

Introduction

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The 7th century-BC Chinese philosopher, Lao Tzu, said

Go to the people. Live with them. Learn from them. Love them. Start with what they know. Build with what they have.

The ideal motto, perhaps, for a growing group in the research and evaluation community who are undertaking research with, rather than on, communities? It certainly suggests that community based research can be done better. And this becomes more important when you listen to the voices of community members when asked about research. I am reminded of an elderly Pacific Island lady sitting quietly in a focus group. After a while she rose to her feet and said, in a measured and calm way, that the trouble with research was that

white men in suits come along and steal our ideas, they take them off on a plane to their conferences and what are we left with? Nothing!

This comment touched me deeply. It resonated not only because it was, in my experience, true, but also because I knew that there was another way. Reflexively, I was forced to challenge my own place in society (undeniably white, middle-class and liberal), my role as a researcher (to discover) and, consequently, the power that lay in my hands to choose what I might do with her ideas. Her stories. Her life.

And so the original seed behind this book was sown through the editors' research practice in Aotearoa New Zealand. Yet the idea has reverberated and was nourished through the similar experiences of colleagues in South Africa, Canada, Australia and the UK. The concepts in this book are global yet the impact of research is often profoundly local. The earlier example is just one of many clashes between traditional 'academic' research or programme evaluation and our communities.

Whilst a shift to more inclusive and grounded research is certainly desirable, it is not without its challenges – for both the researcher and the researched. There has been an historical tendency within the western academic tradition towards excluding the views of ordinary people. How often do we ask our research subjects how to go about carrying out our research or what we should do with the results? There are, of course, times when this

would be inappropriate even impossible. However, sometimes it is not only appropriate that we hold stakeholders at the heart of our research, as this book demonstrates, there are times when it is vital to the success of the project and to the future wellbeing of the community. Research does not have to be about consuming ideas, as Freire (1985) suggested, it can be about creating and recreating them. Surely a community that is actively engaged in research about itself has more opportunity to learn and transform as a result of that research?

'Researching with communities' presents a diverse range of personal and grounded perspectives from academics, researchers and practitioners on undertaking research in ways that promote and privilege the voice of the community, are respectful of local or indigenous practices and are culturally safe. This book does not attempt to provide solutions to all of these difficulties one might encounter and it most definitely is not intended to be 'tick list' for approaching community-inclusive research. This book makes no claim to have all the answers! What I hope it does do is provide some examples, guides and discussion about the experiences of doing research respectfully and inclusively. It does this by drawing on the perspectives of researchers and community practitioners and by providing a range of reflective chapters that explore what community-based research means in a range of settings and for a range of people. Like the communities in which they are grounded, undertaking research in this way is always a unique experience.

It is hoped that this book is of value to a wide audience. It was never written as a purely academic text or reference, though hopefully it will be valuable as such. It was intended to support the community being researched – or wanting to research itself – as much as students and researchers, whether experienced or emerging. It is hoped that this book can contribute, however modestly, to a wider debate on the value of grounded, community based research and towards developing and supporting policies and programmes that directly affect communities.

What do we mean when we talk about a 'community'? They are not rigid monoliths that we can neatly label. Communities come and go. They evolve, grow and die. Definitions of 'community' are inevitably problematic and the term remains rightly contestable and malleable. The communities represented and described in this book include local, ethnic and religious but what makes a community can equally be a single point of connection, an up-to-date issue or a shared history. The only common thread in defining a 'community' is that it requires people to come together and this occurs in three, potentially overlapping, forms (Crow & Allan, 1994; Gaved & Anderson, 2006; Willmott, 1986, 1989):

Locality	Geographical or place-based community.
Interest	Topical community of those who share common interests.
Attachment	The weakest form of community, suggesting a common sense of identity and a level of interaction with others.

For me, the term ‘community’ engenders a feeling of belonging and a desire to retain that connection over a period time (see Bauman, 2000). It is also not easy to measure the strength or value of a community. It is often intangible, varies depending on an individual’s commitment or sense of belonging and is not always obvious to outsiders.

Real life is not a theoretical exercise, yet so often research can be dehumanising. You cannot separate individuals from their lives and the communities to which they belong (Reason, 1994). The everyday folksonomies of community and kin are as valuable and important as our more formally instantiated taxonomies of knowledge, so prized by academia and government.

As we become more familiar with a community we see that it has itself got layers and differences. An example of this is provided by Maria Higgins and Catherine O’Donnell, who warn us to beware of assumed homogeneity when working with even relatively small, minority communities. Their experience of working with asylum seekers and refugees in Scotland shows that division and difference is as likely to be the norm, rather than the exception. Bernard and Pauline Guerin warn in their chapter, assumed homogeneity is dangerous for researchers who fail to understand that an individual or group almost certainly do not speak for all the community. On a more positive note, difference does not have to be a problem if it is understood and acknowledged. The diverse and contested nature of community, Peter Day observes, can be seen as a strength, rather than a weakness, because it facilitates an environment in which social creativity and innovation can be nurtured in ways that stimulate and promote community learning.

The value of civil society is not drawn from the good intent of the individual but in the way those individuals are connected and embedded within what Putnam refers to as “dense network of reciprocal relations” (2000, p.19). Such semi-institutionalised relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition provide members with a degree of backing from the collective, providing both support and credibility. Relationships are socially instituted and community based research is to a large degree about relationships.

Social capital is one measure applied to communities and groups. A theoretical concept, it emphasises the importance of social ties and shared norms, measuring the connectedness of individuals to each other and the “social networks and norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them” (Putnam, 2000, p.19). As Coleman (1988, p.1) suggests, “unlike other forms of capital, social capital adheres to the structure of relations between and among actors.” Whilst strong social capital can be difficult to measure and risky to compare across different communities, strong communities are important.

The above is an important point for those of us wishing to undertake community based research because, in some small way, when we do, we become a part of that community and exchanges inevitably occur (for good or for bad). This leads on to a reflexive discussion about how we might accurately represent communities, as both an etic (outsider) or an

emic (insider) researcher, considering of course that researchers are never wholly on the inside given the issues of trust, power and social desirability bias that affect what we do. Reflexivity and negotiation are paramount if we are to avoid making assumptions about the nature of community and, as Gaby Jacobs suggests, about the very nature of participatory research. Jacobs poses four questions which researchers might ask themselves:

1. What do we mean by participation?
2. Why do we think participation is important?
3. Who benefits from the research and in what way?
4. How do we judge the success of participation and how is participation involved in this?

Paula McGee identifies a conflict between taking a collaborative approach and meeting the demands of research governance. As Reason (1994) argues, research can only be conducted *with* people if the researcher engages with them as people because, while “understanding and action are logically separate, they cannot be separated in life: so a science of persons must be an action science” (p.10). This requires us as researchers to accept our place in the world, not as disconnected, soul-less bodies but as real people with beliefs, biases and different points of view. Subjectivity is not a problem, it is central to what we do and does not stop us being rigorous in our research, it just acknowledges that researchers too are human.

We must negotiate community boundaries carefully. Even as an insider our status changes when we undertake research. This is especially the case when, as Randy Stoecker suggests, the research is managed by an external body, such as a university, with its own often inward-looking processes. As outsiders we are often on the look-out for the ‘mavens’ and ‘gatekeepers’ who provide access to a community and, with it, the credibility for us to start our research. Whilst we look for these links in the community being researched, we also need them in the institutions that allow us to do research. Entry to a community is not enough, as Stoecker (2005) argues when describing the difficulties that researchers experience when establishing their own legitimacy.

Establishing trust is a pre-cursor to effective community engagement. Even more so when entering a community without invitation or existing social capital. Yet, despite these challenges, when community based research succeeds and trust is built we as researchers will often become the conduit between institutions, agencies or government and a community that is distrusting, feels let down or badly treated and which is sceptical of outsiders. This is a tenuous place to be and so, as Claudette Legault and Madine VanderPlaat remind us, the challenge for any collaborative relationship is to ensure that the collaboration is actually genuine!

Engaging in community based research is difficult when we are committed to representing the true voices that we hear. Grounded research is subjective and it is the same in this book; just as the contributors have attempted to retain the voices and values of the communities in which they work, we as editors have also attempted to allow the author's own voice and individual styles to come through. As I mentioned earlier, do not expect homogeneity, even in a small community!

Privileging the voices of participants is about respect. Language is a matter of power and control, of colonisation and submission. For example, notice how, in this book, indigenous peoples are often assigned names by the coloniser. Sometimes this is accepted (or at least tolerated and used) but often that community chooses a different name to refer to itself. What we call ourselves can be the tip of the epistemological iceberg; many indigenous groups do not subscribe to a western-oriented worldview and this presents further challenges for researcher and researched alike. As Shannon Faulkhead, Lynette Russell, Diane Singh and Sue McKemmish conclude "attempting to match these two systems of knowing often results in one system being subsumed by the other, or one being presented as an alternative to the other; not in them being equal but different worldviews." This book is itself set in a Western academic tradition but it does at least attempt to break free from the positivist paradigm and give voice to individual stories and worldviews.

This book is not limited to a single discipline, rather it tries to draw out different experiences from a range of disciplines – the book's commonality lies in what the authors have set out to achieve, not the fields in which they undertake research. A number of the authors have commented on how, in writing their chapters, they have themselves been given the opportunity to be reflexive about their own research – a luxury in an output-oriented academic sector and a challenge for practitioners who are often overworked and under-resourced. All too often our outputs report the findings but fail to reflect on or describe the research experience.

The book is divided into four parts. The first two chapters (this introduction included) attempt to set the scene for community based research. In section two, 'engaging communities', the focus is on strategies to engage with community partners and the third section focuses on a discussion around how the research itself can be participatory and grounded. These two sections obviously overlap and, in many ways, most chapters would sit comfortably in the other section.

The fourth section of the book is about method and methodology; the process of undertaking the research. Each chapter is grounded in a piece of research but this book is not about reporting that research per se, it is about reflecting on the process, the method and the experience.

The authors are drawn from a wide variety of disciplines and backgrounds and from a diverse range of locations. This was always our intention as we wanted to create a global

account of community based research (albeit, we accept, from a predominantly Anglo-European standpoint). There is a, of course, a common thread throughout this book, which is that community based research is about mutuality, reciprocity and respect. Above all else, it is about people:

E patai atu ahau ki a koe,
He aha te mea nui o te Ao?
He tangata, he tangata, he tangata¹.

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¹ Let me ask you / What is the most important thing in this world? / It is people, it is people, it is people (Māori proverb).