

Then and Now: Reflections on the Relevance of Community Research

When the Centre began in the early 1980's, "community research" was in its infancy. Neither the concept nor the practice was well known. In those early days, we often talked at the Centre about the need for research that would bridge theory and practices and be relevant to social change related to human services.

Many academic researchers and funders were clearly skeptical about community research twenty years ago. I remember academic colleagues expressing disbelief that I had left a tenured academic position for something as uncertain as a community research centre. Although not easy to embrace at the time, in retrospect it was precisely the ability to deal with uncertainty that made the Centre such an exciting place. The "certainty" that research should only be carried out in halls of academia simply was no longer relevant to the pressing issues that were facing human services.

The Centre has always had allies and relationships with people who find community research relevant. In the early years, there were two groups in particular that enabled community research at the Centre to have significant impacts. Some voluntary associations, such as the Canadian Mental Health Association and the Canadian Association for Community Living, found community research particularly relevant in an era of deinstitutionalization, when the voices of vulnerable citizens were aching to be heard. It is not surprising that some of the early Centre studies completed with some groups included stories that break your heart.

Leaders who work in innovative projects have also found community research very relevant. Traditional human services have come under a barrage of criticisms in the last fifteen years, which have spawned a large number of innovative approaches and projects. Community research, with its focus on participation and action, has been an excellent "fit" with these innovations. Community research has also significantly influenced and been influenced by the growth in program evaluation in North America. More and more, evaluation is guided by practices that have their roots in community research.

How things have changed in twenty years! Community research is now seen as highly relevant in much community work and human services, and is even embraced by many academics and research funding agencies. As with all social change, however, this change is not all for the good. As human beings, we know it is easy to pervert a good idea. There are now some dark clouds and shadows that could set back community research and make it less relevant in the future.

First, community research was born and works best when it is embedded in a strong set of values. Yet, there is a danger of community research becoming a new technology. Without values and principles that ground researchers and participants in community, relationships, and context, the technology will gradually lose its relevance. Second, I see community research projects struggling with how to engage community, a central tenant of this approach. Since there is little training for researchers in facilitation, there is a tendency for community engagement to be seen as a "should" rather than the heart and soul of the community research process. Finally, today's prevalent neo-conservative economic values have moved accountability to centre stage in evaluation research. As efficiency crowds out effectiveness, and as management crowds out leadership, community research could become a tool of the status quo.

The Centre has a long tradition of being grounded in values and principles. The Centre's contribution to community research has been significant. Whether in concept clarification, ways to engage citizens, the power of using consumer researchers, or methods that harmonize with innovation, the Centre approaches are highly relevant to community research and social change. I am also confident that the Centre will play a leadership role in addressing the clouds and shadows that now hang over this meaningful approach to research.

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