Participatory Research and Capacity Building for Community Health and Development

Vincent T. Francisco

Department of Public Health Education, University of North Carolina at Greensboro, Greensboro, North Carolina, USA

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Introduction

Participatory Research and Capacity Building for Community Health and Development

VINCENT T. FRANCISCO
Department of Public Health Education, University of North Carolina at Greensboro, Greensboro, North Carolina, USA

It is my pleasure to introduce this themed issue on “Participatory Research and Capacity Building for Community Health and Development.” While most of the literature is still dominated by targeted interventions, run by researchers, that have a limited reach (usually affecting change among much less than 100 persons), these community interventions affect the broader social ecology. Even further, there is a growing literature on community-engaged scholarship that calls for this kind of active partnership but often falls far short of its goals (Calleson, Jordan, & Seifer, 2005). The articles in this themed issue represent the possibility of collaborations between university researchers, state-level policy makers, and community-based groups to affect widespread changes in the social and physical environment.

KEYWORDS community health, participatory research, social ecology

It is my pleasure to introduce this themed issue on “Participatory Research and Capacity Building for Community Health and Development.” In it you will find a variety of articles with a common theme—that of building the capacity of communities to affect systems improvements leading to health improvements of a variety of kinds. The health outcomes are eclectic, and range from violence prevention, to substance abuse prevention, to building

Address correspondence to Vincent T. Francisco, Department of Public Health Education, University of North Carolina at Greensboro, 437 HHP Building, Greensboro, NC 27402-6170, USA. E-mail: vincent_francisco@uncg.edu
healthier communities, to broader capacity-building approaches at local and global levels. Throughout these pages you will find one predominant theme—all of these efforts operate to affect change at multiple ecological levels.

Most of the literature is still dominated by targeted interventions, run by researchers, that have a limited reach (usually affecting change among much less than 100 persons). By contrast, these community interventions affect the broader social ecology. The need for such interventions has been discussed for decades (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; McLaren & Hawe, 2005; McLeroy et al., 1988; Stokols, 1992; Stokols, Allen, & Bellingham, 1996). What was missing is a research-based approach at community and systems improvement that did not need the researchers to maintain effectiveness. The efforts described here are grounded in the communities they serve; they build the capacity of the people in these communities to affect the changes themselves. While most community-based intervention research projects will affect change in one or two policies, or implement one or two programs, these efforts aim to bring about hundreds of changes in communities and broader systems. These community/systems changes are defined as the new or modified programs, policies and practices that (taken together) aim to affect the targeted mission of the community-determined effort.

There is a growing literature on community-engaged scholarship that calls for this kind of active partnership, but often falls far short of its goals (Calleson, Jordan, & Seifer, 2005). These articles represent the possibility of collaborations between university researchers, state-level policy makers, and community-based groups to affect widespread changes in the social and physical environment. An exemplar of engaged scholarship, this collaboration engages community members themselves and scientific partners—working together to help discover what works and apply it to address locally determined goals. We see academics in their best role—that of guide and capacity builder, rather than primary doer.

REFERENCES