

Community Research: 1982 to 2002

October 22, 1982 – Community research tends to be theory-driven, researcher-driven, and quantitative in nature. In my sub-discipline of Community Psychology, articles published in the major community psychology journals (American Journal of Community Psychology and Journal of Community Psychology) reflect these three themes. In fact, there are few alternatives to this dominant way of practicing community research. I am a young, untenured professor in the Community Psychology program at Laurier, and my research practice mirrors the field. For example, I have no clue what qualitative research is.

But there are signs of change. Enter the Centre for Research and Education in Human Services. Enter the Canadian Journal of Community Mental Health (the first issue, on “Community Psychology in Canada,” has just been published). Several new themes in the practice of community research are beginning to emerge.

1. Some researchers are beginning to understand what community members have been saying for some time: basic, theory-driven research doesn't have much relevance to the community. The implications of this work are always for some time in the future. Those who work in human services and government are concerned with how well their programs are doing now! Some researchers are starting to practice and write about program evaluation and needs assessment (The first edition of Patton's book on Utilization-focused Evaluation is published).
2. Consumers of services don't have any say over research and they don't trust researchers because they have been abused or neglected by them. Researchers come in and scoop the data and take it back to the university to analyze it, seldom having the consideration to come back and report on the findings, their credibility or usefulness. Consumers want a piece of the action; they want research to be more action-oriented; and they challenge the exclusive authority of researchers. Some researchers have discovered participatory action research, which has been practiced in other parts of the world for some time. Research projects that involve consumers and other stakeholders are emerging and being written about (Brown and Tandon publish an article entitled “Ideology and political economy in inquiry: Action research and participatory research” in the Journal of Applied Behavioral Sciences; mini shock waves are felt around the globe).
3. Most people believe that research follows the scientific method and uses statistics. But others are beginning to challenge mainstream research on philosophical grounds. Lincoln and Guba publish *Naturalistic Inquiry* in 1985 and introduce many community researchers to social constructivism. Some community researchers become more aware that there is a whole range of qualitative research approaches that have been around for some time in some disciplines. There is an explosion of qualitative research in many of the social sciences. Community psychology and feminist psychology are beginning to explore qualitative methods, even though the mainstream of psychology resists its inclusion.

October 22, 2002 – Except for those who were born after October 22, 1982, we are all 20 years older. But are we wiser about the practice of community research? In some respects, community research has changed. First of all, the practice of program evaluation is increasingly widespread. Almost everyone knows what a logic model is, although we all still get confused and have lengthy debates about what we mean by terms like output, outcome, indicator and objective – sigh. Quantitative research is still the norm in the social sciences, but in some places, qualitative research has become the norm. A problem is getting government and granting agencies to acknowledge the credibility of qualitative research; but at least qualitative research is on the map. One clear indicator of the growth of program evaluation and qualitative research is the sheer number of books published by Sage Publishers in the past 20 years. When I get a Sage catalogue, there are pages and pages of books on these topics. Someone in Thousand Oaks, California is making a lot of money off of these books.

What about participatory action research? My impression is that with some exceptions, this approach has not advanced as much as we would like to see. There is definitely more collaboration and partnerships between researchers and human services, but more often than not, consumers are not a central piece of these partnerships and continue to be involved in only token ways, if at all.

How did the changes in the practice of community research come about from 1982 to 2002? Through pressure from community partners and consumers of services, through the leadership of research settings and people, and through new ideas in the humanities and health and social sciences about the very nature of research. Credit the Centre for Research and Education, John Lord, Joanna Ochocka, Centre staff and partners, with playing a significant leadership and training role in making these shifts in community research. What is especially exciting for me is that there is a fresh generation of community researchers who will take us places that we never expected over the next 20 years (Seuss, 1990). By the way, does anyone know what Dr. Seuss's first name is?

Geoff Nelson, long-time Centre collaborator and former board member

References:

Seuss, Dr. (1990). *Oh, the places you'll go*. New York: Random House.