Can community-based participatory research be conceptualized as social movement?

An innovative theoretical framework to assess the Kahnawake Schools Diabetes Prevention Project


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Background

- Community-based participatory research (CBPR) has become increasingly popular as an approach adding relevance and value to health research (1).
- Given the complex causal web linking a CBPR project and its health outcomes, it may be more relevant to assess intermediate indicators of change, such as system changes and group processes (2).
- Because it examines the conditions under which collective action emerges and develops to promote social change around an issue, we believe that social movement theory could provide a good theoretical apparatus in order to investigate social processes generated by CBPR.
- Our hypothesis is that successful (sustainable) CBPR projects behave like social movements.

Objectives

- This communication aims to present a preliminary theoretical framework based on social movement theory that will be used to assess a CBPR project, the Kahnawake Schools Diabetes Prevention Project (KSDPP).
- KSDPP is a long-standing CBPR project running for 21 years and aiming to prevent Type 2 diabetes in children and future generations in Kahnawake (Mohawk Territory, Quebec).
- Since the start of the project, many studies have attempted to evaluate the outcomes of the project on health and lifestyles of residents in the community. These studies have shown mixed results on physical activity, diet, weight and diabetes (3).
- Above and beyond these outcomes, a definition and an assessment of intermediate indicators of changes, such as system changes and group processes, are greatly needed.

Methods

- Major literature and seminal works on social movement theory (especially resources mobilization and framing theories (4-8)) as well as literature on CBPR have been consulted to develop a theoretical framework that could be used to investigate social change processes in the context of KSDPP.
- Similarities between social movements and CBPR processes and characteristics have been identified from the literature. From these similarities, themes, properties, and dimensions have been defined and developed in an iterative process.
- An preliminary theoretical framework has been developed from this work. This theoretical framework will be further developed and refined using a framework synthesis (a type of qualitative review) of successful CBPR projects (N = 9). This refined framework will then be applied to the analysis of our case, KSDPP.

Results

- The framework developed emphasizes similarities between CBPR and social movements:
  - They both pursue a political agenda or a ‘cause’, which is promoted in a collective action frame (interpretative discourse) to mobilize people.
  - They engage in collective actions that are oriented toward clear targets and use a variety of strategies in pursuit of their goals.
  - They develop in relation to specific opportunities (political, social, economical) and follow a long life cycle that retain some continuity over time.
  - They use tangible and intangible resources brought by individuals and groups (e.g. money, facilities, means of communication, knowledge, skills, expertise, labor and legitimacy).
  - They have a strong organizational base (involving leaders, members or followers, formal or informal organizations and coalitions).

Theoretical framework

Conclusion

Using a social movement theory lens to assess CBPR projects could provide innovative insights in order to evaluate and improve these initiatives.

References: