

# Moving along the community–researcher continuum towards participatory research in British Columbia

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## Abstract

With initiatives such as forest certification, innovative forest practices agreements, model forests, and community forest pilots, gathering data on social and economic factors relating to natural resource management is likely to be a growing area of social science research in British Columbia. This paper examines expert-driven versus community-driven participatory approaches to social science research. A hypothetical continuum of community involvement and power in the research process is presented that helps to distinguish between these research approaches. Arnstein's ladder of citizen participation also provides a useful guide to discussions about the desired level of community involvement in research. The challenges posed by increasing citizen participation in community research are examined, as is the potential of community-driven methods of social science research in British Columbia.

**KEYWORDS:** *social science research, British Columbia, community-based participatory research, Arnstein's ladder of citizen participation.*

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## Introduction

I worked as an extension agent in a timber-dependent community in Oregon during the 1990s. I was hired to help the community address the acute social and economic issues resulting from reduced timber harvest levels on nearby national forest land. I remember looking out the window of my office and spotting an out-of-state university sociologist who I knew had come to “study us”—in other words, to examine the effects of the federal endangered species legislation on towns like ours. I remember skeptically thinking: What could outsiders possibly understand about the reality of this community in a few short weeks? I also felt uneasy about being the subject of research work that had no direct benefit to the community. With so many of their own questions about major economic and social transitions, why couldn't community members harness this research capacity to help address their own issues and goals?

At the time, I wasn't aware of the academic debate surrounding expert-driven versus community-driven models of social and natural science research. Expert-driven community research is led by academics who conduct interviews, focus groups, and surveys, all directed by their own research questions. These academics then leave the community to analyze the data and publish the results. At the other end of the spectrum, community members determine the research questions, select data collection methods, analyze results, and determine how results will be distributed (Green *et al.* 2001).

As I work with social scientists and communities in British Columbia in my role as Socio-economics Extension Specialist with FORREX, I have come to see that these two approaches are at opposing ends of a hypothetical continuum of community involvement and power in the research process (see Figure 1). Both methodologies have a place in social science research. In this paper, I describe this continuum, discuss the challenges and advantages of

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various research approaches, and discuss the potential of community-driven research methods in British Columbia.

## Examining the Community-Researcher Continuum

In expert-driven research (at the left side of the continuum), researchers make all decisions regarding the research. This process is efficient and is often more scientifically rigorous. While this is sometimes called “community-based research,” the research is about the community and does not necessarily involve the community. Conversely, community-driven research (at the right side of the continuum) is entirely directed by community members.

Examples of “community-based participatory research” (Metzler *et al.* 2003) or “participatory research” (Hurst 1995), which lie somewhere between the two extremes of the continuum, are now more prevalent. This type of research involves community participants as the partners of researchers in all aspects of the research process. The needs and interests of researchers and community participants are negotiated. The results are both timely and relevant to community needs, but still address the scientific rigour and other interests of researchers. Participatory research is based on a deep respect of the capacity of community members to develop knowledge of, and solutions to, their own issues.



FIGURE 1. Community involvement and power research continuum.



Its popularity has risen in response to a growing recognition that wholly expert-driven approaches often fail to meet the direct needs of communities.

The emergence of community-based participatory research involving community–researcher partnerships parallels the trend of increasing industry–researcher partnerships in the biological sciences. Both types of partnerships aim to solve problems immediately relevant to the research partner.

In the field of program evaluation, a related approach called “empowerment evaluation” is now a widely accepted method of appraising the effects of programs that are designed to improve communities. This approach uses evaluation concepts, techniques, and findings to foster improvement and self-determination within a community. Program participants conduct their own evaluations and outside evaluators serve as coaches or facilitators.

Researchers frequently believe that they are conducting participatory research because community members are involved in several aspects of it; however, true participatory research involves community members in all decisions. For example, if a researcher has the “final say” on decisions about the research process, then it is *not* participatory research; if both researchers and involved community members feel a sense of ownership for the research decision-making process, then it *is* participatory research.

## Distinguishing Between Participatory and Expert-driven Approaches

To distinguish between participatory and expert-driven approaches, consider the following variables.

**Initiation of Research:** Whose idea was the research project in the first place? Whose questions will the research answer? To what degree are community members involved in defining the research questions? How was the input of community members on research questions obtained?

**Researchers’ View of Community Members:** Do researchers consider community members as participants in the research process? For example, are community members hired and trained to conduct interviews and surveys, or does the researcher bring research assistants to the community?

**Time Allowed for the Research Process:** Is adequate time allotted to community meetings that are intended

to help define the research questions, train local research assistants, and discuss various data collection method options?

**Ownership of Research Process and Results:** Who decides how and when results will be disseminated and stored? Whose ethical rules will be followed in conducting the research?

**Role of the Researcher:** Do researchers have the final say on decisions relating to the research, or are they acting as a coach or facilitator of a community decision-making process?

## Arnstein’s Ladder of Citizen Participation

A model developed by Sherry Arnstein, former Executive Director of the American Association of Colleges of Osteopathic Medicine, provides another way of looking at the continuum of community involvement in research (Arnstein 1969). Arnstein’s ladder of citizen participation has been widely used to describe how citizens are involved in planning processes and to illustrate the levels of community member involvement in research. This model provides a useful guide for discussions about the desired level of community participation in research. Higher steps on the ladder translate to greater citizen power over decision making. The ladder’s eight steps are outlined below.

1. **Manipulation** – This step is non-participative and may be designed to convince the public of a particular point of view. For example, a researcher may conduct research in a community to prove a point about the effects of a government policy.
2. **Therapy** – The goal of community involvement at this step is to achieve community support for the researcher’s plan. The research is focused on outcomes that the researcher identifies and that the researcher feels will be “good” for the community.
3. **Informing** – While this is a crucial early step to participatory research, it is a one-way flow of information with no feedback mechanism. For example, a researcher may write a press release or be interviewed by a local newspaper about a research project or idea.
4. **Consultation** – This step may include attitude surveys or neighbourhood meetings. Researchers work on community issues, consult with the community in developing research questions, and share results within the community; however, in this step



power over decisions relating to the research still remains with the researcher.

5. **Placation** – In this step, citizens are involved to placate certain members of the community (e.g., picking certain community members for research planning committees). Community members may advise or plan, but researchers still retain the right to judge the legitimacy or feasibility of the input.
6. **Partnership** – Power and responsibility for planning and decision making is fully negotiated between community members and researchers.
7. **Delegated Power** – Citizens have a clear majority in the decision-making process with power to make decisions. Accountability for the results is delegated to them.
8. **Citizen Control** – Community members handle all tasks of planning, policy making, and managing a research project with no intermediaries between them and the source of funds. Accountability lies fully on the community members.

## Challenges Associated with Moving Up the Ladder

Several challenges are associated with approaches that seek to enhance citizen participation in community research. These challenges involve numerous issues related to research and funding organizations, definitions of community, conflicting research priorities, privacy, research ethics, and research involving Aboriginal peoples. By addressing the following issues, researchers and communities can move up Arnstein's ladder to achieve higher levels of citizen involvement in participatory research.

### Research and Funding Organizations

Most conventional research institutions do not have a history of rewarding researchers for outcomes involving community capacity-building or empowerment. In general, most researchers have been trained in specific disciplines that often do not address complex community or industry problems. Organizations that fund research commonly require some immediate "research" outcomes rather than interim "process" outcomes. In addition, the time frames associated with funding usually don't recognize the longer period required to develop community–researcher partnerships.

### Definitions of Community

Identifying the level of citizen control on Arnstein's ladder depends in part on how community is defined.

For instance, is the "community" whoever shows up to meetings? Is it municipal council? How is power distributed within a community? How much should researchers control the ways in which power and benefits will be distributed? Researchers need to resist the easy definitions that see communities as a single entity with a single personality.

### Conflicting Research Priorities and Scope

Researchers often require scientific rigour, which may take some time to obtain, while community members need answers to problems right away. For example, if a response rate on a survey is low, a scientist may want to conduct follow-up mailings to ensure statistical validity; however, if community members are under pressure to make decisions or launch programs, they may not want to take the time for follow-up mailings. Researchers sometimes desire to conduct research on more than one community to draw generalizations across communities (such as the effects of certain types of legislation on rural communities). While research with a broader scope may indirectly provide useful information to communities, it may not be specific enough to help a community solve immediate and unique problems. In addition, if community members wish to delay publication of results for political or practical reasons, researchers are caught between their need to publish and their desire to be responsive to the community.

### Privacy

Researchers have described difficulty in conducting research because community members were reluctant to share personal information. Social science researchers can overcome this barrier by developing partnerships within the community. Opinion leaders in the community can help legitimize the research project and encourage participation in interviews, focus groups, and surveys.

### Research Ethics

Most social science researchers who work for institutions with research ethics policies are aware that conducting research involving human subjects requires a special review procedure to ensure privacy, dignity, fairness, and the informed consent of human research subjects. Because of the shared power between communities and research organizations in community-based research, ethics review processes can be more complex. When overall decision making is shared between community organizations and researchers, the partners must jointly decide how, or if, to apply ethics policies



and procedures. Power-sharing highlights questions about how the privacy of community members is protected, and how more vulnerable research subjects such as children are protected. It is possible that an institutional review process might add considerable time to a research project. This may be problematic for community members who are motivated to get research results as soon as possible.

### Research in Aboriginal Communities

Some funders (e.g., Canadian Social Science and Humanities Research Council) expect research organizations to follow specific policies related to research involving Aboriginal peoples. These policies reflect those of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, the Inuit Circumpolar Conference, and the Association of Canadian Universities for Northern Studies. A set of what are called “good practices” has been developed to guide researchers when involving Aboriginal people as partners. The practices outline procedures for conceptualizing the research, designing the projects, conducting the research, and creating opportunities for communities to react and respond to the research findings before completion of the final report. Since the culture and language of the researchers may differ from that of the community members, special care must be taken to ensure that both an informed consent process and inclusiveness are achieved in Aboriginal community-based research.

### Participatory Research in British Columbia

Participatory research may not be desirable or appropriate in all situations. Researchers may need to operate at one level on Arnstein’s ladder for one project and another level for another project. Sometimes an appropriate level of involvement is achieved by simply including community members in the definition of the research questions. Many factors will influence the decision about which level of the ladder constitutes the most appropriate approach, including the:

- importance of scientific rigour and neutrality,
- time available to conduct the research,
- importance of building research capacity in the community,
- policies related to research in Aboriginal communities, and
- urgency for the answers.

Expert-driven research, which is often more scientifically rigorous and quicker than participatory

research, might be the most appropriate approach to answer research questions. On the other hand, shifting to the right on the community involvement and power in research continuum, or higher on Arnstein’s ladder, increases local participation in research and will potentially provide more direct and long-lasting benefits to community members.

But, is it participatory research, or is it just lip service? Researchers, when working with community stakeholders on research projects, can determine this by asking: Who is doing whom a favour? Is the community performing a favour by “helping” the researcher, or is the researcher doing a favour by “helping” the community? To genuinely share ownership, both sides should consider it “their” research. In this way, gratitude extends in both directions.

Community members interested in launching a research project may use the continuum and Arnstein’s ladder to guide their discussions about how to involve researchers. Researchers may wish to use the continuum and ladder to ensure that they are realistic about the level of community partnership they can, or wish to, achieve. More organized forums will also help to bring community members and researchers together.

Finally, to enable more participatory research in British Columbia, the following conditions are necessary:

- Funding organizations must recognize that longer time lines are often involved with participatory research.
- Academic institutions must recognize and reward researchers for conducting research that involves community members.
- Funding organizations must accept interim results relating to relationship-building between researchers and community members as a valid product of the funded research.

### Conclusion

Gathering data on social and economic responses to natural resource management is likely to be a growing area of research in British Columbia. Evidence indicates that the interest and involvement in community-based social science research will continue to expand with initiatives such as forest certification, innovative forest practices agreements, model forests, and community forest pilots. Is it possible to conduct research while offering direct and immediate benefits to community members? I believe community-based participatory research offers a way to do this.



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