Challenging the Empowerment Expectation

Learning, alienation and design possibilities in community-university research

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As community-university partnerships have become mainstream, many have celebrated their success in bridging different communities and building capacity, particularly in under-resourced neighbourhoods. Across the spectrum of approaches to these partnerships, researchers and funders have argued that community-university partnerships generate important collaborations, learning and development (Currie et al. 2005; Israel et al. 2006; King et al. 2009; Lederer & Season 2005; Williams et al. 2005), and these positive outcomes define allocation of project funding. Researchers also argue that community-university partnerships generate 'a process of ongoing collaboration and mutual learning, [that] will foster comparative research, training and the creation of new knowledge in areas of shared importance for the social, cultural or economic development of communities' (SSHRC 2011). These are ambitious goals, and many of these projects do strive to develop egalitarian research collaborations that will enable community organisations to thrive. Many also aim to generate transformative learning and social action through their research processes, as well as their results.

Research on how well these projects achieve their ambitious goals reflects the diversity of the field. Many studies report positively on their processes and their findings (Gaventa 1988; Guevara 1996; Hall 1985; Kidd & Byram 1979; Park et al. 1993; Tandon 1981), but recently there have been studies that have troubled the waters, especially when examining the impacts on the frontline workers who carry out the community-university research on behalf of their communities (Edwards & Alexander 2011; Greene et al. 2009; Kilpatrick et al. 2007; Warr, Mann & Tacticos 2010). These studies have highlighted the challenges community researchers, or peer researchers, face, and while they conclude that these projects are on the whole empowering, they question the assumption that these partnerships are inevitably empowering sites of learning. While the outcomes of learning, social action and empowerment are largely treated as a given in discussions of

community research, I question this and raise a counter-example of disempowerment and alienation generated through community survey collection.

Using the case of the Community Learning Collaborative (CLC), a pseudonym for a Canadian community-university partnership committed to addressing poverty through community-based participatory action research in low-income communities of colour, I examine what community researchers learnt through their participation in a survey of their neighbours. Rather than assume that their learning generated social action, I look at what they learnt and how they attempted to mobilise their learning. I argue that, while speaking to their neighbours during the survey process enabled community-researchers to learn a great deal about their communities and validated their existing knowledge, it did not necessarily generate engagement in community-led social action, and instead generated alienation. This contributes a counter-story to the dominant logic underlying community research, not to contest its potential or argue against its implementation, but to call for more careful consideration of how the design of research partnerships may enable or constrain participation and for more detailed accounts of what enables learning and empowerment in these collaborations and what does not. Rather than expect that empowerment and social action will naturally flow from community-university research projects, I argue for more specified claims that will help us to create more accountable and generative projects.

In the sections that follow, I first review the literature on community-university research partnerships, examining the assumption that access to information and research processes in a neighbourhood will inevitably create the conditions for increased community engagement. I also review the studies of peer researcher impact, which raises questions about the universality of the claims of community research. I then review the context of the CLC where I conducted this evaluation. Next, I review the methods used for generating data of a subset of the community researchers in the project. I then turn to the types of learning that the community researchers reported, first focusing on those who supported the goals of community-university partnerships and then reviewing the learning and alienation that we encountered as community-researchers became overwhelmed with the problems their respondents identified in the communities. Overall, I argue that community-university partnerships can be sites of learning and, within the CLC, that community-researchers learnt skills and were also able to critique their communities, which helped them engage with them more effectively. However, this was not enough to spur social action, and without infrastructure for mobilising these ideas collectively, a sense of disempowerment and alienation was created. I conclude by arguing that, for community research projects to meet their objectives of generating learning,

collaboration and community development, they need to design more opportunities for meaningful collaborative action in response to the findings of the research.

COMMUNITY-UNIVERSITY PARTNERSHIPS AND TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING GOALS

Community-university partnerships have become a mainstream approach to conducting research that bridges neighbourhoods and universities, bringing together multiple stakeholders and advancing an approach to knowledge that strives for accountability, capacity building and utility. Community-university research partnerships are intentional relationships between the two, designed to generate knowledge that serves to develop community organizations and the communities they are a part of (Currie et al. 2005). Within the broad mandate of community-university partnerships, there are many collaborative approaches to research, from community-based research (CBR), to participatory action research (PAR), action research and any number of other iterations of research that centre on partnership with impacted communities. These partnerships are increasingly popular (Woloshyn, Chalmers & Bosacki 2005) and attempt to meet the goals of multiple stakeholders. They have the potential to foster strong relationships of mutuality and to produce rigorous, relevant research that can be mobilised in multiple sites.

One of the explicit goals embedded within community-university alliances is that of mutual learning and community development. While some community-university alliances place less emphasis on co-learning and social action, participatory action research partnerships explicitly work towards political transformation via learning opportunities generated during the research process. PAR focuses on learning for social action, arguing that building partnerships between the university and community organisations can develop research programs that benefit and include participation of community members. In this approach the academic and community-based researchers are co-learners, and there is community participation in the development of the research and its use for education and change (Gaventa 1988; Guevara 1996; Hall 1985; Minkler 2000; Park et al. 1993; Tandon 1981). Furthermore, all of the approaches argue that research needs to comprise social investigation, education and action in order to share social knowledge with oppressed people (Maguire 1987). This methodology relies on the Freirean idea of the educative process (Freire 1970), in which people first reflect on their experiences, then make connections among their co-community members, and then use that information to develop a systemic analysis of the problem, which they then mobilise to address unjust power relations. Participatory research was born from popular education theory and practice and strives to create knowledge with

and for marginalised communities so that they are better able to change their living conditions (Hall 1985). All knowledge produced is intended to be mobilised in the interest of social transformation.

As an explicitly liberatory research strategy, it is not enough for people to merely understand the causes of the problems in their communities, they must also work collectively to change the systems that negatively impact their lives (Alvarez & Gutierrez 2001; Maguire 1987; Sohng 1996). Within PAR, significant emphasis is placed on the utilisation of research results by the community partners and many research agendas include the action component as part of the research project data (Gaventa 1988; Paradis 2009; Sohng 1996). Gaventa (1991, p. 121) describes participatory research as 'simultaneously a tool for the education and development of consciousness as well as mobilization for action', underscoring the need for mobilisation in relation to the learning and knowledge mobilisation components of a participatory research project. Paradis (2009, p. 46) argues that 'participatory research should support the empowerment of participants and communities in three ways: it should leave them feeling more capable and confident, it should help them exercise real political influence, and it should build skills which can be applied to other self-initiated projects'. All of these authors make it clear that building capacity for social action is an integral component of participatory research, and that through the dialectically related research-action process, community organisations and universities should create learning spaces that require and enable social action for transformation.

While there are many community-university research partnerships that successfully centre learning and enable social action in response to findings, many have warned that we should view these processes cautiously and engage with the substantive challenges of community-engaged research (Israel et al. 2006; Minkler 2004; Smith et al. 2010; Stoecker 2008; Travers et al. 2013; Warr, Mann & Tacticos 2010). They call for research that interrogates the challenges in community research and a grounded assessment of power relations, institutional constraints and other challenges that emerge in community-based research projects.

In particular, several studies focus on the challenging role of community researchers and the potential for their experiences to be productive and empowering, or not (Edwards & Alexander 2011; Greene et al. 2009; Kilpatrick et al. 2007; Warr, Mann & Tacticos 2010). These studies focus on the role of community/peer researchers in community-based research studies, documenting both scepticism and, at times, empowerment, despite the challenges on the ground. Greene et al. (2009, p. 365) trace peer researchers' experiences of capacity building, demonstrating their frustration with being 'capacity-built' and treated as tokens, as well as feeling a lack of connection to the community they were supposed to represent. On the other hand, they found the experience of becoming a peer researcher empowering, but

they felt sceptical and concerned about the conditions in their community. Similarly, Kilpatrick et al. (2007) document the experiences of peer researchers, tracing how they learnt to do research and highlighting their contributions to the project. The article also identifies the ways that youth researchers learnt skills that they thought would be valuable, while also noting a lack of clarity as to whether they were being effective. Warr, Mann and Tacticos (2010) note the lack of attention to the impacts on community researchers of conducting research as peers and the challenges, including the emotional impact of documenting distress and isolation in the community. But they also document the personal benefits of the peer research process, as well as the collective benefits and strong sense of community that was built. Thus, while these studies trouble the notion that community-university partnerships conducting research in communities using peer researchers are an unquestioned good, they find that they are generally beneficial for the research, the university and the peer researcher – despite the problems the latter may experience.

Edwards and Alexander (2011) are less sanguine about the prospects of community/peer researchers, arguing that calls for democratised research in the form of peer/community researchers often masks instrumental concerns about access to respondents and labour management, where claims to empowerment and learning are secondary to completing research tasks in an increasingly demanding neoliberal university environment. Significantly, Edwards and Alexander argue that, while community researchers learn useful research skills, many may need help in exiting their roles and leaving the positionality of a researcher. They also argue that 'there seems to be little acknowledgment in the literature of the fact that peer researchers remain in the community after the research and have to deal with any consequences' (p. 275). Their work points to positive outcomes in community research, but warns that the dual rationale of political empowerment and pragmatic data quality instrumentality may be a myth, and that we have little data on the impacts on peer researchers beyond their involvement as workers for the community-based research projects.

These studies of community/peer researchers point to new questions, which challenge the widely held assumption that learning through community research is necessarily empowering. What happens when a community-university research project that is intended to drive social action and community engagement fails to empower and build capacity? What happens when peer researchers experience community research as disempowering and alienating, rather than enabling deeper political engagement? I engage with these questions, bridging the assumptions of Freirean-inspired participatory action research projects and the calls for attention to challenges on the ground, particularly for peer researchers embedded in the community. I examine what they

learn and how their learning impacts their ability to participate in the community, troubling the assumption that knowledge of one's community is adequate to produce the conditions for social action.

THE PROJECT

This article examines the survey component of a five-year funded alliance between three universities and eight local community organisations in Toronto that made up the Community Learning Collaborative, or CLC (the project name is a pseudonym). This community-university partnership explicitly sought to connect research on learning, community development and social action in the interest of building capacity for community organising in Toronto's priority neighbourhoods. Priority neighbourhoods are identified by the city using indicators such as socio-economic status, proximity to services and the number of homicides, in order to funnel public and private resources to the most vulnerable communities. The CLC partnered with community organisations, including neighbourhood service organisations, health centres and activist groups, to conduct a study of community participation. This community-based research process included detailed case studies of neighbourhood organising, as well as a cross-city comparative study based on mixed-methods surveys conducted by community-based researchers from the participating communities.

The community-based surveys undertaken by CLC in nine Toronto neighbourhoods aimed to create a particular type of social engagement that blended research, community organising and civic engagement, and also offered participants opportunities to learn skills, investigate their communities and develop critiques of learning and social change strategies in their neighbourhoods. The survey attempted to gain a big-picture understanding of the anti-poverty organising and civic engagement that occurs every day in Toronto. The survey was designed by university researchers and was field tested and refined by one of the neighbourhood organisations' community-based researchers. The survey contained qualitative and quantitative questions, including Likert scales, multiple-choice questions and requests for descriptive qualitative responses. Among the qualitative questions, it asked participants for assessments of their geographic communities, their involvement in community activity or campaigns, and what they had learnt through their involvement.

Community researchers carried out the survey, using their social networks to recruit participants. These peer researchers were selected by the community organisations. The community researchers reflected the racial and ethnic diversity of their neighbourhoods. They reported different reasons for joining the teams, including being asked by staff or friends to do so, the financial stipends offered for each survey and gaining Canadian work experience that they could list on their resumes. Their level of engagement in their communities and organisations varied widely, depending on the neighbourhood. In some neighbourhoods, the community researchers were experienced leaders in the community

organisation and had long been involved in community activism. In others, the community researchers were invited to participate as a way of bringing them into the organisation; these researchers were newcomers to Canada and had fewer ties to the community and the community organisation. All community researchers were trained in basic research methodologies and on how to conduct and record these extensive surveys with their neighbours. All were asked to conduct 30 surveys. Each survey interview lasted between 30 and 90 minutes and was audio recorded. The surveys were conducted in multiple languages and respondents were drawn from the social networks of the community researchers and the user base of the community organisations. The survey data was coordinated by university researchers and entered and processed at the partnering universities.

METHOD

In this article, I reflect on community researchers' experiences as part of the CLC process. For my analysis, I focus on a subset of the community researchers. I examine the role of the community researchers who collected the survey data through interviews with people in their communities in order to understand how community researchers' participation impacted their views of community activism in their neighbourhood and their role within that work.

Participants in this reflective analysis were selected based on their status as community researchers who had completed the survey process for the research project. They were recruited from four organisations in three neighbourhoods where surveys were collected. All participants were active volunteers or staff within the community organisations and represented the racial and economic diversity of their neighbourhoods. One of the groups was made up of all White women, many of whom were involved in psychiatric survivor and affordable housing advocacy. Another group included Latina women, while another included Black youth. The final group was ethnically mixed, including recent immigrants from South and Central Asia.

Three focus groups representing different neighbourhoods were conducted. The first focus group included two participants from the local community organisation. The second included six participants from the community organisation and two university-affiliated participants. The third comprised six community researcher participants and five university-affiliated participants.

As part of the facilitation of a reflective process, community researchers mapped their neighbourhoods. They collectively drew the geographic landscape, identifying the boundaries of their neighbourhood and indicating the important areas of social life. They drew neighbourhood institutions, assets and places where people gathered. They were then asked to note the places they had learnt about or discovered through the community survey process. This question proved to be instructive, precisely because the

community researchers said they had not learnt about new things in the neighbourhood and could not add anything to their maps as a result. Throughout the mapping process, participants were asked to discuss what they had heard from the people they had interviewed, what they had learnt about their communities and how, and how they planned to integrate this new information into their lives.

Discussion in the focus groups was transcribed in full and community maps were photographed and included as part of the transcription. Codes and categories were developed through an abbreviated grounded theory process and iterative cycles of analysis. After the first transcription, initial codes emerged. These codes were added to and categorised after the review of the second transcription. Major themes of what people had learnt included skill building, grievance construction, systemic analysis and recognition of local knowledge.

THE UPSIDE: LEARNING, VALIDATION AND EMPOWERMENT

Community researchers immersed in survey collection learnt through formal and informal means and in multiple environments. They acknowledged the value of the knowledge they already had about their neighbourhood, gained research skills, learnt how to improve their community organisations, developed grievances based on the survey interviews, and constructed an initial analysis of the causes and potential solutions to some of those grievances.

Recognising Their Own Knowledge

Notably, what was acknowledged or relearnt was the information and knowledge the community researchers already had. They said they didn't really learn new things from the process, but it helped them to know what they already knew. When asked if they had learnt of any new resources that people access in their neighbourhood, one researcher said, 'No. We already knew! I learned about the issues and needs of the people, but not about any new things.' Repeatedly, community researchers said things like 'Yeah, I knew it from living here'. The process helped them to bring together what they knew from their experiences and to situate those experiences within a larger understanding of their communities. This recognition of the local knowledge also motivated some community researchers to do something about the problems they perceived in their communities. When asked about how the research had affected her, a community researcher said, 'It didn't change what I really knew. It just made me more, ok things need to get done. More like, Ok, Action, that's what I'm about.'

As they discussed the problems they faced in attempting to arrange or conduct interviews, they identified their solutions. The space to reflect and share proved valuable to the community researchers. One said, 'Mind you, I'm new to this place, so it's learning … so this is actually a good activity for me – just

visualizing the area.' The process of documenting what she already knew was helpful in solidifying and validating knowledge. Other exchanges between community researchers as they negotiated the co-construction of their maps allowed them to share information about their communities. They also shared about resources and assets, such as services or day care, discussed current events, such as recent police raids, and identified cultural spaces that other community researchers had not known about, for example, a Sri Lankan community mosque, a Filipino church and a Colombian community group. This process of reflection was important to their learning and something for which one community member specifically wanted more opportunities. She said that having more reflective spaces within the project would 'strengthen it, it would support the volunteers who are doing the research, and at the same time, the agency who's trying to sort it out.'

Research Skills

One significant thing that community researchers learnt was how to do research. This is the area where learning was most evident. Community researchers gained interviewing and research administration skills that informed their practice.

The interview skills community researchers gained occurred through formal learning in a training setting, where faculty and graduate students facilitated lectures and practice sessions for them. From the experience, community researchers developed strategies for improving their interviews. They were quite reflexive in their learning, and with each survey they conducted they refined their practice and informed each other's practice.

The community researchers also developed their own language for talking about the survey and why it was important, rejecting the framing the university had provided. Several said things like 'I think you should not go with this "anti-poverty" thing. People don't understand this, so go something like house issue, home issue, employment issue, then they'll understand you.' They developed strong critiques of the survey and in some instances supplanted the sections that did not work for them with different explanations or descriptions that they felt were more appropriate to their community, and also suggested changes to the survey. These included reframing the questions in the survey to be less repetitive, including more resident input in the survey, incentivising participation, and employing someone from the community to serve as the liaison between the community organisation and the university. These suggestions represent significant learning about how one conducts research and may enable both community researchers and university researchers to become better researchers in the future. Unfortunately, a different partnering community organisation had piloted the survey, and so the critiques that were developed were not integrated into the survey design, frustrating the community researchers and diminishing their sense of ownership over the research process, potentially leading to subsequent feelings of disempowerment.

Improving the Community Organisation

Through the process of interviewing community members and reflection, the community researchers developed several recommendations for improving their community organisations. Organisational outreach to the community was a key area that community members reflected on. At one site, community researchers connected immigrants' need for Canadian work experience through volunteer work to the organisation's need for outreach volunteers in an innovative way. One researcher said:

> This office, they need to communicate with everyone in the neighbourhood, so they should use volunteers for this purpose. I can take their brochures, or their literature or whatever to buildings. So it can be a small job. But whenever there is some seminar [at the community organisation], they have to struggle a lot to gather people, so volunteers can do this work. The problem is that there are potential volunteers, but they are not being used.

Other community researchers learnt how limited the outreach of the community organisation was and were surprised by how few people were familiar with the services available to them. Some community researchers immediately began to develop strategies to close the gap between services offered and what was perceived to be available in the neighbourhood.

Additionally, the research process gave community members a space to critically reflect on their community organisation. One set of community researchers made connections between the widespread lack of local hiring in their neighbourhood and the lack of local hiring within the organisation. As one posed, 'So if the [community organisation] is not doing that, how do you expect some big place like Coca-Cola to do it?' The researchers recognised the inconsistencies that were playing out within the organisation and wanted the community organisation to modify its hiring practices so that they would be more aligned with the values the community researchers held.

Grievance Construction

The community researchers all conducted surveys in their own neighbourhood. Through these interviews, they learnt about the specific problems that the survey probed, focusing on housing, food security/nutrition, safety, education and health. From this process, the community researchers gained an intimate understanding of the problems of their community. This was a process of 'learning about the problems of the people', as one researcher said, as they interviewed and learnt from their neighbours. This process enabled the community researchers to construct grievances, as they became experts on what was going on in their neighbourhood, and these were distinct from the findings of the surveys as a whole. In each neighbourhood, the responses were different, but reflected the specific concerns of the community members. The researchers commented on a number of concerns, including youth issues (gangs, lack of activities,

youth as targets of police), housing issues (affordability, low quality, security, poor management), unemployment (especially for newcomers), immigration (deportation, credential problems), transit, day care, isolation, overpopulation, the economic mix of the neighbourhood (gentrification), gender roles and culture, amongst others. One community researcher said, 'I learned a lot of the issues. I was thinking, I am living in this area I surveyed last year also, but this survey was different from last year.'

Analysis of grievance issues

In some cases, the community researchers were able to identify patterns in responses and move beyond the basic iteration of grievances. They began to analyse the causes of the problems and think systemically about the broader phenomena. Out of the more than 15 grievances named, community researchers only began to dig deeper on three.

From the grievance of unemployment, both groups of community researchers identified the lack of local hiring as a central impediment to people from the community gaining employment. One researcher said:

> Another thing is that here we have a big mall, lots of stores, but the people who are working here, most of them are coming from the other communities. Why they are not giving us – we have qualifications, we are hard workers ... like, most of my participants they said, 'Why they are not giving us chance to work here first?'

Many other researchers shared this assessment. They looked at the mall, the stores, the local factories, and identified that the companies hired from outside the community and could have provided a significant number of jobs to people within the neighbourhood. They did not understand why this was happening, but questioned the bigger picture. They understood that it was endemic to the area and that this could be a key improvement if they could change the hiring practices.

One group of community researchers interrogated the problem of recognising the credentials of well-educated newcomers to Canada, which also related to unemployment. They not only understood that unemployment was a problem in their neighbourhood, but also understood the reasons why so many newcomers could not get good jobs. In some cases, the analysis was coming directly from the community members who were interviewed, and in other cases, the analysis emerged from the researchers hearing multiple stories and fitting the pieces together themselves. The community researchers felt obligated to act on what they perceived to be a systemic injustice, saying:

> I want to write to people, the Canadians who work in embassies back in my country, and ask why are they encouraging people to come here, when we say 'This is the qualification we have, this is the type of professionals we are,' why are they encouraging and saying this is available, and when we come here we're left alone? Because that's what happened to ALL these people here! And ask them why? It's

not that people are desperate to come here, they want to come here because Canada is a better place, but they are professionals in their field. Once they come here and they say 'No, we are not recognizing you, I don't recognize this.' It doesn't make any kind of sense.

The community researchers also identified patterns in the low quality of affordable housing, where one building management company was not meeting its obligations to tenants in numerous buildings within the neighbourhood. Because the researchers were interviewing many people, they were able to see the bigger picture in a way that individual respondents could not. Below is an example of the way the community researchers identified broader problems in social housing in the neighbourhood:

Robin: One of my respondents, she was living in Flemingdon (the neighbourhood), I think she was living in [public] housing, one of the problems she mentioned was security, security is not safe. Because if they lock their stuff in the downstairs, then they break the lock and remove everything. Her main concern was this, that it's not safe.

Linda: It's the same thing in Thorncliffe. We have a problem in 26, 27 and 50 – it's the landlord, you wrote the letter, or you have a problem in the apartment, he only just wrote the letter to say you have to pay the rent, and that's it. So that problem is, because I live in 27, and we have the same problem – they broke the locks, and they steal all the things. So I think yeah, we have that problem in 27, 26 …

Keith: I think the administration is the same for these buildings. Transglobe. I haven't seen such unprofessional people in my life. Whatever – you abuse them, you scold them, there is no result.

Jenny: Wait, you live in one of those buildings? Ah, you live in 26 …

The conversation continued, as the community researchers began to discuss the ways they could hold the management company accountable for the poor conditions in their buildings. This was among the most concrete example of community researchers translating their community surveys into an analysis and strategising around collective actions they could take.

These examples demonstrate an initial interrogation of the grievances that the community researchers were introduced to through the surveys and their lived experiences in the community. Their understandings of the issues, while sophisticated in some respects, were still in the formative stages. With more time, reflection and investigation, they would deepen their analysis and identify root causes and potential interventions.

THE DOWNSIDE: ALIENATION AND DISEMPOWERMENT

While the researchers learnt through their experiences of conducting research, one particular gap in their learning was observed. As described in the literature, participatory action research entails a commitment to social action and should build

capacity for social change within the community. Yet, within our survey process, as participants identified grievances and built skills, they did not reach the point of self-organising to address the problems they identified in their communities through the survey process. The survey in and of itself was an insufficient tool for generating a strong enough critique to mobilise people to action, which led to complicated feelings about the research project. Through the focus group discussions, I found that the community researchers felt disempowered by the survey process. They reflected that they had learnt/relearnt about all the problems in their communities and they felt like there was nothing they could do about all the grievances they were constructing.

When asked what they would do with the information they gained, one respondent said, 'What do you mean? Like we have to take action or something? If we had power we could say anything. We don't have power.' As a group of newcomer immigrants, many of the community researchers felt disempowered and alienated in Toronto more generally. Several had come to Canada as skilled professionals, as had many of their neighbours, and they found their experience of joblessness because they lacked 'Canadian experience' as deeply demoralising. Their sense that they lacked power was related to their community's larger context, the expansive sense of lack of opportunities and racism. Further, these participants were not and had not been embedded in organised social action in Canada. Their sense of possibility was perhaps constrained differently from some of the other neighbourhood survey groups, who had infrastructure and history participating in community organising. The possibility that the former participants could build power was foreign to them; when a university researcher encouraged them to consider collective action to build power, they responded sceptically.

Another respondent said, 'Mostly the problem is employment, so we can't do anything about it, you know. We can't hire them, because we don't have jobs for ourselves.' The grievances they constructed and the analysis they developed collectively drove them to very narrow opportunities for intervention. The responses that community researchers encountered in their interviews with their neighbours did not invite them to think about collective action. Instead, the community researchers reported that their respondents were critical of their conditions but thought there was little possibility of the conditions changing. These responses generated, and likely reproduced, demobilising frames, where the problem and its potential solution lay outside the scope of what community members could address. Even where there might have been opportunities for the peer researchers to explore other examples in Toronto of immigrant-led catering cooperatives and non-profits engaging in social enterprises that created jobs and training opportunities, the community researchers in this

group framed their problems in ways that limited, rather than expanded, their opportunities to engage. Thus, when encouraged to participate, they could not imagine this happening.

The process of survey collection left the community researchers feeling 'powerless' and without clear means of acting on their problems. Although some participatory research clearly focuses on collective action, this case left community researchers in a gap between information and activation. They reported being submerged in negative information about the community, despite all of the positive things that they also reported learning. This was an interesting outcome, indeed, because the structure of the survey did not necessarily ask respondents to report on the deficits of the community. Yet, the peer researchers reported that they had learnt of so many problems in the neighbourhood that they felt worse about the community and their potential, as participants in the community organisation, to create change.

Most troubling was the statement by a community researcher about her feelings: 'It's not powerless, like we take our issues, like for example our meeting today. You people (the university researchers) know about our issues, we, hopefully, like you said you will be talking about these things in the future, so we feel a little bit powerful, because we brought those issues to you.' She abdicated her power to the university, and rather than feel obligated (personally or as a community researcher) to fight to change her community, she saw the university affiliates as responsible for taking the information and creating whatever changes they saw fit. She believed that the university researchers, particularly the faculty, had access to policy-makers and that they could, and would, take the results of the survey, interpret them and produce significant change in the neighbourhood. Her thought process was, in many ways, steeped in the dominant paradigm of research, where academics have historically held all the power to determine the results and mobilise them. However, this was particularly frustrating, in that the university researchers thought they had been working to foster a collaborative project, where community organisations and peer researchers had a sense of ownership of the process.

There were two exceptions. Community researchers identified mobilisation as a possibility that emerged from their interviews; the other emerged as a response to a university faculty member. When prompted about starting a campaign, one community researcher said, 'If you (the academic) have a demonstration or a walk-out, I'll be there.' While this respondent was willing to take action, he, like his other community researcher colleagues, deferred to the university affiliates to take responsibility for coordinating the action. Rather than building a sense of capacity, the survey process inadvertently left community researchers feeling dependent on the university to address the issues raised by the survey questionnaires.

The community researchers were ready to act and looking for an outlet for the grievances they had constructed and the

analyses they were developing. One researcher said, 'Unless we get someone who is in power, like a government representative, or some employer, unless we engage such people, it is useless. I mean, sitting together and having a cup of tea, or having dinner or lunch – afterwards it is of no use.' He identified the reflection process as useless and argued that there was no connection between the research work and the potential to change policies. Despite the clear desire among the community researchers to improve their communities, the survey process seemed disconnected from any actions that might be taken with or on behalf of their communities.

At the other site, participants also struggled to put their information into action. One community researcher asked of the data:

> Where is it heading? Like, ok this research takes place, we get all this information, it's a great initiative, it's a great work, and I'm glad that we are doing it, 'cause one thing is to make sure people's stories are told, but where are we heading? But how impactful will it be? How realistic will it be? Are specific people going to be engaged in the process of achieving whatever it is?

Without a focus on action or a venue for the community researchers to continue their involvement, they struggled with feelings of disempowerment and irrelevance. Despite their efforts to build a sense of ownership of the research project, the above community researcher had no sense that she could control the direction, or that she even knew why they were doing the research. This participant, unlike those in the group previously described, was an established organiser who understood social action and had strong ties to activists in the community. The fact that she too ceded the responsibility and ownership to the academics in the room raised a red flag. Unlike participants at the other community site, participants in this group did not report feeling less able to participate, but they did share feelings of directionlessness and having no way of embedding the knoweldge that they had spent months gathering into a coherent strategy that would impact their communities.

The disconnect between learning and action became a central discussion point among the university-affiliated participants, and steps were taken to continue the survey process beyond what was originally planned in order to address feelings of irrelevance. In collaboration with the community partners, we designed and implemented a collaborative data analysis process that we hoped would bridge the praxis gap that our initial survey process failed to address. After the university-based researchers collected the surveys and processed the qualitative data using SPSS, members of the survey teams were trained in quantitative analysis and were invited to participate in collaborative data analysis sessions. These multi-day sessions brought the community researchers together with the university-based researchers to interpret the findings that were emerging. These sessions included

bringing one community researcher from each neighbourhood across the city to conduct cross-case analysis and develop a comprehensive analysis of the results. The results from this process were documented and circulated to the community organisations via the CLC newsletters. The findings included were written by both community-based researchers and university-based researchers.

While the collaborative data analysis process is outside the scope of this article, it is important to note that the project leadership team took these concerns very seriously and worked to create actionable strategies that might provide concrete opportunities for engagement. Unfortunately, the majority of the community researchers were not involved, largely because of financial limitations, so many of the participants whose views are documented here concluded their participation feeling dissatisfied with their experience as researchers and uncertain of how to continue their involvement in the community.

CONCLUSIONS

While there have been studies that look at the impact of community research on peer researchers, they tend to highlight the positive aspects of learning while glossing over the challenges. Some studies have identified the challenges peer researchers face as they straddle two identities, one as researcher, one as community member, and try to navigate the conflicting accountabilities.

However, in this article I have argued that little has been written on the situation where community research projects have been experienced by peer researchers as disempowering and as having reduced their willingness to participate in community action. This is particularly important for us to examine because so much of the community-university partnership research literature assumes that, through the collective process of researching and analysing data, community researchers will become more invested in community-based social action. This research counters that narrative as it describes cases where community researchers became alienated through their participation in their communities. It points to flaws in the implementation of peer interview surveys that collect large amounts of data, but offer few opportunities for community researchers to process the negative feedback about their community or to funnel their sense of injustice into purposeful and winnable social action. The resulting sense of disempowerment suggests that, as research teams design and implement community interviews and surveys, we cannot assume that the process and results will be inherently empowering for the community researchers, and instead must design ways to link the survey process to ongoing campaign work that can shift their sense of alienation and provide substantive outlets for the grievances they construct.

CLC's survey process demonstrates that community-university alliances can and do produce important sites of collaborative learning. What is clear, though, is that learning more about one's community, gaining skills, affirming one's

knowledge of the community and developing grievances are critically important, yet insufficient for flowing into, supporting, or fomenting social action for community development. We discovered that if our goal is, indeed, to strengthen community engagement work that is being carried out in neighbourhoods, we must do more than train community members to survey their peers. The critical learning opportunities lay in developing a collective analysis of what their respondents said, why they said it, and what it means for their community. This analysis must be tied to mobilisation strategies that enable people to feel empowered and begin to challenge the problems their surveys unearth. Through the reflection process, it became clear that many of the learning opportunities available through this community-university survey partnership were embedded in the analysis, but that without concerted attention, the opportunity to truly leverage and mobilise community action based on the results of the survey was lost.

Several of the neighbourhoods that participated in this project had clearer paths to participating in social action via their organisational partners' programs. However, those included in this study had weaker ties to the organisations, and the organisations themselves were less involved in community activism. This meant that these community researchers had far less infrastructure to support their engagement in the community and fewer explicit links between the survey and social action. These tenuous links generated the dissatisfaction with the process and the overall sense that the community was in dire straits and that only the university's researchers could save it. These weak ties point to strategies that might mitigate the alienation documented here. The survey, in particular, did not have clear guidance for the community researchers and respondents to become involved in action based on their grievances. In communities where there were more links between the surveys, the case studies and ongoing social action in the neighbourhood, there were clearer trajectories for engagement. In those cases, the community researchers had more opportunities to be involved, to target their critiques and use the relationships they built to engage in their communities. While my data does not speak to the experiences of those community researchers, it clearly suggests that generating grievances among community researchers is an important part of learning that takes place in community-university partnership research projects, but it also suggests that, without intentional strategies for mobilising this learning, these research projects can become alienating for peer researchers rather than empowering.

The community survey may yet be an important tool for constructing grievances, developing a systemic analysis and planning actions to address the problems the community members and researchers identify. But the initial process only facilitated community researchers through part of a Freirean process (Freire 1970). However, we have asked participants to reflect on their experiences and make connections, but have only begun to develop

the systemic analysis that will hopefully provide the foundation for a campaign seeking to address the root causes of the concerns raised by community members. In all, the process was ripe with opportunities for learning, and though the survey component may have fallen short of its potential to catalyse collective learning for social change, there are opportunities to continue to leverage the experience and data in ways that will strengthen the communities involved and fully realise the goals of partnership in community-university partnerships.

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