

Uncovering the Benefits of Participatory Research: Implications of a Realist Review for Health Research and Practice

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Abstract:

Context: Participatory Research (PR) entails the co-construction of research through partnerships between researchers and people affected by, and/or responsible for action on, issues under study. Evaluating the benefits of PR is challenging for a number of reasons: research topics, methods, and study designs are heterogeneous; the extent of collaborative involvement may vary over the duration of a project and from one project to the next; and partnership activities may generate a complex array of both short- and long-term outcomes.

Objective: To undertake a realist review of primary studies of PR in health-related interventions with a view to identifying the added value and potential limitations of such partnerships.

Methods: The review team consisted of a collaboration between researchers and decision-makers in public health, research funding, ethics review and community-engaged scholarship. We identified, selected and appraised a maximum variety sample of primary studies describing PR partnerships. For each stage, two team members independently reviewed and coded the literature. Key realist review concepts [middle-range theory, demi-regularity, and context-mechanism-outcome configurations (CMO)] were used to analyze and synthesize data, using the PR partnership as the main unit of analysis.

Findings: From 7167 abstracts and 591 full-text papers, a final sample of 23 PR partnerships written up in 276 publications, was retained for synthesis. The link between process and outcome in these partnerships was best explained using the middle-range theory of *Partnership Synergy*, which demonstrated how PR could (1) ensure culturally and logistically appropriate research; (2) enhance recruitment capacity; (3) generate professional capacity and competence of stakeholder groups; (4) result in productive conflicts from which useful negotiation followed; (5) increase the quality of outputs and outcomes over time; (6) increase sustainability of project goals beyond funded timeframes and during gaps in external funding; and (7) create system changes and new unanticipated projects and activity. Negative examples illustrated how these outcomes were not a guaranteed product of PR partnerships, but contingent on key aspects of context.

Conclusion: This review used a realist approach to embrace the heterogeneity and complexity of the PR literature. The theory-driven, interpretative synthesis identified mechanisms by which PR may add value to the research process. Using the middle-range theory of partnership synergy, the review confirmed findings from previous PR reviews, documented and explained some negative outcomes, and generated new insights about the benefits of PR in terms of stakeholder conflict and negotiation, program sustainability, unanticipated project activity and generating systematic changes.