IS THERE A CASE FOR COMMUNITY BASED RESEARCH?
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'Research can be a weapon ... in a challenge to be more intelligent and
rational in the process of shaping and applying social welfare measures'
(Titmuss 1968)

Since the late 1960's there has been an upsurge in the view that
ordinary citizens can have a part to play in the construction and
implementation of social policies: an idea which has found expression
in demands for participation and in the rise of community action groups.
Some of these groups have been quite transitory in nature, whilst others
have become well established organisations. For many of these groups
'research' is regarded as forming an integral part of community work.
Yet the process of fact gathering and effective communication of
research findings is no easy task.

It is argued that social researchers should respond to the rising
pressure for more effective popular participation in the political
process. Bearing in mind that both community development and social
research have similar aims of raising the levels of social, economic and
political competence to the local community and thus encouraging a
greater degree of control over resources, it is clear that the social
researcher can assist the community worker by transferring his skills
and methods in a way that are educational, consultative and supportive.

With the intention of responding to this argument by establishing a
community research advisory centre at the Polytechnic of North London, I
carried out a survey to identify the origins, conduct and outcome of
community research. Results from some 220 groups in Camden, Hackney,
Haringey and Islington demonstrated that research and campaigning
featured as their second most important daily concern and that many
research activities are carried out on behalf of various socially
disadvantaged groups in the community. These covered such issues as
community needs assessment, housing, unemployment, welfare rights,
health, leisure, education, and training. The survey found, however,
that groups do lack the knowledge, skills, training and resources
necessary to identify and conceptualise issues clearly, design studies,
conduct investigations, collate and analyse results as well as to
effectively communicate research findings to the policy maker to ensure
their absorption into the public decision making process.

The findings led to the organisation of a conference at PNL, the main
aim of which was to offer community groups a forum to disseminate some
of their research methods and findings and also to offer workshops for
community workers to gain an introduction into basic research methods
such as: interviewing, questionnaire design, statistical processing,
information searching, dissemination of research results.

The conference, however, proved popular not only with community workers
from many different types of groups but also with consultant community
researchers, academics, professional researchers, statisticians and
Local Government departments - some ninety people in all.

In his introductory talk, entitled 'What counts as knowledge? How do we get it? How do we use it?' Dr Paul Corrigan drew our attention to problems associated with each of these issues. This analysis argues that the relationship between the community need for factual research material and the researcher's ability to provide it has never really worked in a satisfactory way. One reason for this is that what counts as knowledge is usually what a social researcher defines as interesting - which is often very different from what counts as knowledge in people's ordinary lives. Once defined as such, however, the intellectual in a sense owns it. It is this ownership which creates a tension for community research. New methods of collecting knowledge need to be developed by social researchers which are more apt and in sympathy with the social reality of people's lives. It is not simply a matter of changing research methods, however, for the gap can only be bridged by a new set of social relationships between researcher and researched.

Researchers have separated themselves off from the political process but the only way to make their research matter is to work with powerful allies in the social world. It has now become necessary to find ways of constructing social relationships who can share the ownership of projects and see them as their issues to fight for. In short researchers must relate to the community, listen to them, their view of what counts as knowledge, their view of how to get it and their view of how it can be used.

In contrast to Dr Corrigan's paper, the four community group contributors gave details of how they had been able to produce valid research without the use of external researchers, but each raised important and similar problems to those exposed by him. A housing association in Camden, for instance, in their attempt to campaign for decent secure accommodation for single people produced an influential report from a simple monitoring process in their office. Results showed that the Local Authority were basing policy on incorrect information. It was argued that the essential feature of the report was its simplicity; 'ownership' did not present a problem since all members of staff could work on it, nor did it need a computer to analyse results. Its major problem, however, was the dissemination process, in spite of good publicity, with press conferences, radio interviews etc. It was generally agreed that successful campaigning required a great deal of staying power and long follow up.

These sentiments were reiterated by an Islington group who were also earnestly attempting to raise the profile of their client group - ESN adolescents - in order to obtain some fair share of resources. It became clear to the audience, however, that the success achieved so far was as much due to the personal dedication and knowledge of the speaker than it was to their sophisticated piece of research!

Successful community research was also illustrated by a women's campaigning group in Haringey. For them community research challenges the politically neutral objective basis of most applied social research, its job is not just to quantify but to expose the forces which create situations. They draw distinctions between top down and bottom up

research and argue that the latter approach is more likely to nurture and empower disadvantaged groups in their campaigning.

The fourth speaker gave details of a very different type of research. Using the resources of a University student, they investigated the psychological identity of Turkish youth in Britain today. The findings were used to feed back into an ethnic community centre, whose organisers were able to respond with more appropriate activities for their members.

General discussion areas included problems of acquiring funds once a group acknowledges their campaigning function; how to break new ground on issues which have little literature written about them; how to overcome the overlap of research carried out by groups, and how to develop new methods more appropriate to community campaigns. But the two main problem areas raised were around the issues of dissemination of research and how to get people to respond to findings - and the use of statistical material. Regarding the latter, a generalised fear and suspicion of computers and statistics was voiced. The hiatus between expert researcher and community was articulated in terms of the former's concern for hard data which led to biased precoded questions constructed to suit the computer and the latter's desire to express general feelings.

Members of the audience were, in the main, professionals, yet they still retain a deep distrust of statistical methods. The message for Radical Statisticians, therefore, must surely be that they have an important educative role to play in demystifying the function of statistics. They need to demonstrate how powerful statistical data can be acquired and used to great benefit; how the figures have been created and what political biases might be present - in short, the voluntary sector needs help in overcoming fear in order to develop more influential methods of radical social research.

Ironically, one of the most popular afternoon workshops proved to be on statistical analysis and information searching, which suggests that a second community conference around this topic might be successful!

In the main, this conference and my research has demonstrated that there is quite clearly a very strong case for community research - what community workers are demanding, however, is training in innovative research methods and new strategies of dissemination so that they are able to conduct their own independent investigations. The new community research unit hopes to respond accordingly.