COMMUNITY

RESEARCH:

A PRACTITIONER'S

PERSPECTIVE ON

METHODS AND

VALUES

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Abstract

As the opportunities and demands of operating in an information society increase, community and voluntary sector groups increasingly need to develop a research and information handling capacity. This article examines some of the common issues that arise when attempting research from a community base. The tension between the need for 'professional standards' in research practice and the empowering possibilities of do it yourself research is explored. The notion of research on a shoestring is considered and some free resource points are mentioned. Assumptions about appropriate quantitative and qualitative methods are discussed, reflections on case studies in community research are used to develop some theory/praxis insights in this area an agenda for developing community-based research is sketched.

Why do research?

Grassroots' community activists and ordinary members of deprived or excluded communities are often, and in many ways justifiably, cynical about the role of research and researchers in community development. It is easy to portray researchers as academics and professionals who have power, good salaries and a way of talking and writing that exclude ordinary people, and who have no stake in the local community and little by way of empathy for the people. The powers that commission the research come in for even more criticism; from the grassroots' perspective it can appear that they only want research findings as a way of delaying action, justifying spending cuts or getting rid of underspend before the end of the financial year. The results are either blindingly obvious, stigmatising or victim blaming, or gather dust on a library shelf. In some cases they are so useful to the community that they become politically sensitive to the powerful, and so never find their way into the public domain.

However, in the real world of community work no one can afford to dismiss the importance of research and information processing, if only as a useful tool in persuading funders to support projects or back up a campaign over a particular community grievance. In contemporary society information technology allows masses of data to be gathered, stored, manipulated and communicated in historically unprecedented ways. One consequence is that official managerialist culture, in its search for efficiency, effectiveness and accountability, demands that patterns of service delivery and funding allocations are tied to statistical analysis of
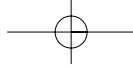
needs and indices of deprivation. Services are benchmarked according to numeric targets, and have to operate detailed monitoring and evaluation schemes. In such a context, research and information gathering in order to establish levels of need, make the case for funding, review performance and ascertain service users' views is becoming a normal feature of voluntary sector life. There is a demand for 'facts', for evidence that will provide the basis for policy making and resource allocation. Even small local campaigning groups need good information in order to counter the spin, lies and media manipulation they may encounter in their struggles with the authorities. While many practitioners accept this demand for research in a grudging and resentful spirit, because it is imposed from above, it is possible to see research in a different light and embrace it positively, taking more control of the process from the bottom up and offering new possibilities of empowerment.

What then is the role and potential of research and researchers in the field of community work, amidst all the collaborations and conflicts that form everyday practice? What is the appropriate balance for a researcher between professional standards that may demand 'objectivity' and a committed stance that seeks to combat the oppressions and exclusions resulting from racism and poverty? What is the potential of a participatory approach to research which enhances community groups' capacity and empowers and rewards community members? What are the ethical issues that arise in community-based research? What are the practical shortcuts and resources that can be drawn on to produce effective research on a shoestring budget?

Rather than trying to answer these questions directly, this article will draw on several case studies arising from my practice as a community researcher employed from 1991 to 2001 by a major charitable trust in east London, as a member of a community involvement unit team whose main business was community development and capacity building for the local voluntary sector. I have included in the text web references to each of the case studies and to methodological resources.

The geographical setting for most of this work was an inner London borough which, according to the 1991 census, was at the bottom of the league in official deprivation index, and which in the mid 1990s became the first local authority area in England to have a population with a majority of people from minority ethnic communities, of an unparalleled diversity. Inevitably the borough became one in which regeneration schemes and
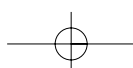
partnerships proliferated. A high proportion of the work undertaken by the team had links with the churches and other faith communities. The values underlying the portfolio of work described here would, I hope, be recognisable to and shared by many community workers as anti-oppressive and broadly socialist, in the Freirean tradition (Freire, 1970). They were specifically developed from the starting point of an Evangelical Christian Faith commitment, and a theology developed from reading the Biblical material on social justice, informed by the readings and debates around Liberation Theologies from the Two Thirds World. In particular the work of the Participatory Research Network (Hall & Tandon, 1982; Tandon & Fernandes, 1982) has been a constant source of inspiration.

Other community workers will no doubt want to draw on their own value and ideological commitments which may derive from other religious, philosophical or political sources. In general it can only be helpful and more honest to be explicit about such value positions as we embark in discussion in these areas. After presenting the case studies I will return to a discussion of the interaction of values and practice in community research.

Case studies

Surveys and their discontents

There is a common assumption found as frequently among community groups as among elected politicians, that the only valid form of social research is quantitative and depends upon official statistics or a representative sample survey. Even though decision makers these days do commission qualitative research and rely on the soft findings of focus groups it is easy to dismiss such research as 'unscientific' and demand results from a 'proper survey'. This preference for numbers and measurable indicators has in my experience a number of unfortunate effects in community-based research.

Surveys: pros and cons

- Surveys are often seen as 'proper' research.
- A well done survey provides plenty of convincing 'facts'.
- However, it depends on what you ask, the terms you use and the values behind your questions.

Case 1: Salvaging a parish church neighbourhood survey

A group with which I was working (a parish church), decided it needed to carry out a neighbourhood survey and that the exercise was simple enough for anyone to do. There were a number of problems. The group had mixed motives as, along with gathering information, it used the fieldwork to make contacts in the community and publicise the church's spiritual and social services. One result was a badly designed questionnaire, with numerous badly phrased or leading questions, and the omission of most of the key demographic variables that would have enabled the group to make sense of patterns within the data. Another problem was the opportunistic and undocumented nature of the sample of respondents. Not only was it unrepresentative, but there was no way of telling how it might not match the demographic profile of the neighbourhood. After interviewing over 200 people the group approached me and asked, 'Can you help us analyse this information?'. I made some efforts to salvage what I could from the pile of data, and resolved never again to help a group unless there was some chance of input at the very early stages. The key lessons from this experience are that a community group must plan ahead, gather resources and count the cost of what it is taking on in doing a survey, and ask for advice, or at least do some serious reading before it begins.

Case 2: Survey alongside a disability rights campaign

Other examples of surveys alongside community groups have been happier experiences. In the early 1990s I worked with a disability rights campaign on a survey of about 200 older or disabled people in an effort to assess their needs and views in the context of new regimes of benefits and community care. From the start I met with a stakeholder group of staff and users of voluntary sector services in the borough. This was invaluable in helping with the design of the questionnaire and the fieldwork strategy. In particular the group's insider knowledge of complex welfare systems, and its 'conscientised' use of terminology that was inclusive and avoided the stereotypical medical model of disability fed into the questionnaire. We were also able to develop an appropriate method of building on the interview to disseminate to the respondents relevant advice about benefits, rights and available services. There were, however, a few points where working in such a participatory manner made life difficult from the research perspective. The stakeholder group shared the common assumption that huge numbers of respondents (they mentioned 1,000) would be necessary for any valid information, and because of their varied experiences of disability wanted to ask every question under the sun. The result could easily have been a 50-page questionnaire taking over two hours to complete. Clearly, as the fieldwork depended on volunteer interviewers, the group's ambitions were way beyond its resources. Eventually about 200 respondents were interviewed, using a quota sample approach and a questionnaire that lasted about one hour. One other disappointment in the process was the dissemination; although the group gathered a lot of useful campaigning data, I am not sure if it had enough grasp of its potential and limitations to be able to use the data effectively in the highly charged political situation of the particular time and place.

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Case 3: Survey on caste and discrimination

Other surveys I have been involved with have raised a number of issues familiar to students of social research methods and a few that are particularly significant because of the community work context in which the research took place. Working with a South Asian community group on the sensitive issue of caste discrimination was a particular challenge. As a white researcher, despite some experience of life in India and in a local setting where the majority of neighbours had origins in the subcontinent, I was not best placed to understand the subtleties of the issue. On the other hand, the activists I was working with had a specific political understanding and were organising a campaign against casteism, which could be seen as lacking objectivity. It was obvious that the volunteer inter-viewers needed to be drawn from the Asian communities and preferably be fluent speakers of the appropriate community languages. However, that alone did not guarantee fieldwork success, for the interviewers were themselves located within the caste system with religious, linguistic, regional, gender and generational identities which might cause respondents to close up rather than divulge their real views and identities. Again there were difficult issues around representative sampling, biased response patterns, and finding enough human resources and enthusiasm to sustain the work to its conclusion.

Case 4: Survey on relations between faith communities

A final case of survey research in which I was involved was carried out in part-nership with the local Association of Faiths and concerned local people's atti-tudes to and relationships with faith communities other than their own. Here volunteer resources were plentiful and we were able to pilot the questionnaire, train the interviewers and interview nearly 500 local people from a variety of faith and ethnic backgrounds. If there was one weakness in the fieldwork strategy it was around sampling and response rates, for it was likely, but diffi-cult to measure, that people who were 'not religious', and the racially intolerant would be those most likely to refuse an interview to the multi-ethnic team of interviewers. This could obviously bias the results in favour of those were more open to inter-faith relationships. However, the large sample did allow for some detailed and complex statistical analysis which was the basis of an academic publication. (Smith, 1998). Ironically this was not the most accessible or popular reading among the stakeholder group who had commissioned the research, let alone among the ordinary members of local faith communities. The publication of such articles also raises some ethical and political issues about already well paid researchers, who get career advancement on the backs of information supplied by deprived and socially excluded local people, and through the voluntary efforts of community groups and volunteer interviewers.

- A large survey costs time, money, planning, training and effort.
- If you ask too many questions people are reluctant to answer.
- It is hard in a community work setting to eliminate non-response and biased sampling.

- It is hard to tell if quick answers are true, or may have more flexible views behind them.
- Surveys can never tell a whole story.

Neighbourhood profiles

One of the most common requests a community research consultant receives is for a general purpose neighbourhood profile exercise, which can be used as a needs analysis or baseline for the delivery of generic or specific local services. Such requests typically come from a Church of England parish, a multi-user community centre or the partnership board of a local regeneration scheme. My own experience of this type of work is mainly in working with Christian congregations, although I have undertaken some commissioned work for regeneration partnerships. The advantage of working with a congregation or community group is that there is an existing group of stakeholders with a deep pool of local knowledge who can be engaged as partners in the exercise. In contrast, regeneration partnerships tend to want a more 'professional' parachutist's eye view of the situation, and tend to demand a quantitative approach, although they do bring with them more resources, which can pay the research consultant's wages.

In order to undertake a comprehensive profiling exercise it is essential to adopt a triangulated multi-method approach, which should include as many of the following methodologies as possible (see Hawtin et al, 1994).

- Census and other official data analysis from the ONS Neighbourhood statistics website http://www.statistics.gov.uk/Neighbourhood/home.asp
- Survey of residents, for examples see http://www.astoncharities.org.uk/research/quest.shtml
- Ethnographic study of the locality (including mapping, walk about, photography or video, collecting documents).
- In depth interviews with key professionals and activists.
- Focus groups for specific sections of the community (e.g. children, young people, women, minority ethnic communities, business people).

In my last decade working as a community research consultant there are numerous profiling exercises that provide case study material illustrating key issues.

Case 5: A parish profile

In the mid 1990s I was approached by a vicar to provide a parish profile as background for a proposed development of a medieval building for community use. Two key issues emerged as I worked with the congregation, many of whom happily volunteered to carry out interviews in the parish (though not many of the numerous African parishioners). The first was that the vicar and the congregation had different visions and perceptions of the parish, while the local community had yet another view of the role of the church. Second was the issue of boundaries and catchment. The geographical boundary of the parish did not map on to any of the standard official boundaries such as electoral wards or designated regeneration areas. This caused difficulties in interpreting census data and problems over eligibility for regeneration funding. Furthermore, the members of the congregation and potential service users based there did not necessarily come from within the parish, so links became a key geographical issue.

Case 6: A neighbourhood audit

A more recent neighbourhood profile, documented at http://www.astoncharities.org.uk/research/barkingroad/titlenew.htm, illustrates the value and the difficulties of working with a coalition of organisations. In this case bringing together nearly a dozen local churches and voluntary agencies and the local FE college into a partnership provided more resources, and greater impact for the profile. It brought in finance from a number of denominational sources, and allowed us to work with a large group of A level sociology students who were trained and used as survey interviewers as a practical element of their course.

Case 7: A parish discovery process

The final case is a parish audit exercise carried out in 2001, described as a process of 'Discovering Our Parish', in order to signal our attempt to involve the whole congregation. One difficult research issue was that the census data was at least ten years out of date and had to be used with great care, alongside more recent statistics gathered by local government. Another important element was the participation of the congregation in the audit process. The research also included a small scale community survey and a series of interviews with local agency professionals. Because busy people were reluctant to attend extra meetings, this was only possible by integrating the activities into an extended Sunday worship session, which involved the research consultant preaching in three morning services, each followed by a parish lunch and working session. One session involved a parish walkabout and mapping session, with disposable cameras provided; a second session took the form of a congregational talents audit; and the third a review and planning session. Hopefully one of the objectives, of extending the church's community involvement, has been progressed by the process, although huge questions remain over the future of the dilapidated 1970s building in which the church meets.

Neighbourhood profiles: pros and cons

- People easily relate to a geographical neighbourhood.
- Official geographically-based statistics are easily available (though may be out of date).
- One can build a multi-agency stakeholder group into the process.
- A good profile demands major resources and some expertise.
- Geographical boundaries may not coincide with each other or community life patterns.
- Communities do not always or only work geographically.

Qualitative research

There are times in community research when because of resource limitations or the nature of the questions to be asked, it is only possible to use qualitative methods. In depth interviews of knowledgeable people and focus groups are two key methods.

Case 8: A community research action project (CRAP) for an SRB

A recent SRB funded project in Canning Town, documented at http://www.astoncharities.org.uk/research/crap/CRAPREPORT.htm, illustrates some of the potential and problems with the in depth interviewing approach. Originally some pressure had been put on the researchers to carry out a survey of all residents rather than qualitative interviews. This was resisted on the basis of local knowledge that response rates in this marginalised and non-book culture would be likely to be very low. As a compromise, an additional self completion survey was delivered to every household in the area, and returned by only about 12 per cent of the population. The main achievement of the interviewing team was completing over 60 extended interviews with open ended questions. A secondary aim and 'output' of this work was to provide some training and employment in research for up to ten local people (although in the end only four stayed the course). In fact, the practical difficulties of employing and training unskilled and in some cases 'unemployable' local people in some ways outweighed the advantages of having substantial funding, and suggests that community research with motivated volunteers or interested students is a preferable strategy. Another problem arose on completion of the report, in that its key finding about the ethnic change in the area and the potential of recently arrived African residents overturned many stereotypes about the area. This message was politically unacceptable to many of the members of the regeneration partnership, which did not include representatives of this new community. It was relatively easy to dismiss the findings on the grounds that the research had not been a representative survey of a large number of residents.

Case 9: Rapid appraisal with focus groups

There have been numerous occasions in my community research practice when focus groups have been used, for example in our baseline study for the Little Ilford SRB partnership documented at http://www.astoncharities.org.uk/research/newham/e12sum.htm.   Focus groups can be particularly useful in getting a rapid overview of a particular locality or issue (perhaps as preparation for a wider survey), as a way of teasing out divergent opinions and perspectives, and for tapping into the views of minority groups. However, the researcher must be aware of group dynamics and how these can introduce biases, produce false consensus or lead people into expressing views they would not hold in a confidential interview setting. From a community development point of view focus groups can have exciting spin-offs. One I was involved in with adult education students from a huge variety of ethnic backgrounds suddenly and movingly turned into a very supportive, even therapeutic group addressing at a deep level the emotional needs of several of its members. Others have drawn together people who had not previously met and have been the basis for developing a new community partnership. But for community workers concerned more with process than with research products focus groups can be an exciting if unpredictable tool.

Case 10: Children's views of a neighbourhood

A final example of the use of qualitative techniques in community research is work with children in the local community. Schools can often offer access in the form of local studies projects. It is possible to collect information from whole classes or smaller groups using brainstorming and flipcharts. Essay, art or photography competitions can draw out individual children's perspectives. One of our projects involved helping a school to develop its own website http://www.astoncharities.org.uk/kidsforkids/index.htm. It is possible to interview children and young people outside the school environment (for example in streets and parks), but this relies on the skills of detached youth work and informal education, and proper child protection procedures. From a research angle this usually means that informal conversations with individuals and groups are more appropriate than the paper based questionnaire approach. For documentation on one project with children in a local urban community see http://www.astoncharities.org.uk/research/canningtown/kids.doc

Qualitative methods: pros and cons

- Qualitative research can be rapid and cheap.
- It is possible to use imaginative and visual methods.
- The relationships built can be the basis for community development processes.
- Local people can be involved and give value to their stories.

- It can be hard to distinguish widely held views from strong inform-ants' hobby horses and prejudices.
- It is hard to achieve good documentation and analysis.
- Decision makers prefer to see statistics and 'facts'.

Evaluations

In the present funding and accountability climate, community researchers are likely to be called on to carry out evaluations of various community projects. Often the terms of such evaluations are alarmingly vague, the timescales ridiculously short, and it is not always clear that the project's objectives were made explicit at the start, or that they have remained fixed over the project's life. There is often a tension between the funder's desire for measurable indicators and the staff and users' more rounded if subjective view of the project's aims and achievements. One recurring issue is the existence, accuracy, consistency and relevance of the monitoring procedures of projects. Sometimes the bureaucratic burden of monitoring is resented by staff, carried out casually if at all and, in the worse cases, the statistical summaries reflect very creative accounting and accountability, designed to secure future funding rather than service improvement. In some larger voluntary organisations staff cultures can be rather conservative and entrenched and the imposition of monitoring or evaluation processes can be seen as intrusive and unfriendly manage-ment, preparing to impose unpopular change or even cuts in staff.

In evaluation theory there is a useful distinction between the summative and the formative approach. The former is typically an end of project evaluation, usually carried out by 'objective' outside consultants. The

Case 11: A homelessness project

A useful case study in evaluation is my work for a local homeless project, avail-able at
http://www.astoncharities.org.uk/research/newham/evaluationturnaround.doc. The most significant issue in this research is my own role as both an insider and outsider. Through my community work networks I had played a significant part in the initial development of the service and continued until very recently as an occasional volunteer worker in the night shelter. This position gave me, as evaluator, the benefits of historical and practical insight into the workings of the project, and good lines of communication to many of the staff and volunteers. However, it also presented a challenge to maintain a professional detachment and critical distance in order to provide a fair assessment of the project's achievement.

latter is more like a review process, which can be recycled many times in the course of a project, and in which practice is reshaped and hopefully improved as results come through. Formative evaluation demands the involvement of staff and probably service users as stakeholders. Community development practitioners may wish to take a further step towards a fully participatory approach to evaluation as outlined by Feuerstein (1988).

Evaluations: pros and cons

• Projects and policies can be improved by accountability.
• Top down evaluation can be resented as a burden.
• Outside evaluators may not understand the full context of the work, especially if the evaluation is too rapid.
• Evaluation is most helpful if it is widely owned by stakeholders and results can be fed into regular reviews of practice.

Directories

A final field of community research commonly undertaken, especially by umbrella bodies and partnerships, is the compilation of databases and directories of agencies and services in a locality or field of activity. My main experience here has been in compiling directories of the religious sector (see http://www.astoncharities.org.uk/research/religion/datagathering.htm) and service provision for young people. Conversations with colleagues working on a national database of women's organisations confirm that the following issues are significant.

Firstly, compiling directories of agencies is a methodological nightmare. The obvious approach of a postal survey generally produces low response levels, although this can be improved by telephone follow up. The more detailed the information requested the less likely it is that people will respond. The greatest difficulty, however, is discovering the undocumented agencies. In our directory of religious groups there were large numbers of new churches and mosques serving marginalised communities and often using sessionally rented buildings. Every technique of the detective was necessary – personal networking, walking the streets, trawling through telephone directories and local papers, picking up evangelistic tracts in the street and even following vehicles to log a phone number which appeared on their door. A further problem adding

to database complexity is the number of agencies that operate under alias names or provide services at different levels, such as a community centre and its various user groups, which may themselves have separate activities for different age groups.

Secondly it is impossible to keep a database up to date, as personnel and programmes are likely to change, new organisations emerge and old ones cease to operate. It is extremely costly and labour intensive to publish and distribute printed versions of a directory. It is also hard to justify such exercises in terms of the market. Although everybody would like to have access to community information, few are willing to pay the price of commissioning the necessary background research. Most are not even willing to pay a realistic price for a single copy of the printed directory. It has, in my experience, proved extremely difficult to spread awareness of the existence of such directories and databases, and it remains pure serendipity as to whether statutory bodies and officers who need such information actually access it. Finally, one has to ask whether such research is going to be of value in an information world dominated by the internet. Increasingly community and voluntary sector groups are developing their own web pages with basic information about contact details and services offered, which they can take responsibility for updating. The web technologies ensure that searching for specific organisations or categories is relatively easy and widely available. The effort in compiling centralised databases and directories therefore seems less cost effective than it used to be.

Directories: pros and cons

- In a complex society with multiple specialist agencies databases and directories can be useful for navigation and referral purposes.
- Analysis of databases can identify duplication and gaps in services.
- It is impossible to make directories comprehensive or keep them up to date.
- Directories are expensive to compile and print, and not easy to distribute or market.
- People still prefer to rely on trusted personal networks for referrals.
- Directories and databases are being supplanted by web pages and internet searches.

Reflection on key issues

What then are the general principles from which one can build a theory of praxis from this varied experience of community research? Initially, rather than expressing this in terms of normative propositions I would rather leave the reader with a series of simple questions to consider, before undertaking or evaluating any piece of community research. These may remind the reader of Kipling's *'six honest serving men, who taught me all I knew. Their names are what and why and when and how and where and who'.*

- **Who?** is carrying out the research, on behalf of whom? Who is getting the benefits from the research in terms of the money spent and the use of the information derived? Who is determining which concepts and questions are being addressed? Is the 'who' one researcher, a small group of experts and decision makers or a wider community of enquiry?
- **Why?** is the research being carried out? Why does officialdom want to know the information? Why does no one know it already? Why is it worthwhile spending resources on research rather than on funding projects, or even scattering a sack of £10 notes out of the window of a tower block?
- **How?** is the research being done? How have the methods been selected? How have respondents been selected? How have the data been analysed and interpreted? How have these interpretations been checked out in terms of the perspectives of various stakeholders?
- **What?** are the questions that are being researched? What is the relevance of these questions to the lives of the people in the community, especially to those who are oppressed and excluded? What answers are emerging from the data?
- **Where?** is the research going to be published? Where are the findings going to be disseminated and publicised? Where are the forums where community members can engage with the researchers and policy makers about the implications of the research?
- **When?** is the research going to be finished? When will the community reap the benefits that are promised from this research? When will the community be ready to be involved in the research as a community education process in which they have a genuine stake and can play a valuable part?

If, as community workers, the process of answering these questions gives us anything like a coherent picture of how research and information gathering fits into our professional practice, or how a specific piece of community-based research helps the development of the communities in which we work, then it would appear worthwhile to co-operate with the research process. In this case it may mean calling on the services of people with professional expertise, or acquiring basic research skills ourselves. If, on the other hand, the six questions produce contradictory or disturbing answers then it is likely that we can do without this kind of research. For, ultimately, social research viewed from this perspective is not merely about gathering 'the facts' in some objective or scientific fashion. Rather, it is a value laden and ultimately political process and should be recognised as such.

Returning finally to the key questions in the third paragraph of the article about the interaction of values and practice in community research, I would like to make a few comments on my own practice and learning from these experiences, in the hope that it may be of value to other practitioners. I will discuss them under five headings.

I was in a unique privileged position

As a researcher with some reputation as a professional and some links with the local university, I was for the most part working in and alongside the community in which I was living, bringing up my family and operating as a community worker, active church member and political activist. I was working with colleagues, neighbours and acquaintances, many of whom became friends. Most professional researchers and community workers will not be in this position, simply because people with such skills do not often choose to live long term in deprived urban neighbourhoods. While I recognise that this location, my personal commitments, and network of relationships might on occasions have compromised my professional detachment, I believe it was more than compensated for in terms of my depth of insider understanding of the local scene, and the ability to access information and resources for community research through my personal local networks. In addition, my other role as a community development practitioner and member of a community development team enabled me to achieve a satisfying balance of research and action, in which a number of projects based on my research findings actually came to fruition as viable and sustainable services or action groups, or as significant changes in policy in the local context.

I always had to compromise on values to some extent

As a person with some strong religious and political convictions, which I would broadly define as anti-establishment, there were many times when I felt my practice should have been more radical than it actually was. Over time the political context probably became more difficult as the clarities of opposition to Thatcherism gave way to a more nebulous unease about the benevolent control freakery of New Labour! Despite a wide freedom in my work I was aware that greater forces dominated the terms of the community research agenda, especially around regeneration and voluntary sector policy. Inevitably there were compromises to be made, sometimes after agonising, more often creeping in unnoticed. In the religious field too I had some unease in feeling the need to keep quiet about some of my own beliefs in order to practise research that demanded an open minded approach, especially in the field of multi faith communities. I also continue to have a 'tender conscience' about receiving funding deriving from gambling such as the National Lottery, although I have worked with several groups which rely on such funding. However, such compromises are in the end part and parcel of everyday living in a plural society, and for the community worker an essential part of the process of empowerment through allowing others space to determine their own views and actions.

Empowerment was always partial

However much one tries to practise a model of research which attempts to be bottom up, participatory and empowering, it is incredibly hard, given constraints of timescales and funding, and the low expectations and limited capacity for participation found in many urban communities, to avoid being cast in the role of 'the expert, who will do it all for us'. In all the case studies outlined above participation and empowerment of ordinary local people was limited, and never reached the level of the 'magic bullet' that one reads into the accounts of participatory action research in the developing world. This does not of course mean that it was not worthwhile, as enabling one local resident to present a cogent argument about local issues to a councillor, or to develop the skills and confidence to interview a person from a different ethnic group, is in itself a worthwhile outcome.

I struggled with objectivity and irony

Research like my own understands 'objectivity' and 'the facts' to be a social and political construct. Coupling this with a commitment to social justice and the rights of marginalised people means some problems in the presentation of findings. The community researcher may want to present a convincing case to decision makers, and to do so will need to argue on the basis of research findings, presented as 'facts'. One cannot help but be conscious of the irony of this position and to some extent be troubled by ethical concerns about honesty, either as a moral principle, or simply in terms of the risk of being 'found out' and discredited. I am not convinced there is a general answer to these issues, but knowing that they exist can only sharpen awareness in each new context.

Were there types of research I would have refused?

It is very easy to think of examples of community research where a research consultant with strong value positions would be reluctant to be involved. For example, a survey commissioned by a housing developer, or a chemicals factory, or the local authority or police might be seen as conflicting with the interests of local residents, or at least of a significant group among them. Or an evaluation of a project by a funder might carry the presumption that this was a cost cutting exercise, seeking ways to undermine a valuable service provided by a voluntary group. In my own practice over a decade, I cannot recollect a single case of a contract offered, or a piece of work suggested, that appeared irredeemably impossible to work with. In a couple of cases I participated reluctantly, under pressure from management, but on each occasion the issue was that I would have preferred to prioritise other more interesting elements of a heavy workload. There was never a shortage of worthwhile research projects to keep me gainfully employed and committed to the task. Other research consultants, who are more 'hungry', may encounter more serious dilemmas than I ever did.

One person's perspective on community-based research cannot provide all the answers to serious questions about the role of research in contemporary community work. However, I hope that in reviewing my own practice and the lessons learned, this article has provided a useful framework though which both community workers and researchers can approach some of the key issues in this growing field.

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Resources and bibliography

For a full catalogue of the author's community-based research from 1991 to 2001 see
http://www.astoncharities.org.uk/research/catalogue.shtml

For methodological resources from the case studies and further discussion of the issues see
http://www.astoncharities.org.uk/research/census.shtml
and
http://www.astoncharities.org.uk/research/quest.shtml