The Praxis of Partnership in Civically Engaged Research

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Participatory research approaches evolved from scholars interested in initiating projects that address social problems and in challenging university-led production of knowledge (Wallerstein and Duran 2017). Scholars also noted that a plethora of terms representing a participatory research paradigm are difficult to decipher and have become intermingled (Wallerstein and Duran 2017). How then should political scientists distinguish civically engaged research (CER) in this constellation of scholarship? More important, how should political scientists do CER?

This article raises and considers questions central to how scholars can create equitable partnerships with nonacademics for research on improving the governance of social problems. To explore these questions, we compare CER to two common participatory research frameworks: community-based participatory research (CBPR) and research-practice partnerships (RPPs). We first identify guiding principles of CER that are shared across these two frameworks. We then identify areas that distinguish our aspirations for CER from how some researchers describe or implement CBPR and RPPs.

LEARNING FROM PARTNERSHIP FRAMEWORKS

In this symposium, Bullock and Hess define CER as "the systematic and rigorous production of knowledge through reciprocal partnerships with people beyond the academy that contributes to the improved governance of social or political problems." Reciprocity and equality are important tenets of CER, which Bullock and Hess also discuss. The emphasis on governance is distinguished from two popular action-research frameworks used in public health, criminology, sociology, social work, and education. CBPR engages with nonacademic partners to improve participant recruitment, data analysis, results dissemination, and overall design of research projects. Minkler and Wallerstein (2008) identified the key elements of CBPR as engaging community members and researchers who cooperate for the production of new knowledge; focusing on co-learning; developing strategies for building capacity; empowering participants to increase control over their life; and balancing research and action. CBPR requires project participants to deauthorize traditional ways of knowing to foster a critical consciousness and action in an unjust system (Freire 1970; Wallerstein and Duran 2017).

RPPs comprise the second framework. Coburn and Penuel (2016) established that "researchers and system leaders share an open-ended commitment to build and sustain a working collaboration over multiple projects." Coburn, Penuel, and Geil (2013) further stated that the objectives of RPPs are for partners to (1) foster long-term collaborative arrangements that develop over multiple years; (2) commit to an open-ended commitment to working together; (3) center partnerships on matters of concern for educator and community partners rather than solely developing theory and knowledge; (4) mutually address needs and goals of all partners; (5) establish practices for making decisions together, designing innovations together, and conducting research together; and (6) produce original analyses that address questions of mutual interest to educators and inform the ongoing joint work of the partners.

On the surface, CBPR and RPPs sound similar. However, they illustrate differences in how participatory research conceptualizes who are partners and what they receive through partnership. Some scholars argue that CBPR is founded on the premise that project ideas must evolve from the community rather than an idea that researchers take to the community (Thompson Sanders 2019). Scholars in public health (Wallerstein and Duran 2017, 27) advocated for CBPR to build on a southern or emancipatory Freirean tradition to "foster democratic participation of community members to transform their lives." In contrast, researchers and "system leaders" are involved in problem definition in RPPs (Coburn and Penuel 2016).[1] Whereas CBPR focuses on problems that people confront in everyday life, RPPs focus on key dilemmas and challenges that practitioners face, which pose consequences for community members. Similar to RPPs, CER does not necessarily privilege nonacademic partner interests like CBPR does. In this symposium, Bullock and Hess view CER closer to the "northern tradition" of action research (Lewin 1948), in which partnerships steer away from one partner deferring to another.

Although these two frameworks represent only a small example of a rich universe of scholarship on participatory research, they reveal common tensions in research partnerships. Figure 1 represents the tensions among these frameworks in a Venn diagram. First, all three frameworks share a commitment to being problem driven. To produce relevant knowledge, partnerships should focus more on outcomes addressing social problems than on resolving debates in scholarly literature. To remain problem driven, all three approaches also emphasize the importance of being

conscientious about context, which suggests that partners should seek a balance between research and action. CER shares with CBPR and RPPs a commitment to engage in a process in which all partners are given agency in the decision-making process and their understanding of the research and its potential are enhanced through project participation (Coburn and Penuel 2016; Wallerstein and Duran 2010).

(Levine 2020). Others find that prospective collaborators intentionally avoid "difficult conversations" on how to build reciprocal partnerships, opting for paths of least resistance (Lipovsek and Zomer 2019).

Some aspects of CBPR and RPPs fall under CER's "big-tent" conception of reciprocal partnerships that involve people beyond the academy. To address imbalances among

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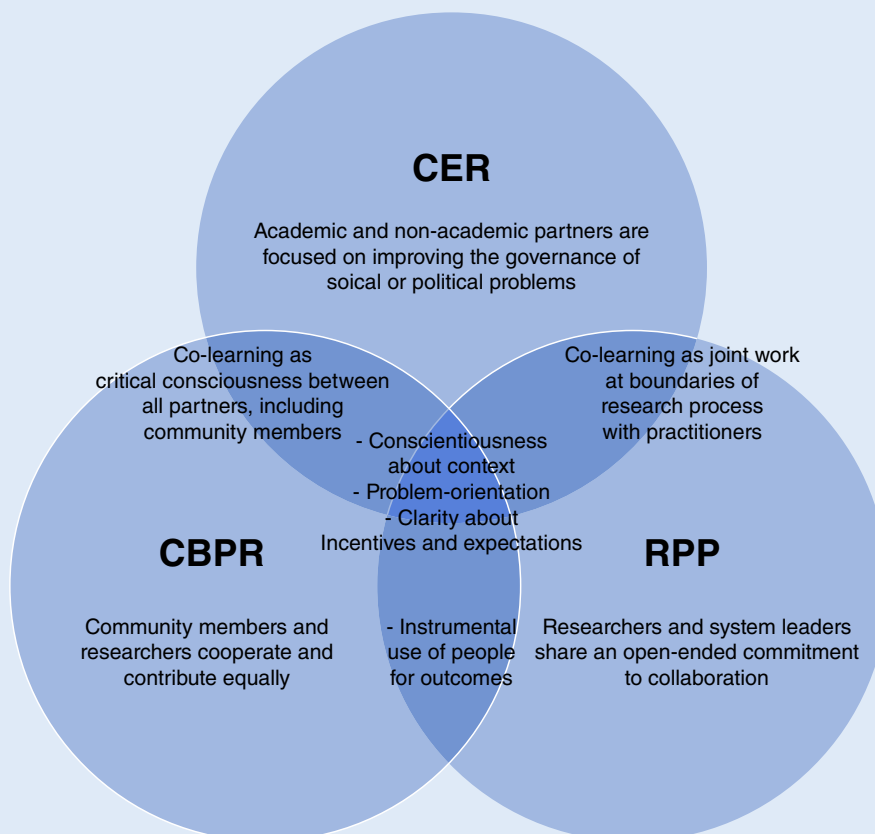
CER also shares an emphasis on clarifying group motivations and expectations with the other two frameworks. Transparency strengthens reciprocal working relationships. This emphasis is key given that partnerships often do not take place because they require openness and unlearning old practical habits and norms that govern "how things have always been done" (Chicago Beyond 2019). Some scholars point to an inception problem—that is, potential collaborators never begin a conversation about partnership in the first place

researchers, community organizations, funders, and participants, CER involves sustained co-learning and reciprocity with people beyond academia, a value that is stated in both CBPR and RPPs. CER overlaps with RPPs in its emphasis on partnerships with practitioners as well as with CBPR in its emphasis on partnerships with either practitioners, community members, or both.

Both literatures highlight important principles for mutual partnerships in different ways. Penuel, Allen, Coburn, and

Figure 1

Common Relationships and Tensions Across CER, CBPR, and RPPs

CER
Academic and non-academic partners are focused on improving the governance of soical or political problems

Co-learning as critical consciousness between all partners, including community members

Co-learning as joint work at boundaries of research process with practitioners

- Conscientiousness about context
- Problem-orientation
- Clarity about Incentives and expectations

CBPR
Community members and researchers cooperate and contribute equally

- Instrumental use of people for outcomes

RPP
Researchers and system leaders share an open-ended commitment to collaboration

Ferrell (2015) conceptualized RPPs as "joint work" at the boundaries of research and practice. They view co-learning as an intentional act to cross boundaries as a way to understand differences and shape mutually shared outcomes and to resist a unidirectional translation from research to practice. To circumvent the problem of inception in RPPs, Levine (2020) argued that academics and practitioners must decenter their own specific priorities by focusing on problems and identifying how their own expertise can accomplish shared tasks. For partnerships that formalize, collaboration is time-intensive (Coburn, Penuel, and Geil 2013). Project partners must permit themselves to engage in a process that is unavoidably messy, long, uncomfortable, and rarely linear (Coburn, Penuel, and Geil 2013; Lipovsek and Zomer 2019). In CER, multiple interactions are important in demonstrating commitment, which is integral for building trust (Lipovsek and Zomer 2019).

themselves as "positioned subjects" who bring their identities and theories to the field (Shehata 2015). CER further builds on Freire's idea of praxis *and* bell hooks (1994), asking *both* researchers and their collaborators to translate their critical awareness of their position and power to mutually create ground rules that explicitly discuss group values of respect, decision-making processes, shared leadership, and accountability and a commitment to learn together for a greater purpose.

At the same time, an emphasis on positionality and reflexivity also encourages caution in partnerships. CBPR and RPPs are two examples of participatory research that decenters academic priorities in favor of focusing on problems and outcomes. Orsini (2015) highlighted concerns over some outcome- or problem-driven frameworks that tend to use people instrumentally. We share this concern. A project may achieve

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CBPR studies highlight a commitment to co-learn with a critical consciousness (Freire 1970). RPPs tend to differ, given that learning is based mainly on independent first-person self-reflections (Coburn and Penuel 2016) rather than an explicit commitment to share lived experiences and lessons—although there are exceptions (Levine 2020). We find that CER draws from literature that supports structuring discussions in which group members recursively revisit how system structures shape their lives and focus on how learning from one another provides benefits that impact everyone (Thompson Sanders 2019). We also find the CBPR literature useful in understanding how to avoid tokenism, in which some participants believe that a partnership is reciprocal and equitable whereas others think and experience otherwise (Dieter et al. 2018; Thompson Sanders 2019). Written records, group contracts, and

its stated goals and objectives but can exploit people outside of academia for benefits exclusively offered within academia (Thompson Sanders 2019).

POLITICS OF RESEARCH PARTNERSHIPS

We hope that this review of two prevalent participatory frameworks provides more clarity about CER. We now discuss other scholarship that encourages a more critical understanding of the politics of partnering with people outside of academia to raise questions that engaged researchers must foreground.

First, to what extent do collaborative processes or agreements privilege who is and is not considered a partner? These decisions are consequential because partnering with a subset of stakeholders and decision makers can replicate power dynamics that are antagonistic to improved governance. We believe that this is not an impediment but rather a productive point of exploration for political scientists to consider how power and authority are exercised in the formation of collective enterprises. For example, Goodman, Bird, and Gabel (2017, 205) provided an insightful spectrum of research partnerships

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memoranda of understanding can provide a basis to address these tensions.

Similar to Freire's (1970) critical consciousness and interpretive methods, CER encourages researchers to "attend to and analyze their possible personal power vis-à-vis those they study" (Yanow and Schwartz-Shea 2015, 442) and to think of

that serves to orient political scientists and their collaborators to the challenges and benefits of partnership approaches. Other work encouraged critical understanding of how researchers define "community." We similarly ask, what is considered a community? Moreover, who gets to define it? Our questions align with interpretivists such as Orsini (2015), who

found that CBPR risks overlooking the important role that researchers play in constructing and interpreting "community" in the first place. We also contend that this applies to RPPs in constructing and interpreting who is deemed a "system leader" or practitioner more generally. Who defines the "system" in question? Although CER may define community broadly, it still must contend with political and politicized processes of how groups are constructed rather than taking them as givens.

Second, can mutual collaborations still involve academics who choose to distance themselves from their partners to conduct research? Scholars have emphasized the importance and benefits of maintaining distance from community for the sake of research and the community itself (Labaree 2002; Orsini 2015). In the coproduction of knowledge, some studies suggest that creating distance from partners or partnering communities, in fact, would bring academics closer to identifying important concerns for a community (Orsini 2015) and foster accountability against powerful non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and influential groups (Goodman, Bird, and Gabel 2017). Conversely, full separation tends to promote research questions and conclusions that are tangential to the problems experienced in everyday life (Smith 2020). In other projects, nonacademic partners create buffers in which researchers may find their evidence undermined by well-resourced NGOs and foundations that favor their own expertise and anecdotal evidence.

Relying on ethnographic studies, we suggest that political scientists must use their discretion and engaged listening to detect tensions between their insider/outsider status (Brown 2012; Cramer 2016) wherein researchers as outsiders must "go native" and insiders must step back to become "observationalists" (Labaree 2002). We believe that political scientists should take an active role in intentionally codesigning and sustaining collaborations. Indeed, studies suggest that equitable research frameworks can strengthen the rigor and relevance of research products (Leung, Yen, and Minkler 2004; Minkler and Baden 2008; Savage et al. 2006). However, we also hope that this symposium will encourage political scientists to use CER for reaching newer audiences interested in improving governance (and less interested in traditional research publications). If not, producing research without providing any tangible outcomes for nonacademic partners will contribute to existing public concern about political science's disconnection from public life (Smith 2020).

It is important that CER avoid the practice of instrumentally using partnerships to generate findings for exclusively academic audiences. To foster reciprocal partnerships, CER requires academics to practically improve governance to resolve social and political problems (further explored by Jackson, Shoup, and Williams in this symposium). We view the best versions of CER to be inspired by a Freirean "listening-dialogue-action" framework that creates equitable ways to achieve reciprocity wherein "everyone participates as a co-learner to jointly construct a shared social reality" (Wallerstein and Duran, 2017). Under these project norms, we envision academics and nonacademics engaging in fully transparent discussions about how they benefit from

collaboration, what they are risking, what they can offer for the good of the group, and how best to work with one another.

CONCLUSION

CER aims to coproduce knowledge that improves governance. To accomplish the objectives discussed in this symposium, CER must involve a sustained commitment to partners with people beyond the academy. Reciprocity and co-learning are crucial and are cultivated through a critical consciousness about the context of a partnership and a structured process in which people genuinely share their expectations and motivations for collaboration. As CER evolves, we hope that political science will support venues in which people can share their learned lessons and lived experiences from collaborations to further understand the praxis of partnership. ∎

NOTE

1. In their article, they discuss different types of system-leader partners. In their description, laypeople (or, in their case, students) are rarely mentioned. They describe partners as researchers at universities or intermediary organizations; leaders in a single district, schools, and youth-serving agencies; and educational decision makers.

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