Program (LCP)
- Second highest drop-out rate of immigrant youth
Goals of Project

- fight racism and discrimination and the violence experiences by Filipino youth and women
- develop capacity in the Canadian Filipino community in relation to policy analysis and public policy engagement
- strengthen existing organizations, create new ones e.g. a national youth organization and build a national network linking disparate Filipino organizations
- build links and partner with other organizations beyond the Filipino community to strengthen efforts to address economic marginalization, discrimination, disenfranchisement of youth and exploitation of women
Main Activities of the Project

1. national consultations and skills building workshops mainly focusing on PAR.
2. local and regional roundtables and further workshops deepening the skills and capacity building; national consultation
3. final national conference, documentation of all activities and preparation of final reports and evaluations.
4. Arts-based KM
The NAPWC Project: Successes

- Organizational capacity building
- Intergenerational engagement
- Policy analysis & engagement
- Media relations
More successes

- Essential skills building
- Knowledge mobilization
- Community-university partnerships
- Arts-based methods
- Women’s leadership
Final Conference
November 6-9, 2008
Scenes from Pinoyville Play
Remaining Challenges

- Economic marginalization continues
- Education of public
- Changing policy
- Limits of CBR and PAR
Using Evidence: How research can inform public services

Strengths
- timely, clear & relevant
- strong advocates endorsed by community opinion leaders
- powerful personal contact
- users are partners in the generation of evidence

Challenges
- methodology is contested
- existing ideologies are challenged
- contentious to the powerful
- policy makers resistant to research as counterbalance to expert opinion
- policy makers resist argument to radically change policy
Reframing

- Build on truths emerging from CBR & PAR
- Look for the values underpinning the issues
- Reframe the policy discussion using values
- The problem with rationalism (ignores the symbolic, metaphorical and moral aspects of policies)
- State clearly and repeatedly what are progressive values