

Partnership River of Life: Creating an Historical Timeline

Background and Purpose

“The River of Life” is a reflective tool to describe the life journey or historical timeline for CBPR partnerships (or community-engaged research projects). Its purpose is to uncover the histories and influences that motivate individual and organizational partners to promote community empowerment, increase community participation in the research process, and promote research and health equity outcomes. Building on the work of Paulo Freire, the exercise is based on the process of dialogue and reflection whereby participants reflect on and document the critical and significant moments of their collaboration.

Through guided questions and by using the metaphor of a river, the exercise is designed to facilitate community and academic partners to actively acknowledge, celebrate, critique, change, and sustain the goals, processes, and results of their health equity work. This tool offers an opportunity for community engaged partnerships to reflect on where they’ve been, in order to build for their future.

Objectives: To facilitate partnership reflection regarding:

1. The history and influences that motivate partners (as individuals or from organizations) to work together in their partnership and/or community-engaged research projects to promote community empowerment, participation in research, and changes in health.
2. The goals, processes, and results of your collaboration.

Time:

- A few minutes for individual team member reflection (Step 1)
- 45 minutes for team work (Steps 2 through 4)
- 15 minutes to reflect and report back (Step 5 and 6)

Materials:

- Sheets of paper
- Plenty of colored markers
- Scissors, magazines, construction paper and glue
- Flip chart or butcher paper

Procedure:

Explain that a river is an important symbol in many cultures; it symbolizes life and change and for many people, it is stimulating to think about the river, about nature, and about what it represents. Every river has headwaters or springs, (beginnings of the

partnership, or organization) and times or places where the river is flowing well (partners are working well together). Sometimes partnerships have a calm period where the river smooths out into a wide pool. Other times the partnership has obstacles or challenges, which can be represented by boulders, rapids, and waterfalls. There are times when bodies of water join through tributaries (new resources, mentors, or new members), and or a stream branches off from the main river (members leave or new separate partnerships are formed).

Step 1.

Each member of the partnership reflects independently about yourself and the partnership in terms of a river: i.e., How and why did you join? What is important to know about your community and how and why you started working together? What have been important events and changes you've seen?

Step 2.

Lay out a long sheet paper (or two flip charts taped together) and other art supplies (markers, crayons, construction paper, glue) so that together you can draw your partnership river of life. Construction paper can also be used to cut out images ((ie. hearts to show positive moments or good river flow, and boulders/rocks to show obstacles).

Step 3.

Draw the river of life for your partnership. Discuss the beginnings, the influences, the obstacles and the peaceful moments as these are key aspects for the work and the commitment to change in the communities and across partnerships and coalitions. Start where you think it's important to start, which could be before the partnership began or historical moments that led to the formation of the partnership.

If it helps, write these instructions on a flipchart:

- Start where you think it is important to start, such as before the partnership began, a historical moment, when you received funding, etc.
- Fill in life moments of the partnership and key influences that were important motivations for continued involvement in community work.
- Draw important or influential stages.
- Draw key tributaries coming in.
- What were factors that facilitated the work?
- What were obstacles that were challenging?
- Where are you headed?

Step 4.

Make a historical timeline with dates of months, years (or decades) below the river of life. Relate important historic events within the community, region, state, or nationally that might influence what is currently happening in your partnership (or coalition, or organization), and consider whether this has had an impact in your partnership's life.

Step 5.

Stand back and admire your River of Life, and answer the following questions:

- What stood out for you while doing this collective process? (Any general thoughts about what you learned or feelings this exercise raised?)
- What were/are some of the facilitators you identified that were important for your partnership?
- What were/are some of the challenges or obstacles you have faced in terms of moving forward in a good way with your partners?
- Were there important external events that made a difference?
- When do you think you could use the river of life tool in your own work?

Step 6. If there are multiple teams or partnerships (or individuals) creating Rivers at the same time, you will need enough time for the sharing of journeys and and discussion of similarities and differences within different contexts and experiences.

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