Making ‘community capital’ real: The impact on community researchers of participating in research

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Communities of Change Seminar
29th May 2019
What We Will Cover

• Approaches to participatory methods of inquiry;
• ‘Connected Communities’ approach & theory of change;
• What we mean by ‘community researchers’;
• A Community Researcher’s personal reflections;
• Benefits & challenges identified in the literature;
• Summary findings from recent study.
Approaches to Participatory Methods of Inquiry

Applied diverse fields and settings-

- social sciences, education, organizational science, nursing, public health.

Multiple terms are used e.g. -

- action research, participatory research, participatory action research, community-based participatory research, action science, action inquiry, co-operative inquiry, co-produced research, citizen social science.

Share commonalities including -

- emanate from same ontological paradigm embracing a participative reality;
- rely on an epistemology of experiential and participative knowing;
- informed by critical subjectivity and participatory transaction;
- recognize importance of involving members of the researched group.
CBPR - Democratising Research

“...deconstruction of power and the democratization of knowledge such that the experiential knowledge of community members is valued and knowledge that previously was the purview of scholars is accessible physically and intellectually to community participants.”

(Minkler, 2004, p. 686)
Key Strengths of CBPR

- Creates platform for democratic research processes, opens up spaces for public participation;
- Community researchers can provide important insights not previously considered;
- Two-way process that can give something back to the community;
- Builds a research skills base within the community;
- Develops new partnerships, links and capacity of organisations, community members, service commissioners and others;
- Helps foster trust between the community and research team;
- Supports involvement of ‘hard to reach’ groups;
- Communities active in knowledge production & potentially transformative social change.

(Richardson, 2014; CLES, 2014; Ryan et al, 2011; Warr et al., 2011; Greene et al., 2009; Fountain et al, 2007)
Engage local organisations

Recruit community researchers

Co-produce knowledge

Co-design initiatives

Connected Communities: Key Elements
We suggest that community capital can be grown through a way of working that follows the Connected Communities principles of *Understanding* the local situation, relationships and patterns of isolation, *Involving* people in creating a solution, and aiming to *Connect* people to one another to reduce isolation and create more connected communities.

(Parsfield, Morris, Bola et al, 2015)
What Is A ‘Community Researcher’?

Various terms – community researchers, peer researchers, co-researchers, lay researchers, citizen scientists....

Some definitions:

“Untrained members of a community that are recruited and trained to perform research activities in their own community.” (CLES, 2014)

“A layperson who does not typically have any prior formal research training and most likely has minimal knowledge of, or experience with, the research process.” (Mosavel et al., 2011)

“Individuals who have joined a community, online or in person, to work toward a common research objective; members of a pre-existing community.” (Eitzel et al., 2017, p14)
Being a Community Researcher: A Personal Account

Find the opportunity?  Why volunteer?

Uncertainties?  Experience?
Impact of Being a Community Researcher

Community Connections/Knowledge

before
after

Community Belonging

before
after

Personal Connections

before
after

Employability

before
after
Unique Experience

• Expert only on my own experience.

• Observation – Unique experiences.
Literature: Benefits

Few studies from this perspective, report Community Researchers:

- Feel empowered from being involved (Greene et al, 2009);
- Gain knowledge, skills, and capacity (Israel et al., 1998; Hale 2006);
- Increase self-esteem and self confidence (Newell & South, 2009);
- Gain insight into own circumstances (e.g. cancer) (Mosavel & Sanders, 2014);
- Have increased community awareness (Mosavel & Sanders, 2014);
- Building community connections (Warr et al, 2011).
Literature: Challenges

• Can heighten individual CR’s anxiety (Mosavel and Sanders, 2104);
• Problems of proximity: from neighbour/friend to researcher can be challenging (Green et al, 2009; Warr et al, 2011);
• Resources, status, power differentials and equitable roles between academics and CRs (Cottrell & Parpart, 2006);
• Privileging of ‘cultural- over technical’ can affect quality of data (Richardson, 2014);
• Higher cooperation and lower refusal rates but sample produced by CRs can overrepresent population groups (Rucinski et al., 2011);
• Competing agendas between academics and community members (Cottrell & Parpart, 2006).
Study of Community Researchers in Connected Communities Projects

- Mixed methods study exploring experiences, benefits & challenges.
- Data sources:
  - Online survey in 2018 (5 Connected Communities projects) – 40 out of 70 CR responded (57% response rate);
  - Qualitative interviews with eight Community Researchers (by a Community Researcher);
  - Focus groups with Community Researchers;
  - Community Researchers statements/testimonies.
- Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006).
Survey Findings

• 70% of CR were from or associated with area/group; 76% said this was important;
• Majority (69%) had no previous experience of doing research;
• 95% respondents would recommend being CR; 68% were ‘likely to volunteer again’;
• Most common reason for volunteering as CR was ‘the opportunity to contribute to my community’ (76% respondents);
• What they most enjoyed about being a CR:
  • ‘connecting with people in my community’ (46%)
  • ‘meeting new people’ (32%)
• What they found most challenging:
  • Getting respondents (42%), e.g. logistics, method, coping with refusals.
  • Asking personal questions (17%).
# Being from the Community: Pros & Cons

What qualitative data says about CR being from the community:

<table>
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<th>Some Pros</th>
<th>Some Cons</th>
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<td>Can relate to local people</td>
<td>Bias – CR already know what the answers will be</td>
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<td>Credibility – ‘better than bunch of anonymous suits’</td>
<td>Not open to surprise findings</td>
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<td>Approachable – reassuring when it’s a local person</td>
<td>Post-research encounters – might be awkward</td>
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<td>Invested in wanting to make a difference</td>
<td>Made little or no difference to success of project</td>
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<td>Better able to understand responses and local issues</td>
<td>Raised anxieties for some</td>
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Intrinsic Benefits

Survey results showed:

• 38% of CR had increased their skills;
• 26% reported increased self-confidence;
• 68% felt more connected to their community;
• 38% said they now value social connections more;
• 35% said as a result they were more trusting of people in the area;
• Two people said it had enhanced employability.
Evidence from qualitative data of gains in social skills, sense of achievement, self-worth, self-confidence, skills, knowledge of the community.

“The surveying was nerve wracking...but it helped me improve my confidence and I could put it on my CV...and I’ve applied for two jobs” (Case study, MH project)

“I have now done some official research which could prove useful later in life.” (Interview)

“Its made me more confident interacting with strangers...trying to get them to help me out with stuff and just, I guess made me more confident overall...” (Interview)
People Connecting in their Communities

New links made or existing connections were strengthened:

“it's good for the local community to see the local kids doing something ...good to break down barriers.” (Focus group)

“I knew some of the other CR before, by name, by sight. Um, but you know that might have been the extent of it...whereas now I have a proper conversation with them and you know consider them friends, which before they were more acquaintances. Sort of helped me to integrate more I guess into the community and get to know people better.” (Interview)
Connecting Communities

• Increased awareness of the community:

“Even only from interviewing 10 people it just gives me a picture of the area that’s more detailed than I had before.” (Interview)

“I understand more about the different organisations that are in the community.” (Interview)

• Feeling accepted and sense of belonging:

“As I’m new to the area and struggle to make friends, it has given me the possibility to meet people and form some fantastic friendships!”

(Case studies)
Connecting Communities

• Evidence of increased sense of belonging to local areas:

74% of local CR thought more positively about their community relationships:

“I now think more about my community and if anyone is lonely or having difficulties. As a result I feel I am a better neighbour”

“I appreciate more precisely the importance of social relationships in older age. Its made me more aware of the needs of my neighbours in the older old age bracket, as well as myself an older person!”
In Sum:

• Connected Communities provides a process that involves people in research in their community;

• It facilitates engagement - as individuals we can be challenged to find these opportunities in our communities;

• Has an individual impact on each Community Researcher;

• Evidence indicates it enhances ‘community capital’.
Your Contributions

Thank you for listening. Now some questions for you -

• Do these findings resonate with you?

• Any benefits and challenges that we’ve missed?

• Anything else you want to add about the value of working with Community Researchers?
References


Contact

Centre for Citizenship and Community website:

https://www.uclan.ac.uk/research/explore/groups/centre_for_citizenship_and_community.php

Email: CCCommunity@uclan.ac.uk