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# HISTORY AND METHODS OF COMMUNITY RESEARCH:

A literature review



I'M NOT ANOTHER  
BRICK IN THE WALL

# Foreword Gabrielle Allen:

## Portfolio Manager at Impact on Urban Health

At Impact on Urban Health, we believe the voices and experiences of people in our place should be heard during the design and delivery of health research and interventions.

Too often health research has negative consequences. If not done well, research can cause mistrust or scepticism in the communities that the research intends to benefit. There is also a danger that health research only benefits a small section of a community and fails to reach the people who would benefit the most. Currently, health research often excludes voices and experiences that are critical to understanding the way people's experiences of their environment – experiences which often include systemic injustices – are affecting their health. For health to be equitable, this needs to change.

This literature review explores the approaches to research that have worked before and how we can implement best practice in the way we do research to make sure that health outcomes are equitable.



**Gabrielle Allen**

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# About the authors

Daniel Morris, Betty Efemini (BA) and Ricky Aboggye (BA) were involved in providing vital insight into current community research models, the community ecology of Lambeth and steering the literature review in a collaborative, co-learning environment.

Paul Addae (BA, MA) is a graduate of The School of Oriental and African Studies. He has conducted research over the last 15 years in some of the most challenging and volatile environments. He has co-produced research with professors from Georgetown University, Exeter University and St Andrews University. He has also worked on EU projects around effective solutions to some social phenomena. Paul is also a fluent classical Arabic speaker and has translated many works into English.

Shaun Danquah (BA, MA) is the founder and Director of Innovation at Centric. He has 15 years' experience in conducting research across hostile environments. This began in 2004 with his involvement in founding the Clapham Park Project, which was part of a £56 million regeneration scheme. He also worked on government programmes and on Los Angeles gang intervention initiatives, delivering workshops on best practice. His work led him to partner with Google, Ideo and YouTube. As a result of his work, he has successfully established networks across various underserved communities.

Paul and Shaun have worked jointly over the last 15 years on different research assignments in the US and UK.



**Daniel Morris**



**Betty Efemini**



**Ricky Aboggye**



**Paul Addae**



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# Introduction and context



The notion of 'community' in 2020 is in flux as emotional bonds to a locale are no longer as pronounced as they were 30 or 40 years ago. Whereas in the past, people might have identified very strongly as belonging to a defined locality, presently people may find that they have more of a stake in a digital archipelago inhabited by a virtual sub-cultural community, via SnapChat, Twitter, Instagram, internet forums, or YouTube Channels. People today may also bond around where they work, shop or spend their leisure time.

Minar and Scott (1969) regarded community as being in "communion with those around us", while Poplin (1972) defined community as a unique construct wherein all of a person's needs can be met, yet the geographical trait to community which Poplin postulated characterised 'community' is a trait which may be problematised in a modern context. Bellah et al. (1991) also questioned the strict territorial notion of community and regarded 'community' as a group of socially interdependent people who participate together in discussion and decision-making and share certain practices, assuming a moral dimension.

Towns which heavily identified as mining towns no longer have strong attachments to the sector in the wake of deindustrialisation, and as a result may identify with broader growing national or ethnic identifiers. This can even be seen in

football where past rivalries are no longer as prevalent; in a globalised world with changing notions of community, past identities and nostalgia around geographical demarcations may not be as pertinent. In 2007, Demos suggested that the term 'community' itself may no longer be sustainable and is a loaded term inapplicable to a modern society where people identify with a range of issues. Demos (2007) also explored how those involved in planning can obtain more impactful outcomes via community engagement.

In the *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970), Paulo Friere emphasised subjective experiences and community learning processes as more dialogical approaches which allowed people a voice, while Geertz (1983) discussed the importance of 'local knowledge' in research and localised frames of awareness. In this way, there is an emphasis on both research and community co-discovering situated knowledge. Communities have a knowledge equity, of which they might not recognise the value. Hence, a framework in which communities can be part of research at all 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 through all phases.

What has been witnessed of late, however, over the last 15 years, is that researchers have been jettisoned into communities to conduct research based on what Gaudry (2011) coins an 'extraction model of research'. This is the process by which localised knowledge is removed from communities without following protocol or establishing a primary commitment to the communities 'being researched'. In the extraction model of research, communities rarely participate in the development of research questions, nor are they entitled to determine the validity of research findings (Corntassel and Gaudry, 2014).

Community research often takes place among minority and disadvantaged communities due to the importance of addressing disparities, largely related to health (disparities which in the current context have been particularly evident with the COVID-19 crisis). In health research there is actually an ethical requirement for the research to be responsive to the health needs and concerns of the community in which the research is being conducted. For this reason, there is greater use in working with community members as research workers often in order to improve participant recruitment and follow-up (Israel, 2015: 180).

Thus, health research should have "local social value" by virtue of asking scientific questions that address important problems for communities participating in the research (Danis et al., 2012: 30). Blumenthal et al. (2013: 6) discussed that in public health the community is less likely to be viewed as a population that must be "sanitised" or "immunised", and more likely to be characterised as a partner and participant in promoting its own health. This trend was emphasised after the Tuskegee Syphilis Study and the Willowbrook State School incident in the 1930s, where 400 syphilitic, and 200 non-syphilitic poor and illiterate black males were deliberately infected over a forty year period, after being told they were to be treated for 'bad blood' and would receive health incentives (Jones, 2008: 86). The men who had the disease were neither informed nor treated. 128 men died directly from the disease or associated complications, 40 infected their wives and 19 of the men fathered children with the disease. This study ended in November 1972 and is an example of the 'cultural destructiveness' (Blumenthal et al., 2013), which can impact some research models.

In some cases, community research is conducted

ethically and with good results for all involved. For instance, Jejeebhoy et al. (2003: 140, 148) noted in their research into female reproductive tract infections and gynaecological morbidity that there should be a high level of interaction between investigators and the communities studied and rapport-building should be maximised.

They noted that this requires prolonged action, and that projects in Egypt and India worked well, as the field workers maintained not only a strong rapport with the study participants from local communities, but assisted participants in attending the project clinic and distributing medication. Khattab notes (2003) that in this way, mutual trust was developed, and community-based action was initiated within the study community, as women believed they had a meaningful stake in the process and were active participants in the project. There was no sense that they were being manipulated for research purposes.

The research teams arranged to provide treatment for all diagnosed morbidities amongst participating women, and as this was conducted in the early stages of the research participants were reassured about the outcomes of the research.



"In the extraction model of research, communities rarely participate in the development of research questions, nor are they entitled to determine the validity of research findings."



# Community-based research models

Community-based participatory research (CBPR) has become more prevalent recently and is used to tackle issues which are relevant to people that belong to a community of place, identity or interest. These people can be local residents, community activists, members of community groups, staff at local NGOs, service providers etc. The 'participatory' aspect infers that there is a level of involvement from different community stakeholders when it comes to research design, method and implementation. This involvement can even be referred to as 'deep participation', wherein ownership lies with the community rather than outside researchers. Such 'deep participation' may offset issues encountered by questions about what the research will do for communities involved.

Community research (CR) is a more collaborative approach and can be led by both academics and community members, as both knowledges are valued without prioritising either (Blakey et al., 2012: 115). However, CR is unlike CBPR, in that it can demonstrate a disparity of power between professional and community researchers, as professional researchers have an aim to produce an efficient project. Goodson and Phillimore (2012) hold that community research provides an answer to academics rarely coming down from the ivory tower to get their hands dirty in the field.

Peer research involves engaging people from a group being studied (i.e. substance misusers, refugees etc.) as researchers alongside professional researchers to investigate their own situation (Laws et al., 2003: 55). Boyd (2014: 501) has highlighted the importance of defining terms when it comes to discussing the principles and skills of community research. Boyd posits that CBPR, action research (AR), collaborative research, participatory action research (PAR, synergistic research, co-inquiry etc.) all apply to the same thing. Breda (2015: 10) stated that one of the goals of PAR is for the research to be of use to the people participating, as they are holders of local knowledge.

While Coughlin et al. (2017: 18, 58, 84) suggest that CBPR is linked to AR, PAR and PLA, all of which



attempt to empower communities to identify their own problems and devise their own solutions, they stress that CBPR and related approaches to community-engaged research occur across a continuum. PAR reflects a commitment to building capacity and doing research that is useful to the community (Cahill, 2013: 196), especially in light of communities of colour who have traditionally not benefitted from the results of research conducted or interventions planned. In this way, PAR is a response to exploitative research practices wherein communities are used as mere 'laboratories' for external policy-makers, planners and researchers.

Citizen science (see Cavalier et al., 2020; Hecker et al., 2018; Wynn, 2017; Cooper, 2018; Cavalier and Kennedy, 2016), as articulated by Irwin (1995), emphasised 'scientific citizenship', wherein science and associated policies are opened up to the public so that science can be responsive to the concerns of citizens, and citizens themselves can contribute to producing reliable scientific knowledge. There is a core difference, however, between citizen science and community research models, in that citizen science is not focused on particular communities under study, but rather that all citizens can feed into areas of research which may be of interest to them. Curtis (2018) has looked at how citizen science has increased with the rise of the internet in recent years.

# Existing community research programmes

There are several projects run by both large-scale research institutions, like universities, as well as grassroots organisations across the UK, that work with or employ citizen scientists, peer or community researchers, research champions and others. These include:

RESEARCH INSTITUTES	
<b>Institute of Global Prosperity at University College London</b>	IGP works with citizen scientists to find out what prosperity means to East London communities and to measure levels of prosperity. <sup>1</sup>
<b>Institute of Psychiatry, Psychology and Neuroscience at King's College London</b>	IoPPN's Research Champions engage with local communities in London around mental wellbeing, mental health research and public engagement activities. <sup>2</sup>
<b>Institute for Research into Superdiversity at University of Birmingham</b>	Their Community Practitioners Research Programme works with Community Practitioners to encourage collaboration between academics and community practitioners (like social workers and others). <sup>3</sup>
<b>Institute for Community Studies at the Young Foundation</b>	The ICS works with its Peer Researchers to set peer research standards, share learning of what works and collect evidence of the impact and effectiveness of peer research as a valuable research methodology.

LOCAL AUTHORITIES	
<b>Camden Council</b>	Camden Council trains and employs local Community Researchers to do research, engagement and consultation for Camden Council and other clients. <sup>4</sup>

## DELIVERY ORGANISATIONS

<b>Groundswell</b>	Groundswell is an organisation that supports people who have experienced homelessness. They work with Peer Researchers, who have experienced the issues they are working to address, to inform their own services as well as the work of others, and to provide practical recommendations and plans for action to ensure their research leads to change. <sup>5</sup>
<b>You Press</b>	You Press is a social enterprise that works with young people (between 16-30 years old) and underrepresented communities to find their voice through creative arts, media, training and writing. They work with young community researchers from BAME backgrounds to gain insight into how their communities are affected by serious youth violence in their local area. <sup>6</sup>
<b>Diversity Living Services</b>	Diversity Living Services aims to promote equality & diversity by supporting BAME communities in accessing services and opportunities through advice, training, advocacy, participation and engagement with mainstream services. Their community research project explores effective ways of combating youth violence in the London Borough of Enfield, focusing on parent solutions. <sup>7</sup>
<b>Salmon Youth Centre</b>	Salmon Youth Centre works with 500 young people between the ages of 6 and 25 every week. They are conducting community research to gather insights into the attitudes of disadvantaged young people in Southwark towards the police. <sup>8</sup>
<b>Hopscotch Asian Women's Centre</b>	Hopscotch supports Asian women and their families, raises their awareness of important issues, enhancing opportunity and influencing mainstream policy and practice. Their Community Views project works with 15 Sylheti and Somali speaking Community Researchers to gain feedback on crime and safety in Euston, primarily from the Bangladeshi and Somali communities, during the construction of HS2. <sup>9</sup>
<b>Sistah Space</b>	Sistah Space works with African heritage women and girls who have experienced domestic or sexual abuse and those who have lost a loved one to domestic violence. They are conducting participatory action research with women of African and Caribbean heritage affected by or living with domestic violence in London with a focus on the Rastafarian community. <sup>10</sup>
<b>The Traveller Movement</b>	The Traveller Movement advocates for the human rights for ethnic minority Gypsy Roma and Traveller people. They are working with Community Researchers to gain insight into the barriers to educational attainment for Gypsy, Roma and Traveller young people in the Greater London area. <sup>11</sup>
<b>BlackOut UK</b>	BlackOut UK is a not-for-profit social enterprise run and owned by a volunteer collective of black gay men. Enabling 12 researchers who identify as Black queer men to work together on researching other Black queer men, resulting in the creation of a resource which benefits their peers. <sup>12</sup>

## DELIVERY ORGANISATIONS

<b>Royal Association of Deaf People</b>	The RADP is supporting 6-10 Deaf volunteers to become Volunteer Researchers so they can hold events at Deaf Clubs and other community venues across London and record people's experiences. <sup>13</sup>
<b>Advance Academy</b>	Advance Academy provides emotional and practical support, including crisis intervention, to women in London. They also advocate for women who are survivors of domestic abuse or trapped in the criminal justice system. Through harnessing the voices of a subset of Advance's Minerva project service users, their community research project will provide insight into the experiences of young female offenders aged 15-24 and their barriers to accessing health services. <sup>14</sup>
<b>Refugees in Effective and Active Partnership</b>	REAP is training up Community Researchers to give a voice to refugees and asylum-seekers who do not speak English so they can speak on their experiences and others can hear them. <sup>15</sup>
<b>Young Europeans at 3million</b>	Young Europeans is a not-for-profit group acting as the under-30s wing of the 3million that focuses on hearing and representing the views and concerns of young European citizens living in the UK. Their Community Researchers assess the impact of Brexit on European Londoners – looking at the impact on college students, lower paid workers, young Europeans with caring responsibilities. <sup>16</sup>

There are also a number of large-scale health research projects that have utilised the community research model. These include innovative projects like the Wellcome-funded Night Club<sup>17</sup>, which brings shift workers together with sleep researchers to improve people's experience of working at night; the Nesta-supported Lambeth Living Well Collaborative<sup>18</sup>, which brings together multiple groups of people to radically improve mental health provision in the borough; Cloudy with a Chance of Pain<sup>19</sup>, which worked with 13,000 members of the public who experience chronic pain to understand how the weather affects their pain; as well as Cancer Research UK's Cell Slider and Trailblazer<sup>20</sup> initiatives, which trained the public to spot clinically relevant features of breast cancer cells in 180,000 images. All creatively integrate public engagement into the very fabric of their models. This kind of work feeds into broader democratic and participatory models of research and services that help address power imbalances between patients, healthcare professionals and health institutions.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>1</sup> [www.static1.squarespace.com/static/5a0c05169f07f51c64a336a2/t/5d03c62b56b1ce0001bf6266/1560528440423/LPI\\_Report\\_single\\_140619\\_update.pdf](http://www.static1.squarespace.com/static/5a0c05169f07f51c64a336a2/t/5d03c62b56b1ce0001bf6266/1560528440423/LPI_Report_single_140619_update.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> [www.kcl.ac.uk/archive/news/ioppn/engagement/ioppn-london-champions](http://www.kcl.ac.uk/archive/news/ioppn/engagement/ioppn-london-champions)

<sup>3</sup> [www.birmingham.ac.uk/research/superdiversity-institute/practitioner\\_research\\_programme/index.aspx](http://www.birmingham.ac.uk/research/superdiversity-institute/practitioner_research_programme/index.aspx)

<sup>4</sup> [www.camden.gov.uk/community-researchers](http://www.camden.gov.uk/community-researchers)

<sup>5</sup> [www.groundswell.org.uk/our-approach-to-research/](http://www.groundswell.org.uk/our-approach-to-research/)

<sup>6</sup> [www.youpress.org.uk/roots-ldn/](http://www.youpress.org.uk/roots-ldn/)

<sup>7</sup> [www.diversityliving.org/young-people/](http://www.diversityliving.org/young-people/)

<sup>8</sup> [www.salmonyouthcentre.org/our-work/](http://www.salmonyouthcentre.org/our-work/)

<sup>9</sup> [www.hopscotchuk.org/](http://www.hopscotchuk.org/)

<sup>10</sup> [www.sistahspace.org/about-us](http://www.sistahspace.org/about-us)

<sup>11</sup> [www.travellermovement.org.uk/about-us/](http://www.travellermovement.org.uk/about-us/)

<sup>12</sup> [www.blkoutuk.com/about/](http://www.blkoutuk.com/about/)

<sup>13</sup> [www.royaldeaf.org.uk/volunteer-researcher/](http://www.royaldeaf.org.uk/volunteer-researcher/)

<sup>14</sup> [www.advancecharity.org.uk/who-we-are/](http://www.advancecharity.org.uk/who-we-are/)

<sup>15</sup> [www.reap.org.uk](http://www.reap.org.uk)

<sup>16</sup> [www.the3million.org.uk/young-europeans](http://www.the3million.org.uk/young-europeans)

<sup>17</sup> [www.night-club.org](http://www.night-club.org)

<sup>18</sup> [www.lambethcollaborative.org.uk/co-production](http://www.lambethcollaborative.org.uk/co-production)

<sup>19</sup> [www.cloudywithachanceofpain.com](http://www.cloudywithachanceofpain.com)

<sup>20</sup> [www.scienceblog.cancerresearchuk.org/2015/10/01/citizen-scientists-can-spot-cancer-cells-like-pathologists-so-what-happens-next/](http://www.scienceblog.cancerresearchuk.org/2015/10/01/citizen-scientists-can-spot-cancer-cells-like-pathologists-so-what-happens-next/)

<sup>21</sup> [www.bmj.com/content/bmj/363/bmj.k5147.full.pdf](http://www.bmj.com/content/bmj/363/bmj.k5147.full.pdf)

# Support for community researchers



Bell et al. (2012: 96) note that community researchers may lack training and confidence, and thus require training in both data gathering and analysis. Morse and Field (1996: 64) opine that novice researchers may need to collect more data at the beginning of a research study as they get to grips with how to conduct observations and interviews. This is due to the lack of standardisation in data collection which can occur when new researchers find their way in the project. As a result, community researchers can benefit from more experienced researchers' knowledge of how to standardise data collection.

Morse and Field also highlight the fact that some younger researchers may not adequately transcribe or analyse interviews, due to being busy trying to conduct insightful interviews. Therefore, it is important for community researchers, when starting out, to be aware of the interaction between data collection with data analysis when embarking on a research study. Even while conducting interviews, researchers in a community setting need to be aware of issues like informed consent, as well as nuances within an interview. For instance, there may be

instances where a participant/interviewee implicitly withdraws consent when they state "well, between you and me..." and they need to confirm whether or not include this in the research. On other occasions, a participant may withdraw participation completely. Researchers need to be aware of these nuances and be well-prepared prior to collecting data. Research training sessions and reflective practice will help community researchers grapple with the ethical challenges and issues which can arise in the field.

"Even while conducting interviews, researchers in a community setting need to be aware of issues like informed consent, as well as nuances within an interview."

# Culture, community and research ownership



It has been highlighted that some communities may feel that research is needed, and findings could be useful; in this context, positive attitudes towards research are likely when there is the understanding that community problems will be addressed. Emanuel et al. (2004) articulated an ethical requirement for community collaboration in health research and that such a partnership can protect against exploitation. They also discussed how communities should receive benefits from any research conducted, as well as be informed of the results. Kirby et al. (2006: 138) emphasise that collaborative researchers should be mindful of democratising the research process, and participants should be involved in activities such as defining the research question, communicating the results and designing the agenda for action.

Buchanan and Allegrante (2008: 89) note that researchers have an obligation to respect the community's right to decide the research goals affecting them. However, due to health inequalities, there is distrust in communities. Rhodes et al. (2013: 167) emphasised that supplemental

community perspectives must be garnered to gain feedback before moving on with further development of research.

Barrett et al. (2016: 294) reveal that some researchers advocate granting access to their raw data via a data repository before the data is analysed. This increases reciprocity, transparency and personal choice, and equalises the relationship between those who provide the data and those who analyse it. They regard this as being slightly utopian, but that further discussion is required about sharing data and other challenges to the integrity of research produced.

The involvement of communities at every stage of research is also apparent in the literature. Brown et al. (2020) have suggested that co-writing with communities can open up opportunities to speak differently outside the constraining spaces of academia. De Weger et al. (2018) looked at the barriers and enablers for community engagement in the planning, designing, governing and/or delivery of health and care services.

Tom-Orme (1991) noted three decades ago that researchers are seen to just “come and go”, as they do not have a commitment to the community to see their findings and results implemented. Aldridge et al. (2008: 38) utilised local researchers to provide that common ground with research subjects from the community, and they concluded that ethnicity and ethics go hand-in-hand in research. At first, Aldridge et al. had faced criticism for not involving the local community in defining research objectives, or involving them with data collection, though they were praised for utilising the researchers from the actual neighbourhood.

Communities should be involved in research process throughout not merely for data collection purposes and those early initial research stages, but also in research analysis and outcomes. There should be an action-orientated research process where tangible outcomes are then fed back into communities. Blakey et al. (2012: 115) suggest people within communities where research is being undertaken should contribute ideas, and that this can be facilitated via community analysis, rather than a mere exercise in extracting information from the community.

Matthews et al. (2017: 48) posit that evaluation for community research should be ‘utilisation focused’, serving the community involved, helping them make good decisions and maximising their activities. They note that there are practical reasons why evaluation is a useful tool for community co-produced research (2017: 47).

As a result of these dynamics, Blumenthal et al. (2013: 11) refer to the importance of culture when conducting research with communities. They identify ‘cultural incapacity’, wherein there is an inability on the part of external researchers to work effectively with diverse groups and underlying racial assumptions from a position of dominance. To alleviate this, Blumenthal et al. suggest ‘cultural pre-competence’, where there is an initial recognition of weakness and an attempt to improve practice and increase knowledge. This should then culminate in ‘cultural competency’ as a goal to be achieved when conducting research within communities. Cultural competency acknowledges culture and its importance for researchers in order to communicate and interact with persons who are part of the community’s culture. It begins with understanding the concepts

of culture, values, beliefs and ethnicity, and this is even more relevant when studying health inequalities and disparities.

The levelling up between community partners and professional academic researchers, however, has not always been welcomed by traditional research. Dresser (2008: 234) asserts that academic researchers can become worried about threats to academic freedom and research integrity when community partnerships are involved. As a result, any agreement seen to ‘hand over control’ of written products of research could open up, to an academic researcher’s mind, a restriction on academic freedom and the academic authority of the university. This is a key obstacle to community research.

Traditional research often focuses on positivism, which is an epistemological perspective that entails the natural-scientific canons of reductionism, experimentation, explanation, quantification and objectivity. As a result, community researchers not familiar with communities they study lack an understanding of ethno-cultural diversity and its implications for research. As a result, the needs and concerns of many ethnic communities are not met (Sasao, 1998: 188).

Collaborative community research has also been considered by traditional researchers to involve the potential for poor generalisations, role conflict, investigator bias and a lack of research funding (Rains, 2006: 92). There have also been issues raised with the complexities of blending two forms of inquiry, each with their own perspectives and priorities.

Maintaining ethical standards and scientific rigour within community research has also long been a concern. Buchanan and Allegrante (2008: 91) highlight that community research can sometimes be marginalised, as it is perceived as ‘inferior’ in terms of scientific standards and research design. Muhammad et al. (2015) opine that researchers of colour are often marginalised, as ethics committees have been led to believe that their cultural knowledge is not valuable. Other commentators have suggested that to promote community research approaches, questions of methodology, ethics and rigour have been glossed over. The following section explores some of these contentions in more detail.

# Community research under the spotlight

Salway et al. (2015) present what is perhaps the most scathing and critical assessment of community research and the notion of the 'insider community researcher' from a community under study. Salway et al. highlight four areas which they frame as downsides, or areas of caution, of insider community research and its validity:

1. That it cannot be assumed that a community researcher can access more information than a professional researcher.
2. That there is often an assumption of 'community researcher credibility' which can lead to the findings of community researchers going unchallenged and unscrutinised.
3. That in the modern era there are more complex notions of identity with shifting intersections, and as a result it should not be assumed that a community researcher coming from the same ethnicity as the community in question is enough to yield instant rapport between the community researcher and the community where the research is being undertaken.
4. As per Hammersley (2003), research should be focused on 'generating knowledge' and not necessarily having a direct impact on policy or to leading to changes in practice.

There are some points to note about Salway et al.'s concerns and how they can be both mitigated and overcome. First, Salway et al. reinforce the dichotomy between a 'community researcher' and what they describe as a 'professional researcher', with no consideration as to how the two can complement each other in a collaborative co-learning context. Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2009: 130) note that some researchers imply that community and practitioner knowledge is 'low status' and trivial, and such assumptions merely serve to keep community researchers and practitioners "in their place".

So-called 'professional researchers' can sometimes approach communities from dominant epistemological

and methodological paradigms and use established academic terms, conventions and standards to evaluate and dismiss alternative ones. Chambers (2009: 137) noted that outside 'professionals' lecture local communities from a position of dominance, and the researcher's reality overrides that of local people; in this case, the researcher's own beliefs, behaviour and attitudes are self-validated. Temple and Steele (2004) questioned the parachuting in of outside-researchers with their own measurement tools and objectives. They noted that this is antagonistic, hampers future research and can lead to questions about the validity of the research.

Moreover, such a method would be wholly inappropriate when conducting research related to key public policy issues related to health and how this impacts specific communities, where longer-term co-production should be forged democratically. Goodson and Phillimore (2012) therefore discuss how an 'ivory tower' approach is often adopted by researchers.

The trend with current community research is not to reinforce distinctions in such a way, as there should instead be an emphasis on the democratisation of knowledge wherein both community researchers and 'professional researchers' are equals around the table, as both contribute useful research in the spirit of dialogue and thematic investigation (as outlined by Freire (1970)). People should contribute ideas and analysis should be facilitated via community reflection as opposed to 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 'inferior'. Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2009: 131) build upon the Geertzian notion to formulate a "local knowledge of practice" which describes the knowledge practitioners generate through inquiry. In doing so, they note a break with the formal / practical knowledge distinction to facilitate collaborative knowledge building between both practitioners and communities.

Secondly, Salway et al.'s point on the assumed credibility of certain community actors is interesting,



and similar to Goudy and Potter's (1975) argument that researchers can sometimes have 'over-rapport', where, due to building rapport, data collected is incomplete, ambiguous or superficial. There can sometimes be naïve assumptions about the credibility of community researchers, but in a collaborative academic project, open reflective practice should mitigate against such assumptions. Their point alludes to the notion of 'tokenism' and community actors who merely serve as token symbols. However, if there was no scrutiny of community researchers' analysis, this would indicate a flaw in the approach. Furthermore, if research is not being scrutinised in such a context then the onus would also be on the 'professional researchers' to identify that and implement rigorous ethical research criteria to ensure this does not occur. It would therefore be particularly important for research collaboration to take place, with individuals who have prior skills in research and community cultural equity. In this case, community researchers would not merely be selected on the basis of assumed street cred 'on road', but will also have a level of prior academic experience and could effectively partake in reflective practice and be able to adequately assist newer, less experience community researchers. Peer review is one option which could therefore be utilised.

Thirdly, while it is true that identities can be in flux and often be complex, it would be quite tenuous to suggest that this would impact community research in the manner which Salway et al describe. Spalek (2008: 73) also argues that the 'insider/ outsider' dichotomy is culturally produced, as researchers are likely to be both. The blurred lines and intersectionality which community researchers inhabit has provoked questions about modern ethical research practice, the role of 'insiders', 'outsiders' and empirical rigour. Mooney-Somers and Olsen (2018) have also discussed that the ethical implications of deploying community researchers have largely been ignored by research ethics scholarship generally, and ethical review processes specifically. They argue that ethics review committees ask researchers to address risks for participants and the research team, but rarely ask about risks to community researchers who are neither participants nor simply researchers.

Despite occupying a specific space and role in research projects, Mooney-Somers and Olsen opine that the use of community researchers is rarely made explicit in procedural ethics reviews. Their invisibility means that there are unique ethical issues they face as both researchers and members of the 'affected

population', as cultural mediators and research collaborators. Yet they are neither adequately recognised nor addressed in procedural ethics.

Milligan (2016) therefore suggests that the 'insider/ outsider' dichotomy can be remedied by an 'inbetweener' approach. This approach notes that a researcher can place themselves in between, and this is even more relevant in cross-cultural research. Milligan found that she was able to be viewed as a "knowledgeable outsider", if not as an inbetweener, thus gaining trust and developing knowledge co-production. Salway et al., however, reinforce an unequal power dynamic where the community researchers are "not professional" and therefore to be scrutinised and problematised further.

Finally, as for research merely existing to "generate knowledge", as per Hammersley (2003), where it fails to influence policy or tangible improvements in practice, then this is the archetypal extraction model of research articulated by Gaudry (2011). A similar argument was put forward by Light and Kleiber (1981), who argued that for objectivity to be maintained in research, there should be some distancing between the researcher and the community being studied. Evoking Hammersley in the context of community research is particularly troublesome, in that Hammersley framed research and practice as being in conflict, and that at times, the priorities of one have to be given over the other. Robinson (2014: 347) has discussed how Hammersley's notion seeks to set up a clear distinction between academic research on the one hand, and practice on the other. 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 are placed in relation to those who stand outside those contexts.

"We academically underpin our Community Researcher's accessibility and credibility to unearth the hidden nuances traditional research overlooks"

**Paul Addae**

# Ethical solutions for community research

In exploring how research ethics can be negotiated with communities being researched, Kara (2018) has outlined “a holistic, egalitarian ethical approach which recognises research as a key element of community building and social change” amongst communities:

- A communality of knowledge
- Reciprocity
- Benefit sharing

The need to balance rigorous scientific and academic evidence with the needs and interests of a community, brought to the fore by access to local knowledge, has been articulated well by Buchanan and Allegrante (2008). They note the importance of striking a fine balance between the two aspects in a way which is appropriate and highlights equity. In order to mitigate against these ethical considerations for community researchers, the following measures may be useful:

- Risks identified and protections put in place (Dickert and Sugarman, 2005).
- Consent forms or participant information sheets can include details of therapy, community support, counselling, health services, legal support service etc. to deal with any issues which may arise during data collection (Mooney-Somers and Olsen, 2018).
- Continual self-reflexivity, for both community researcher and the research itself. 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.

- Reflective practice can help build an atmosphere of trust and conflict resolution. It also allows for community researchers to question, along with academic researchers, which knowledge paradigms to enhance. Self-reflection can lead to better strategic planning where cultural, linguistic and experiential concordance can be applied (Muhammad et al., 2015).
- Ensuring expectations of community participants are managed by community researchers from the outset, as it may not be totally confirmed that the research will yield immediate, tangible change in practice. Although the research will feed into insight, community researchers, depending on remit, may be unable to directly give definite guarantees as to when that will manifest. However, agencies undertaking research during a public health crisis should ensure future benefits, as there is a strong ethical imperative for public health officials to conduct research that could yield data useful in preventing future illness.
- Dealing with ethical concerns not from a distant, dominant position, but instead with increased transparency of the interests and expectations of the research (Kirpitchenko and Voloder, 2014).
- Building relationships based on rapport, trust and respect of different views of others.

# Recommendations

Recommendations for developing an effective framework for conducting community research are as follows:

- The formation of **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.
- A sound balance between **scientific rigour based on sound research ethics** and **knowledge of community ecology**, so the two areas of knowledge merge.
- An **equity-based, collaborative, co-learning environment** to support partnership sustainability and promote co-ownership of research. This will both depart from the 'extraction' model of research and also enhance the **democratisation of knowledge** for open discussion on research choices and will help both communities and researchers develop pragmatic research designs. The two work in tandem as equals in a co-learning, power-sharing, complementary process.
- **Cultural competence** and respect of community ecology and its traditions and concerns. This must work in tandem with research integrity and ethics so as not to not compromise validity.
- Creative thinking and review of data collection at different stages in order to allow everyone to **share experiences** while meeting the needs of the research.
- **Reflective practice** where researchers meet to discuss how the research is progressing, and to reflect on any emotions, challenges or issues which may arise during data collection. 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.
- Community researchers 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.
- Open discussion at the beginning of the process about the needs of funders and how that will influence both **local social value and research methods**. This will aid both community and professional researchers to develop a pragmatic research design to meet the needs of all involved and help manage expectations around research outcomes.
- Emphasis on community researchers having an **'inbetweener' approach**, allowing them to utilise both outsider and insider skills in conducting research.
- To aid in training and development, community researchers should have **regular training updates**. They will also need to see examples of both good and bad interview techniques. Role-play and practice can facilitate this, as does constructive feedback and hearing experienced interviewers or focus group facilitators. This will support community researchers to respond to different scenarios during research and data collection.
- Teams should also become **reflexive**, openly discussing different scenarios and deciding on ethical responses. Working in a team provides the basis for community researchers to learn about and practice integrity. It also aids in monitoring and maintaining a good quality research standard throughout a project.
- A recognition that not all researchers can do everything, so roles should be assigned based on relevant skills and experience. Not everyone needs to be involved at every stage of research and data gathering, but **specific expertise** should be utilised in relevant contexts. There should be an acknowledgement of collective levels of expertise amongst both community and academic partners.

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