

Session: Community-University Research Partnerships

Panel: Researching Anti-Poverty Community Organizing: Methodological Considerations In Understanding Collective Learning For Social Change

**A COMMUNITY-UNIVERSITY RESEARCH PARTNERSHIP IN ACTION:
EXAMINING COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION IN THE ANTI-POVERTY COMMUNITY
ORGANIZING AND LEARNING (APCOL) PROJECT SURVEY**

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ABSTRACT

This paper illustrates the use of a Participatory Action Research framework (PAR) in a community-university research partnership project. It looks at the questions of how and where community participation is effectively built into a survey project. This concern will be taken up in the context of the APCOL survey, which is currently being conducted in Toronto.

Through a critical examination of the processes by which these research relationships were developed and then engaged, this paper will consider the impacts, benefits and limitations of community participation within academic research. Findings of the project will be used to further question and discuss the modes of participation, its observed dynamics, and the power and privilege issues that have surfaced in the undertaking of such a community-university research partnership.

INTRODUCTION

This paper uses Participatory Action Research (PAR) as a framework for conducting community-based anti-poverty research. The purpose is to examine the use of this research methodology in community practice and how it can create conditions that help move research processes toward participation and partnership.

Outlined by the PAR framework, community participation is integral and valued in this project. The paper explores the community-university research partnership and its processes of developing and administering an anti-poverty survey. Community-university collaboration is built into each phase of the survey project, from instrument development and survey administration, to data management, analysis and dissemination of results. This paper discusses community-university involvement in: committee membership and staffing; decision making regarding issues of instrument design; pre-testing; community relationship development; processes of team building; community researcher recruitment and training; graduate student skills development and leadership; neighbourhood selection; survey sampling and administration; data coding, transcription, and analysis; and reporting on and dissemination of findings.

We aim to capture the lived experience of researchers, practitioners and community residents within a case of PAR and illustrate the complex, often contested and contradictory nature of its processes and outcomes. Using the case of the Anti-Poverty Community Organizing and Learning (APCOL) survey, we describe the processes, stories, key moments and learning taking place within a community-university research partnership. This allows for a discussion around the dynamics within PAR in community development and organizing, and how it can be used to open up spaces for learning and understand and recalculate barriers in participation. This paper comes from a place of reflexivity, where, as integral to the process of PAR, we see this as an opportunity to be self-critical, revisit our opinions and create room for new understanding.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Participatory Action Research

Participatory action research (PAR) is an approach and epistemology within qualitative research. PAR differs from many other approaches as it is fundamentally about partnerships, collaboration and information sharing, where researchers, community members and practitioners work together to integrate research and action to improve conditions in people's lives (Park, 1993; Stoeker, 2004). Within PAR, it is never just 'professionals' taking on research decisions and processes, rather PAR is a co-investigation with different groups collectively engaged in the investigative process, determining and influencing activities, interpreting findings, and sharing ideas for action. By putting research capabilities into the hands of the community, PAR promotes the development of common knowledge and critical awareness and been seen to be an effective way to ensure that community-based research contributes to positive change processes (e.g. Martin, 1995; Livingstone & Sawchuk, 2004).

Social Movement Learning

Social movements are understood by scholars and researchers to be powerful instruments of social, institutional and political change. (Della Porta & Diani, 2006). The framework of social movement organizing can provide a starting place to examining and understanding participation and learning in anti-poverty activities.

Participation in social movement organizing provides an opportunity for gathering local knowledge on activism and fighting against poverty, however, there is growing concern whether participation alone can lead to collective action or social change. Freire (1971) describes the creation of knowledge or participation as not enough; it must lead to action that will change the status quo. The nature of participation, therefore, must focus on politics and power to carry potential for emancipatory learning.

Social movements can be important sites of learning (Foley, 2001). Learning dimensions of social movements have gained attention in academic literature over the past two decades, as researchers focus on the learning and education within the movements themselves (internal dimension) and how social movements educate the general public (external dimension) (Foley, 2001; Hall, 2006; Welton, 1993). Social movement learning suggests that these sites have the transformative potential to "challenge presuppositions, explore alternative perspectives, transform old ways of understanding, and act on new perspectives" (Mezirow, 1990, p.18).

THE ANTI-POVERTY COMMUNITY ORGANIZING AND LEARNING PROJECT

APCOL is a five-year project that aims "to develop an integrated, city-wide perspective on community anti-poverty organizing efforts in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) with an emphasis on the contributions of popular education and learning processes" (APCOL, 2011). One part of APCOL project is a Toronto-wide quantitative survey examining community issues and how people learn to engage, re-engage, as well as remain unengaged in various forms of anti-poverty activism.

Survey Processes

A participatory aspect was embedded in the development of the research instrument. APCOL researchers and community partners cooperatively developed a survey. The survey was initially constructed through review of existing literature and interviews with key community members on community organizing, activist histories, formal and informal learning, and perceptions on barriers and motivating factors. From this, preliminary versions of the survey questionnaire were created and brought to the survey committee.

Committee membership and staffing consisted of both community and university members, who were jointly involved in decision-making regarding issues of instrument design. Over the period of a year, university researchers and community partners discussed and deliberated the framework, approach, dimensions, questions, language, terminologies and ethics of the survey questionnaire. This process was time-intensive, and took enormous efforts on both sides. For example, there was an ongoing debates about the words 'activist' and 'campaign'. These words were pre-loaded with specific meaning for many, and conversely, did not hold an understandable or significant meaning for others. Even the word 'anti-poverty' was discussed and debated, on whether or not it would be understood the same way by different groups of people and if the word itself should be excluded from the survey.

Another ongoing issue in the survey development process was whether or not it was going to be only in English, or if it would be translated into other languages. This was a hotly debated topic, with issues around who we are including/excluding if the instrument is only in English (and the legitimacy of this with respect to an anti-poverty survey of low-income racialized communities) on the one hand, and the consideration of financial resources and whether the cost of translation was feasible on the other. In the end, group consensus gave rise to the critical importance of survey translation, and in conjunction with community

leaders and groups, it was decided to translate the survey into four languages spoken across communities in Greater Toronto, namely Spanish, Arabic, Urdu and Chinese.

Pre-testing of the instrument was carried out in the neighbourhoods in which community partners lived and worked. This on-the-ground exercise of using the survey questionnaire provided opportunity for the tool to take shape for practical use. Importantly, it gave explicit feedback on the survey instrument on what worked and what didn't, including the reaction from community residents that "it is too long!" Two graduate student researchers, when piloting the survey in the St. James Town area of Toronto, spent three hours knocking on doors in high-rise apartment buildings, only to have one person agree to do the interview. Conversely, when one of these same graduate students went door-to-door in the Kingston-Galloway Orton Park neighbourhood with a community researcher who lived in the area, every single person approached agreed to participate. Survey piloting demonstrated the power of social connections, and the process contributed a lot in terms of survey sampling strategies, community relationship development and processes of team building.

The APCOL survey had a commitment to involving community members in the process of administering the survey questionnaire to neighbourhood residents. Community members and student researchers came together to develop their skills and knowledge of poverty issues, community organizing, popular education and conducting research through several trainings and meetings. This produced the opportunities for residents from different neighbourhoods of the Greater Toronto Area to work and learn together in community-based research.

DISCUSSION

As presented throughout this paper, the APCOL survey is an example of what community-university collaboration in research can look like. A participatory approach provided university faculty, graduate students, community organizations, and community residents a chance to work and learn together. This learning was both varied and widespread.

Learning about Other People and Communities

During the survey process, researchers learned a lot about communities and became familiar with the people living in neighbourhoods and the issues they face. This was a first glimpse of real issues with grounded realities. The process of face-to-face interviews, particularly ones of such length, gave researchers the opportunity to really talk and listen to people. Through exposure to different types of people in the community, they were learning about and from each other;

For me, what I learned from this, aside from the issues I learned from this community, and from Flemingdon, was for myself – I didn't know I had it in me to deal with different kinds of people...they have different personalities that I didn't know I could deal with. I have known myself as being introvert, being anti-social and all of this. (Interviewer17, APCOL Thorncliffe Survey Report)

While seemingly simple, learning how to *deal with different kinds of people* was a key product of collaboration. For many, the APCOL project brought exposure to groups that they may not typically be exposed to.

The development of social networks was a notable outcome – bridges across age, gender, ethnicity and religion were built among local activists. While several members of the team already had strong connections to each other due to personal and familial ties, most began with limited ties. For example, while traditionally there may be weak ties across

groups of newcomers, seniors and youth, researchers quickly developed strategies to bring these groups together. This had the effect of strengthening their own process as well as broadening anti-poverty organizing.

Group Dynamics in Collaboration

The potential of collaboration can be very clearly seen in the APCOL survey. The use of both community researchers and graduate students provided opportunities for skills development and leadership within and across both these groups. The questionnaire was administered by the community researchers and graduate students, who supported each other. Having community and graduate students work together contributed to better research - more eyes and ears to capture important information and perspective coming out of the interviews - and also led to learning opportunities on both sides. This included significant learning about the context or community that the other came from. Graduate students gained increased knowledge of the work of various community groups and issues faced by different communities, and community interviewers had the opportunity to learn about the research process and how the university works.

The collaborative community-university approach was not without contradictions. Even simple things like deciding where to hold a meeting had implications for who is in a position of power. In the case of deciding meeting locations, bringing together people who lived and worked in very different geographical locations meant that someone always had to travel. Care was taken to make sure that university members didn't privilege their 'busy' lives over that of the community members' equally busy lives. A conscious effort was made to have as many meetings as possible held in the neighbourhood spaces run by partnering community organizations.

The Nature of Participation

As documented throughout this paper, opportunities existed for both community and university members to participate in different aspects of research. Questions about the nature of participation emerge from this process, where we must look at the quantity and quality of participation. As an extension, it is critical to ask if opening spaces for participation was enough, or what would allow for opportunities to consist of 'meaningful' involvement?

Reflections on APCOL survey experiences suggests that the type and amount of participation varied tremendously by participants. One university researcher involved in training and coordinating survey research documented how the survey administration process looked different depending on the individuals involved and the decisions they made;

Most of the [community] researchers chose to conduct their surveys on their own from the start; with one researcher I attended her first two interviews as an observer, and with another I conducted the first two interviews with her observing. (Interviewer20, APCOL Thorncliffe Survey Report)

The choices of the researchers, bound within the constraints set by the overarching project goals, dictated what the experience looked like. There was room for involved individuals, both community and academic, to work together and be autonomous, to deliberate and make decisions.

Community members involved in APCOL were local activists themselves, engaged individually in their respective communities. The APCOL project provided a channel for these activists to get further involved in issues in their community and worked to sustain and further learning opportunities. This focus on learning was one of the strengths of APCOL, and a major contribution to facilitating meaningful participation. The APCOL project

supported participation through resources, working to ensure time and space was available for participants to meet, discuss day-to-day activities, reflection on their actions and learning, and developing strategies for future anti-poverty activities.

The structure of the project contained flexibility to allow for people to participate at levels they found manageable, recognizing and respecting that people have other commitments in their lives. For example, some interviewers conducted one or two surveys, whereas others completed up to twenty-five! This flexibility made participation accessible and non-threatening, providing a means to engage in community activism. Of the community researchers who were involved in survey administration in different neighbourhoods, many continue to be involved with APCOL in varying capacities. This includes participation in data entry and analysis, writing articles for the newsletter, working on survey translation feedback, participating in the APCOL conference organizing committee, and presenting at out-of-town conferences.

Reflection on the process demonstrates, above all, type and level of participation seemed to be linked to a history with APCOL. Those who had prior experience with the APCOL project before the survey, such as involvement in an APCOL case study, seemed to have more in-depth and sustained involvement in the survey. Interestingly, this effect was observable across both community and student researchers. This effect of experience is dual-edged: there is an obvious benefit to the project in having people who are experienced, trained and committed; but at the same time, working only with the same people means that only certain voices are heard and it may limit opportunities available to other people.

As the APCOL project continues, it continues to reflect on and adopt new processes and methods to address the dynamics of participation. The complicated issue of sustained and meaningful involvement is something that is constantly 'on the table'.

Effects on Community Organizing and Social Change

Participatory processes allow for learning by doing, which can lead to the development of social and political capacities and individual. Findings from the APCOL survey suggest that people were learning agency – their ability to affect change – through the research process. A reflection exercise at the end of the survey administration in one neighbourhood revealed thoughts about social power;

J: Do you feel more or less powerful or powerless than when you started this?

K: Obviously once you start knowing people, you start becoming more powerful, in the sense that now you have a lot of people, those who know you and you know them, so in that sense you become powerful. (APCOL Thorncliffe Survey Report)

By becoming *powerful* people are developing an ability to understand and intervene on issues around poverty in their community. This perception that power comes from the coordination of many individuals with a common purpose recognizes the potential of organized people. If feelings of collective power can be elicited through research processes, then this process, in our mind, is largely successful. Before we can exercise power, we must recognize that we have it.

CONCLUSION

This paper explored the opportunities and challenges of community-university research partnerships throughout instrument development, administration and analysis. Learning and knowledge is brought to the forefront, not only in findings but throughout the entire research process.

While questions remain about how to best involve different groups and how to address dynamics in collaboration, the APCOL project has made a significant impact both in terms of its processes and outcomes. Participatory processes have had the effect of building social networks, creating opportunities for action and reflection, and learning about social power. This has the potential for increased capacity not only in formal research, but also in practice within social movement organizing and collective action.

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