

Practical Strategies for the Future of Community Research

The Centre for Research and Education has played a lead role in shaping community research in Canada. Our definition of community research is research that is initiated in response to issues arising in the community, and designed to be useful to community members in a direct and immediate way. At the same time, community research should be rigorous and credible in terms of the standards applied by academics and professionals. In other words, we believe community research as research must balance relevance and excellence.

We have practiced and taught about community research for 20 years. In the last 10 years alone, the Centre for Research as conducted over 100 research projects and consultations. This work has generated over 125 journal articles, books and technical reports. We have collaborated with countless project participants. Now standing at the threshold of a new decade, we wonder out loud about what is needed to lead community research forward.

Over the years, community research has slowly become more common, more accepted and more credible. The language of community research – catch words such as “empowerment”, “participatory”, “stakeholder” – is spoken more fluently and in new quarters in our society. Methods and practices that used to be in the margins have become more mainstream (e.g., qualitative methodologies, consumer involvement). But in many ways the challenges confronting community research haven’t really changed much. Buzzwords easily lose meaning. Methods and practice easily become co-opted (who hasn’t seen a bureaucratic logic model or token consumer representation?). It’s at the level of effective implementation that the challenge of community research remains – or more precisely, at the level of matching values with practice.

The age-old struggle to find new and fresh ways to express old, underlying values remains. It’s not enough to simply restate the basic values of community research – meaningful participation, respect, voice and choice, sharing knowledge and power, etc. What is needed are mechanisms, or practical strategies, that give fresh emphasis to values and that give clear direction as to how those values can be applied in practice. The challenge we face is in foregrounding those strategies that speak most relevantly and with most integrity to today’s socio-political reality. These practical strategies can then serve to sustain the original vision of community research in the face of new and changing circumstances.

Below is a description of four strategies that we see as critical to the continued growth of community research. In recent years we have begun to implement these mechanisms more frequently here at the Centre. We invite your reaction.

Hiring and supporting community researchers

Community researchers live the issue under study on a day-by-day basis. Typically, community research studies have involved primary stakeholders as research participants and as members of research steering committees. Less frequently, they have been involved as full partners on research team. Because many community researchers have little or no experience in conducting research, training and ongoing support become critical elements. This mechanism emphasizes the fundamental values of individual capacity building (learning transferable skills), of community mobilization (researchers becoming agents of change within their community), and of social justice (access to the valued resource of employment). The hiring and supporting of community researchers also speaks to the principle of excellence. Having a person grounded in the setting contributes to a study’s “trustworthiness”, potentially bringing additional insights and verification of data collected.

Sharing power and control within the research study

Professional researchers must learn how to share power and control with all involved within the research study. Professional researchers need to “let go” of control and to practice good process, democratic involvement (voice and choice) and decision-making (consensus). Some concrete mechanisms for sharing power and control include having regular researcher meetings and involving all researchers – including community researchers – in planning and decision making, data gathering, data analysis, writing and dissemination. These strategies reduce specialization within the research team. They also provide opportunities for community researchers to “step up” and become more involved in steering the research

project. Other helpful strategies include using plain language rather than professional jargon, encouraging and listening carefully to all researcher's contributions and negotiating difficult issues. Changing "I" into "WE" is crucial.

Negotiating complex and competing partnerships

We have noticed that our partnerships on community research projects have become more complex and more diverse over time. Different kinds of people are making the effort to participate in community research (e.g., academics, governments, politicians, and leaders of many different kinds of community groups). Power imbalances on community research projects are therefore potentially greater. Our increasing challenge has been to facilitate equal voice among all constituents, so that our research can continue to be meaningful and "responsive and supportive especially to people with limited access to power and opportunity" (Centre mission statement). By building on commonalities and decreasing differences across those stakeholders involved we try to find ways for partners to show their uniqueness and expertise. We intentionally create opportunities for people to share about their personal self, not just their professional self. We also facilitate the group towards creating a common vision of how they can use research as a tool for change.

A related strategy is open communication with all partners, and a clear explanation of roles and responsibilities agreed upon at the beginning of the project. Community research is becoming an art of facilitation, negotiation and clarification. As researchers we're always in the middle; negotiating, mediating, challenging. We try to bring strong leadership, clarification of mutual goals, energy and enthusiasm. We try to bring focus and remind all about values of stakeholder participation, consumer perspectives and consumer rights.

Maintaining networks of support for researchers

A fourth group of practical strategies focuses on the development and maintenance of supportive networks. We see this as an important way to emphasize the fundamental values of individual capacity building, of community mobilization, and of mutual support. Community research is an intensely collaborative process that is still on the margins of most mainstream research organizations. As a result, practitioners often feel isolated from their peers in the broader research community.

Individual researchers, regardless of their level of academic training, need to bounce ideas off peers, get help solving problems and find common ways of expressing the ideas emerging from the research. Networks of support also foster mutual learning and the integration of individual efforts – especially when the research team includes members with very different backgrounds and points of view. Membership in a team gives researchers strength and purpose to act on common ideas. These networks often lead to new overlapping projects and inspire collaborative writing or the development of new proposals.

Although we have had success developing such networks within individual projects, a standing network of practitioners interested in participatory action research (PAR) approaches could serve as a powerful platform for mutual learning, ongoing reflections, trouble shooting, mutual support and the formulation of practical approaches. Such a network could function face to face or, if necessary, through teleconferencing and consultations by e-mail. In this spirit, we would like to announce the Summer Retreat for Community Researchers, coming in July 2003. This will be an opportunity for like-minded folks to look into the future of community research. See our website for details. We hope to see you there and together equip ourselves for the next decade of community research.

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