

Community Research Framework – Urbanising Research

Introduction

Institutional disconnect has led to subaltern counter-public spheres which have been sceptical of mainstream narratives. Brixton for example is a case in point as a conurbation of subaltern counter-public spheres largely due to the presence of a sizeable black community alongside global resistance identities which found fertile ground therein. This can be a challenge when building research among complex communities and forging insightful discourses with participants usually averse to speaking about their narratives. In this way research must not only be decolonised but also ‘urbanised’.

This ‘urbanisation’ of research allows for insights into the dark alleyways, murky backstreets and the grimy estates which contain many unheard voices and discourses. These are the locales for a myriad of societal issues regarded as super-output zones regarded as impenetrable by outside services. What is required are real-world insights into offstage neighbourhoods across the urban landscape, not normally understood in the mainstream. An approach which harnesses the cultural interface between academia and these communities with a framework around protocol, codes of conduct and newly-developed methodological approaches.

The research of Addae and Danquah (unpublished, 2018) revealed within these counter-public spheres counter-narratives develop. Hence, a framework in which communities can be part of at all research stages (data collection, analysis, recommendations etc.) along with ownership of this knowledge is sought-after. This is so communities can see tangible results of research in their locales via shared processes and frameworks based on co-production all phases.

The approach to be adopted for community research is not to reinforce distinctions between academia and communities, rather there should be an emphasis on the democratisation of knowledge wherein both community researchers and ‘professional researchers’ are both equals around the table wherein both contribute useful research, in the spirit of dialogue and thematic investigation as outlined by Freire (1970). People contribute ideas and analysis should be facilitated via community reflection, not a mere exercise in extracting knowledge from a community (Blakey and Kilburn, 2012: 115). Furthermore, it is also relevant that *local knowledge*, in the Geertzian sense, is also not disregarded outright or deemed as being ‘inferior’.

Research Weariness

Some communities also experience ‘research fatigue’ in that they have been over-researched. Afshar et al. (2008) found that a group of black women noted that they had been asked the same questions over and over again but rarely saw any feedback or outcomes of the research. Their research weariness led to reluctance to participate

in future research because of previous research experience and a perception of limited change emerging as a result of their participation in the research. Bermingham and Porter (2007: 118) discussed that communities have grown used to being the subject of research or regeneration activities which made little difference except to confirm the stigmatisation of deprivation. Bermingham and Porter identify the 'parachute model' of research wherein researchers have been,

dropped in from the outside, gathered their data and then disappeared, with no long-term change resulting for the community. This has led to a high degree of scepticism among local residents that acted as an immense barrier, at least in the beginning, to successful engagement between projects and communities.

Such scepticism can greatly hinder a researcher and thwart any chance of significant study and will result in communities questioning a researcher's background and motives. Aldridge, Medina and Ralphs (2008: 38) note that the suspicion they experienced, led to them calling upon local researchers to provide common ground with research subjects from the community. In this case, research participants were 'research-weary' and had perceived researchers as being "outsiders" almost solely hailing from white, middle class backgrounds (Aldridge et al., 2008: 40).

Patel (2016: 164) notes that researchers are sometimes viewed by communities as "further abusing black and minority ethnic populations for their own interests, for instance career development". This can even lead to junior and novice researchers employing shocking approaches merely to champion a theory, thesis or idea and garner notoriety in academia. Methods such as "going rogue" as a researcher, as in the case of Venkatesh (2009) for instance, infiltration of the target group, concealment of the purposes of participation etc.,

Sampling Strategy in Research-Weary and Hard to Reach Communities

The respondents in this research will be garnered based on local knowledge to ascertain what will constitute a rich sample. This means that the data collated will contain thorough insights into participants' trajectories and experiences. It can also provide a space for people to reflect on how they felt about things on both a personal and collective level. Rather than observing participants' behaviours in the world, this allows for researchers to be able to listen to what they thought about themselves and others in their communities, which addressed issues of *why* things happen as opposed to merely *how* they happen. Respondent-driven sampling can be used when it is difficult to conduct research due to high levels of misunderstandings, exaggerations and an atmosphere of distrust and suspicion (Cohen and Arieli, 2011: 425).

Cohen and Arieli note that suspicion and distrust towards researchers will affect their choice of research methods and methodological challenges can include **identifying the population of interest, mapping their subjective perceptions, understanding their needs, knowing their interests and gauging their concerns**. In fieldwork, challenges around mistrust, cynicism and weariness are present. Other noteworthy methodological issues that impact sampling and interview techniques are denied access, lack of openness due to mistrust, security issues, non-representativeness and bias.

A Fresh New Approach to Research in the Urban Landscape

The community research framework presented herein is well-positioned to access deeper nuances across the urban environment. While our researchers, due to their positionality and credibility in the communities, are able to tap into deep insights to inform research. “Professional researchers” can at times approach communities from dominant epistemological and methodological paradigms and apply established academic terms, conventions and standards to evaluate and dismiss alternative ones. This leads to **distrust of research processes in contexts where there is already cynicism and scepticism**.

Although it is important to build upon existing traditional research methods the framework is conducive to hard to reach complex communities and interpreting data founded on community responses. This is important as Lawrence (2015: 75) notes that if health and wellbeing are to achieve their desired goals then innovative interdisciplinary approaches need to be adopted rather than ‘business-as-usual’.¹

Communities need to play a role at every stage of research from data collection through to analysis and recommendations. In this way, **an equity-based co-learning environment** is developed wherein professional researchers, key stakeholders and community researchers all partake in the research process. This fosters a **democratisation of knowledge with co-ownership** of the research.

Power-sharing and collaborative knowledge building between both practitioners and communities needs to be facilitated. In this way, the research process brings **local knowledge** to the fore and removes any notions of a dominant external gaze. This approach also effectively mitigates against the tendency to merely ‘**extract**’ data from local communities as if they are reserves for knowledge to be taken at will and then used in contexts where the very communities neither benefit nor access. In the spirit of dialogue and thematic investigation all should contribute ideas and analysis should be facilitated via community reflection, rather than *extracting* data and knowledge from a community. **Local knowledge** should not be disregarded or deemed ‘inferior’.

An innovative and radical new approach is required however there must be a robust and rigorous framework in place prior, which is co-produced with the community. Given the sensitivities of the across the urban locale, it is imperative that a review of our frameworks is conducted before embarking on any sensitive research in BAME communities. It is therefore vital that prior to research strategy and design, a robust research framework will be required when working with complex communities. In the context of this current landscape therefore, a re-thinking of ethical considerations is also required.

An urban social brokerage approach needs to be adopted wherein potential participants are initially identified and engaged; then assessed risk (high, medium and low); then a focus on gaining consent and the actual interviews and then interpreted

¹ Lawrence, R.J. (2015). “Mind the Gap: Bridging the divide between knowledge, policy and practice.” in Hugh Barton, Susan Thompson, Sarah Burgess and Marcus Grant (eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of Planning for Health and Well-Being: Shaping a Sustainable and Healthy Future*. Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge. 74-84.

results utilising thematic analytical coding. Developing relationships and obtaining research in 'hard to reach' communities for empirical data can assist in producing exceptional contributions to knowledge.

Transparent, reciprocal and sustainable partnerships established through **trusting relationships** and **genuine co-ownership** of the research process and product. This **equitable collaboration** will mitigate against potential conflicts between community researchers and other stakeholders and facilitate appropriate research methods and the continuous dialogue throughout all stages of the research.

Framework

Theme	Explanation	How is this validated?
Co-ownership and Logical Continuum	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Communities are to be part of at all research stages in a logical continuum (data collection, analysis, recommendations etc.) along with ownership of this knowledge is sought-after. Co-producing recommendations; delivery and implementation. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Continuous dialogue throughout all stages of the research. Power is shared without the sense of an over-arching dominant outside eye. Communities see tangible results of research in their locales via shared processes and frameworks based on co-production all phases. The levelling up between community partners and professional academic researchers however has not always been welcome by traditional research. Dresser (2008: 234) asserts that academic researcher can become worried about threats to academic freedom and research integrity when community partnerships are involved. "Handing over control" of written products of research is viewed as 'restricting' academic freedom and the academic authority of the university
Reciprocity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Relationships and exchanges are mutual 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a reciprocal approach as we build confidence of consultants to be able to operate across the urban locale and also identify and engage people direct from the urban locale and build their capacity by assess skillsets, build positive rapport, professionalism and then are able to access and penetrate hard to reach communities. Avoiding extracting more than is required.
Equity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Paulo Friere in the <i>Pedagogy of the Oppressed</i> (1970) emphasised subjective experiences and community learning processes, a more dialogical approach allowing people a voice 'extraction models' of research, articulated by Gaudry (2011), which has 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The democratisation of knowledge for open discussion on research choices helps both communities and researchers develop pragmatic research designs Tangible outcomes are then fed back into communities; Potential conflicts between community researchers and other stakeholders are mitigated against via transparent co-learning environments and collaboration. Geertz (1983) discussed the importance of 'local knowledge' in research and localised frames of awareness. In this way, there is an

	<p>been popular in the UK over the years.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Such research processes lead to cynicism which can make engagement in future initiatives difficult. ▪ Some researchers have found that when conducting fieldwork research in volatile communities or environments questions may arise from interviewees or research subjects about what the research will do for them and if it will spur change (Aldridge et al., 2008: 38). ▪ Sanghera and Thapar-Björkert (2008) also revealed that black and minority ethnic communities are both suspicious and in fear of research due to prior researchers entering their domains with promises of change. These researchers then enter the field, obtain data and then leave without delivering on promises made at the outset. 	<p>emphasis on both research and community co-discovering new situated knowledge. Communities have a knowledge equity which communities are misinformed as to the value.</p>
Cultural Interface	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Communities within the urban locale come together with researchers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ developing relationships and obtaining research in 'hard to reach' communities for empirical data can assist in making exceptional contributions to knowledge.

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Relationships between very different worlds are formed as both academia and urban ecosystems learn from each other.
Inbetweener Approach	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> This approach notes that a researcher can place themselves inbetween and this is even more relevant in cross-cultural research. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Allows for the utilisation of both outsider and insider skills in conducting research. Milligan found that she was able to be viewed as a “knowledgeable outsider” if not as an inbetweener and thus gain trust and develop knowledge co-production.
Urban Social Brokerage	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Coupled with local knowledge of urban ecosystems enables a high level of credibility, authenticity and validity. There is Researchers having the requisite accessibility, positionality and credibility 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> These aspects are lost or diminished with the usage of secondary data or from research deemed to be conducted from the outside of the community under study. Access to social networks and well-positioned with communities which require deep penetration, trust, credibility so as to inform knowledge and understand nuances and community traditions. Researchers need to be well-acquainted with urban ecosystems. Certain nuances, emerging trends and cultural relevancies and dynamics are taken into a contextualised consideration and evaluated in relation to data collected; these esoteric aspects may be simply missed or underestimated through data collection by outside sources.
Urban Code of Conduct and ‘Guesthood’	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The ‘code of the streets’ (Anderson, 1999) formal rules which govern interpersonal rules in deprived communities. Researchers are ‘guests’ (Harvey, 2003: 142) who recognise that knowledge is gained in relationships and negotiation which requires an active presence and participation. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> If a researcher has not been adequately invited into a community, this can then present the researcher to risk as they have not used the adequate urban code of conduct Knowledge of code switching; adapting learned skilled across urban the local – brought into the methodological approach; Bespoke management of risks; street confidence and cross-cultural dexterity.

Respect and Cultural Competence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ respect of community ecology and its traditions and concerns. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ This must work in tandem with research integrity and ethics so as not to not compromise validity.
Reflection	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Reflection on the research is progressing, and to reflect on any emotions, challenges or issues which may arise during data collection. ▪ Continual self-reflexivity, for both community researcher and the research itself. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Reflective-practice can assist in this so that there is an atmosphere of trust and conflict resolution; and allows for community researchers to question, along with academic researchers, which knowledge paradigms to enhance. Self-reflection can lead to better strategic planning and that cultural, linguistic and experiential concordance can be applied (Muhammad et al., 2015). ▪ This provides a safe space for community researchers to reflect on their experiences and feelings in the research. Community researchers will navigate a multitude of layers and nuances in their data gathering which will require reflection on their own positions and identities. ▪ It also helps to develop a dual perspective where a researcher also understands her/his own culture and appreciates difference among others. This helps one recognise the influence of their own culture/s on perspectives and how cultural values are shaped, and how they could impact the research process. ▪ The community researcher can confront her/his own vulnerabilities, thoughts and emotions which transpired during the research. Community researchers need to consider both the ways in which participants view themselves in the field and how their positionality can contribute to relationships. An ethical community researcher should 'reflect in action,' with an awareness of oneself and the other, and the interplay between the two. A reflexive researcher moves beyond her/his own positionality to consider how issues may develop in relation to others engaged in the research enquiry.
Epistemic Disobedience	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Problematising the imposition of Western epistemologies and paradigms which often denigrate the urban black 'Afrikology' and traditions. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Adu-Gyamfi (2015) has therefore noted that Western universities cannot treat ethics as a 'one size fits all'. ▪ Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2009: 130) emphasise how there can often be a drive among university-based researchers to transform practitioner, and community, knowledge into "professional knowledge" via scientific methods. In this way, insider narratives

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Research ethics are firmly rooted in a particular Euro-Western tradition it is applied uncritically to all as a one-size fits all model. Aldridge et al (2008: 43) concluded that ethnicity and ethics go hand in hand Evoking street corner storytelling; indigenous storytelling 	<p>are to be placed in relation to those who stand outside those contexts.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Coram and others suggest that research needs to be 'decolonised' and that this presents a challenge especially when institutional guidelines have been set and research requires approval. This approach is also useful when conducting research with complex communities within the UK who have roots in other parts of the world. Chaurey (2020) notes that it is part of the duty of care of a researcher to understand her/his place in the systematic extraction of resources before entering the field, and that this positionality is important. Designing methods that speak to our realities with methods which are participative, interactive, emancipatory and ethical (Mignolo, 2009). Tapping into African-centric/indigenous approaches harking to notions of the 'village meeting' wherein ideas are shared Specific soft skills, although denigrated and downgraded by academia, are more effective for research in complex communities and within certain urban ecosystems than any other Eurocentric traditional instruments provided by mainstream academia.
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Problematic Research Practice in the Urban Locale Often Involves:

- A lack of adequate community consultation
- Cultural incapacity wherein there is an absence of both the cultural competence to decipher urban code-switching and Ebonics, and the cross-cultural dexterity to build rapport.
- Parachute models of research, where researchers and academics may merely take from communities without imparting any stake in the research process to communities
- Extraction research – where researchers and academics take as much data from hard-to-reach communities for their own academic interests and there is no input or
- Exploitative research wherein the full details are not conveyed and

