

Chapter Title: Introduction: walking many paths towards a community-led paradigm  
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Book Title: Community-Led Research  
Book Subtitle: Walking New Pathways Together  
Book Editor(s): Victoria Rawlings, James L. Flexner, Lynette Riley  
Published by: Sydney University Press. (2021)  
Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv1rcf2jj.3>

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# Introduction: walking many paths towards a community-led paradigm

*James L. Flexner, Victoria Rawlings and Lynette Riley*

The idea that academic research needs to reach beyond the ivory tower has been around for a long time, gaining traction particularly after the 1960s as academics increasingly recognised that their research was neither politically neutral, nor only of interest to other academics. The concept of community as an important element of what we do has likewise become increasingly prominent across a variety of disciplines as a result of this impulse to reach beyond the walls of the university with our research. Somewhat ironically, in the 21st century environment of economic austerity and funding cuts, universities have returned to concepts of ‘public impact’ as they struggle to define their broader value in a rapidly changing political and social environment.

In this book, we introduce the concept of *community-led* as a critical new paradigm for academic research. We see Community-Led Research (CLR) as a distinctive, if related, approach to similar projects sometimes labelled Participatory Action Research (PAR; Kemmis & McTaggart, 2000; Kemmis, McTaggart & Nixon, 2014), or Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR; Wilson, 2018).

J.L. Flexner, V. Rawlings & L. Riley (2021). Introduction: walking many paths towards a community-led paradigm. In V. Rawlings, J. Flexner & L. Riley (Eds.), *Community-Led Research: Walking new pathways together*. Sydney: Sydney University Press.

## Community-Led Research

These types of research take the critical step towards attempting to make communities equal partners in the research process. As Wilson (2018, p. 1) notes:

Distinguishing features of effective CBPR include: blurring the distinction between researchers and research participants, minimizing power imbalances, and researching in partnership with communities towards positive community outcomes that are sustainable beyond the life of the research.

CLR also shares an affinity with many kinds of 'activist' research that are pitched at different facets of broader projects concerned with 'social justice' (e.g. Atalay et al., eds., 2014; Ornstein, 2017; Smith & Wobst, 2005; Smith et al., 2019). In CLR the ways these kinds of approaches are defined and how they articulate with different projects will vary for a number of reasons, from the nature of the communities involved to the broader social and political landscapes in which they are located. The concept of social justice might work elegantly in certain CLR initiatives. Examples in this volume include Sampson, Katrack, Rawsthorne and Howard's approach to disaster planning and Rawlings and McDermott on self-harm among queer youth. In other cases, care must be taken when attempting to shoehorn Western concepts into community spaces in ways that might become culturally inappropriate. Flexner discusses in this volume the ways that local practices, beliefs and values are key to CLR in Vanuatu, where people might find the Western concept of social justice confusing or out of step with Melanesian traditions.

In this book, we aim to take steps beyond these models to establish a community-led approach to research. Rather than blurring the distinction between researchers and community, or minimising power imbalances, we seek to invert these dynamics as much as possible (Daniels-Mayes, this volume). What would the research environment be like if, rather than researchers coming up with ideas and then trying to work with communities to study them, the community was given the initiative to tell researchers what *they* want? What if the entire research process was then led from the community level, with the researcher placed in a position of facilitator, using their expertise not to direct but to serve community research interests?

We use the language of step-taking and movement intentionally here. In part this is because the reality of a CLR paradigm is largely unrealised. It is something we move towards, something we hope for and something we continue to work on, rather than something we have accomplished. We also use this language advisedly because of the significant Aboriginal and other Indigenous contributions to this volume, either through the identities of specific authors or more generally the close relationships in other authors' work with Indigenous communities. We find the metaphor of walking new pathways together inspiring as it invokes a journey together, with the end goal of communities serving as the guide, leading the way. Further, the concept of walking together implies something open-ended. We do not see this collection of essays as a final authoritative voice, but rather a beginning of a walk that should continue long into the future as we explore the ends of where a Community-Led approach to research can take us.

### Community-Led Research: limitations and challenges

Frameworks such as PAR and CBPR signal a broad-based move away from the extractive and unequal relationships inherent to much academic research, especially research involving subaltern people. Far too often, university-based researchers, many with good intentions and robust ethical guidelines, have gone into different environments, gathered information, and turned that information into 'high-impact' publications (typically hidden behind insurmountable paywalls). The value of this work for the communities who have been 'researched' is unclear or non-existent. Certainly, many Indigenous peoples feel they have been 'studied to death', with no apparent benefit or even point to the work done to and at them. While it is tempting to assume such research is limited to the bad old days of colonialist research (for examples from anthropology, see Adams, 1987; Young, 2004), the reality is much academic research continues to work according to the extractive model, often in spite of the desires of the academics involved. Institutional emphasis on international rankings, productivity, and the continuous competition for research funding lead to an impossible situation for even the most well-meaning researchers.

Given the constant pressures on time and resources, work with communities often occurs on the sidelines of research, much of it done at the expense of other work bleeding into evenings and weekends as scholars put in extra hours to maintain the interpersonal relationships necessary to move towards a CLR approach. The authors in this volume are very aware of the limitations facing a true realisation of CLR in the contemporary academic sphere. These range from institutional, as with the funding structures that support research (Robinson et al., this volume), to structural, as with the ongoing legacies of colonial inequality (Flexner, this volume; Riley, this volume).

Besides the institutional problems on the academic side, there is also the question of community itself. It is tempting for outside researchers to imagine that communities represent coherent, cohesive, easily legible wholes: groups of similar people with similar ideals and desires (Frake, 2008). This is especially so when the researcher believes the community in question is small-scale or horizontally organised. In practice, of course, communities are the opposite: fractious, factional, and very difficult to understand without serious investment of time to develop close relationships with people. Indeed, the communities that are seen as horizontally organised can often be *more* complicated to work with, as decision-making processes are often dispersed, consensus-oriented, and above all time-consuming (Flexner, 2018).

Indeed, if there is one resource that will continue to challenge people walking the path towards CLR, it is *time*. A community-led paradigm asks us as researchers to take the time to reach out to people living beyond the bounds of academia (sometimes quite a long way outside, physically or otherwise); to initiate, grow and maintain close relationships; and to discuss, consider and continually re-evaluate our research approaches and outcomes. On the other side of the equation, collaborative research involves significant investment of time and resources from community members as well. One of the related challenges is how to recognise these efforts, through remuneration, co-authorship, or other means, while also making sure that the leadership role of involved community members is not compromised by things like payment (hence the need to frame CLR relationships in terms of reciprocity rather than dependency; Webster et al. this volume).

Thus, researchers interested in walking the path towards CLR find themselves in a bind. On one hand, our institutional positions and indeed access to resources to support research are contingent on our ability to appear productive to an output-oriented capitalist model of research (e.g. Cunningham and MacEachern, 2016, pp. 629–30; Scott, 2012, pp. 105–28). On the other hand, our ethical obligations push us towards an approach to research couched in terms of interpersonal relationships, sensitivity, and care (for the communities we work with, the environments we inhabit, the value of the knowledge we co-produce). As McMahan and McKnight (this volume) suggest, a move towards CLR is ‘right, wrong, easy, and difficult’, and yet for all the authors in this volume it is essential to advance research in this direction.

So, is it time for a rebellion? Many scholars are probing the limits and seeking alternatives to a system that extracts so much, both from research ‘subjects’ and the researchers themselves. Does CLR have natural allies, not only within the related fields of PAR and CBPR, but among scholars calling for a turn towards ‘slow science’ (Alleva, 2006; Stengers, 2011), or more broadly for a ‘degrowth’ approach to contemporary systems of production, including knowledge production (e.g. D’Alisa, Demaria & Kallis, 2015; Kallis, 2018)? Slow science asks researchers to take time to carefully consider their experiments, theories and results before rushing off to the next journal submission or grant application. It also discourages the idea, particularly among junior scholars, that our work as researchers is to be publication machines (and yes, we recognise the irony that this is yet another academic publication produced at a relatively fast pace, but we assure the readers it is a work of love, and dare we say, was actually *fun* or at least mostly enjoyable to work on).

Degrowth even more broadly recognises that the overall economic landscape in which we find ourselves is unsustainable, and basically undesirable on both environmental and human fronts (Krueger 2018; Wilkinson & Pickett 2009, 2018). If we want a habitable planet that is pleasant to live on (O’Neill et al., 2018), we need to reverse our current addiction to runaway growth, translated in the academic sphere as more publications, more grants, higher rankings, and above all, never-ending piles of work. At what point is it our role as researchers to say enough, to intentionally put the brakes on and slow the

ever-accelerating pace of institutional productivity and pressure, to free up time, space and energy to go about the work of CLR properly?

From our perspective, we see these related projects as occurring in parallel with each other. Putting communities first in the work that we do will by necessity force us to slow down in many cases. We have to work at the pace that is comfortable for the people who are ideally leading the way in CLR. Further, this kind of research has the potential to bring about changes in the political ecology of research itself. Among other things, imagine the benefits across everything from carbon footprint to mental health if we could all occasionally shut off our laptops, smartphones and servers to invest time building community first, leading to research second, and then only carefully, slowly and intentionally. Rather than focusing on more and higher-impact outputs, CLR places the researcher as listener, learner, and sometimes facilitator, arranging access to particular areas of knowledge and expertise. It begins a walk down a path away from the capitalist model of constant productivity, and towards a space where research is about its quality, its value for real people, and its duty of care towards the world we all inhabit.

### Walking many paths

This book does not offer a single overarching model for CLR. Rather, we approach this concept from a variety of backgrounds – cultural, disciplinary and personal. What ties these approaches together is the idea that community, understood broadly, has a critical role to play in the development of research over the remainder of the 21st century. The authors in this collection may have walked very different paths, but we arrive at the same place through our common interest in pushing the limits of the possible in our work with a variety of communities.

The book has a strong Australasian focus both in terms of geographical origin of the contributors and the locations of research sites. This book represents a particular, emplaced approach to CLR, including the voices of several scholars who are from the region's First Nations. It is not, however, parochial in outlook or approach. Rather, we provide a geographical emphasis that can offer a valuable comparative

perspective for similar approaches in other parts of the world. Since this is an emerging field of research, it will be interesting to see how the form of CLR varies with geography, culture and history.

As the discussion above indicates, and many of the chapters that follow will suggest, we are still in the woods. As researchers interested in the CLR paradigm, we continue to walk on many small pathways of our own, sometimes parallel, sometimes overlapping, sometimes divergent. However, it is our hope in offering this volume that we begin moving towards the same direction, to a broader path that has more space for community members to walk with us, and indeed, to lead us in the directions they want to follow. For our readers, we hope this book encourages you to join us as we try to move towards clearer and brighter research landscapes in which community can be placed not just as equals, but as leaders in future research.

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