Community based research and evaluation models: their applicability to social regeneration programmes debated through an analysis of the literature

Louise Warwick-Booth

University of Sheffield
Department of Sociological Studies
Elmfield, Northumberland Road
S10 2TU Sheffield
E-mail: sog02lw@sheffield.ac.uk

Abstract

This paper discusses the growing interest in more participatory ways of producing research within the social sciences and how these approaches theoretically relate to social regeneration. The current literature within public health, social work, and evaluation fields is drawn upon and highlighted to identify the potential benefits and pitfalls of community based approaches. Given that there is growing interest in alternative ways of using both evaluation and research in a number of fields, is there space within regeneration settings for the development of these models? This paper pays attention to social regeneration settings asking if such contexts are suitable places in which to develop community based research and evaluation models. This paper argues that despite the gap in the social regeneration literature in terms of community based research models, there are several areas in which community based research can potentially contribute to regeneration.

Introduction

Within the social sciences in recent years there has been a growing interest in more participatory ways of producing research, with participation by non-researchers in the different aspects of both research and design. During the last decade the growing emphasis of public and private funders on outcome based community service initiatives has spurred interest in collaborative and participatory forms of research and evaluation (Cousins and Earl, 1992; Fetterman, 1996).

Community based research is thus identified as a philosophy of inquiry encouraging active participation in research from all those involved (Cockerill et al, 2000). Discussion within the evaluation field over the past two decades has focused upon the benefits and the problems of including programme participants and other key stakeholders in the design and administration of evaluations (Ayers, 1987; Folkman and Rai, 1997). Consequently, several participatory evaluation approaches are discussed
within the literature including inclusive evaluation (Mertens, 1999), participatory, collaborative, stakeholder and empowerment evaluation (Patton, 1997).

Similar discussions are evident within the social welfare arena. Hess and Mullen (1995) discuss how multiple collaborative approaches to enhancing knowledge are emerging, arguing that they facilitate the development of practice knowledge. Thus, the development of interactive research practices, involving both professional researchers and the community, as partners within research are evident within public health (see Baker et al, 1999).

Despite this increasing interest across a number of fields, a largely unexplored area remains. Are community based research approaches applicable within social and community regeneration programmes? Certainly, evaluation has become increasingly important in such contexts. Bachtler and Mitchie (1997) discuss the upgrading of importance accorded to the evaluation of European structural and cohesion policies with specific social regeneration aims, arguing that evaluation contributes to a significant increase in awareness and understanding of the value, purpose and conduct of research amongst a range of actors. Perhaps more importantly, they argue that the role of evaluation within European Union regional policy continues to grow. Furthermore, Diez (2001) argues that participatory evaluation seems to be more appropriate to the specific characteristics of some of the new regional policies and more suitable for sorting out the problems posed by their evaluation. Indeed, the European Union is acting as a driving force behind research and empirical analysis around new evaluation methods and as a disseminator of new evaluation techniques (Diez, 2001). On the basis of this increased interest within evaluation and its potentially widening role, focus needs to be directed to participatory research to determine if it has a role to play within social regeneration. In fact, some research approaches, as tools of community development work are not new. For example, community profiling, needs assessments, social audits and community consultations have all played a role in initiatives such as City Challenge and Neighbourhood Renewal Initiatives (Hawtin et al, 1994). However, these approaches are not well documented within the regeneration literature leaving the question of whether community based research and evaluation can contribute within such settings unanswered.

Overview of Community Based Research

What is community based research?

Community based research emphasizes the participation and influence of non-academic researchers in the process of creating knowledge (Israel et al, 1998). Community based research is rooted in the community, serves a community’s interests and frequently encourages community members to participate at all levels (Sclove, 1997). In short, community based research is research conducted within a community as a social and cultural entity, with the active engagement and influence of community members in either some or all aspects of the research process (Israel et al, 1998). There is however, no specific ‘type’, format or model for a community based research approach and successful community based research generally
involves the collaboration of community members, organizational representatives and researchers. This approach is actually an orientation to research with a heavy accent on trust, power, dialogue, community capacity building and collaborative inquiry working in combination and sometimes attempting to facilitate social change (Minkler and Wallerstein, 2003). Within the literature community based research is described as a collaborative, participatory, empowering and transformative process (Hills and Mullett, 2000). The literature offers many definitions of community based research, which tend to overlap in terms of similarity. For example,

Sclove (1997: 542) argues that community based research can be defined as research rooted in the community, serving a community’s interests and frequently encouraging citizen participation at all levels.

Hills and Mullett (2000:1) describe a community based approach as valuing the contribution that community groups make in the development of knowledge about the community. Thus, “community based research is a collaboration between community groups and researchers to create new knowledge to bring about change.”

Minkler and Wallerstein (2003:4) describe it as “…a collaborative approach to research that involves all partners in the research process and recognises the unique strengths that each brings.”

What are its principles?

The key principle of community based research remain both characteristic to the approach and unchanging.

Epistemologically, community based research is consistent with constructivist and critical theory paradigms and their emphasis on the socially created nature of scientific knowledge (Israel et al, 1998). Community based research acknowledges the value of multiple ways of knowing and more significantly, it recognizes the value of knowledge contributed by community members. Thus, a clear principle of community based research is its critique of positivist approaches to data collection, which emphasize objectivity and tend to view research participants as objects to be studied rather than as actual participants within the research process. In contrast, community based research rests on an extended epistemology, which endorses the argument that the knower participates in the known and that evidence can be generated in many ways (Hills and Mullett, 2000).

In ontological terms, community based research adopts a postmodernist perspective in relation to the exploration of knowledge. Thus, knowledge is as much about politics as it is about understanding. Therefore, understanding research focuses not only on method but also upon the ways in which knowledge is contrived and the benefits that amass to people who control the creation and production of knowledge. Hence, community based research concentrates on individual understandings and meanings, as they are experienced. Indeed, the inquirer and the participant are perceived as being
connected in such a way that the findings are inseparable from their relationship (Guba and Lincoln, 1989).

On a theoretical level, community based research sees theory as something that is unknown. Community based research views theory being created by traveling through the iterations of action and reflection, which leads to praxis and generates evidence for future practice (Hills and Mullett, 2000).

Indeed, at the axiological level, in relation to the theory of value, community based research has interest in more than just the usual research outcome. The utility of the research is judged on the difference it makes in transforming the community. Consequently, community based research sees capacity building as worthwhile both at the individual and community level (Hills and Mullett, 2000).

In terms of methodology, the methods adopted as part of any community based approach are not predetermined but rather emerge from the chosen principles of the project and the research questions. Irrespective of which method is applied in practice, the approach accommodates the full participation of those involved (Hills and Mullett, 2000). Indeed, the methods used emphasize a continual dialectic of iteration, analysis, assessment, reiteration and reanalysis (Guba and Lincoln, 1989).

Community based research is also underscored by the principle of partnership working, aiming to integrate knowledge and to produce benefits to all partners involved in the research process. Hypothetically those involved participate as equal members and share control over all phases of the research process (Israel et al, 1998).

Finally, community based research rests upon the principle of empowerment; it is said to build upon strengths and resources within communities and to promote a co-learning and empowering process. Thus, participants in the process arguably gain knowledge, skills, capacity and power (Israel et al, 1998).

These aspects of community based research are the most commonly discussed however, there are a range of other principles emphasized within the literature. Hills and Mullett (2000) outline six principles of community based research including systematic planning, relevance to the community, community involvement, problem solving, social change and sustainability. Israel et al (1998) also discuss several principles of community based research within the health field including the recognition of the community as a unit of identity, building strengths within the community, facilitating partnerships, integrating beneficial knowledge for those involved, empowerment and the dissemination of knowledge to all partners. Clearly, these principles can be applied to community based research models in any field, and more particularly within social regeneration. However, this list of principles is not exhaustive and obscures the fact that some may be more important depending upon the context of the research, the partnership collaboration and the organisations involved. Essentially, the application of any model of community based research in any field will depend upon many factors.
What are its benefits?

So, when the approach is applied in practice what is likely to occur? Several beneficial results relating to involvement within community based research are illustrated within the literature.

The development of skills, confidence and employability amongst community members involved in the process (Green et al, 2000) can result from participation in community based research. Stakeholders can gain knowledge, training, experience and insights into the technical aspects of research, whilst simultaneously developing an appreciation for the usefulness and meaningfulness of the data generated (Fetterman, 1996). Participation can also develop new social relationships, trust and social efficacy (Schloves et al, 1998). Individuals can clearly learn from each other by sharing their personal experiences as well as going out into the community to gather information (Papineau and Kiely, 1996). Involvement can also contribute to personal development through the learning of specific skills, such as computer skills, planning skills and process skills (Papineau and Kiely, 1996). Involvement in research potentially creates leaders at different levels, who represent a range of skills and functions (Greve, 1975). Therefore, community based research can create more sustainable improvements within the community by enhancing the position, skills and knowledge of people located within the research process.

The achievement of more positive outcomes is also highlighted. Conventional research and development have had some negative effects for example, pollution, ethical breaches and the creation of weapons of mass destruction. Arguably community based research tends not to produce such negative consequences but rather contributes directly to preventing, mitigating or remedying them (Schloves et al, 1998).

Community based research can also focus upon a more local agenda through the raising of specific local issues and concerns and often involves local groups reacting to problems at their level (Schloves et al, 1998) allowing research to be steered in the direction of what local people really want. Consequently, such an approach can increase knowledge within local settings and lead to the freer flow of significant information. The process of involving community members in disseminating the research findings arguably leads to an increased acceptance and use of the results (Ayers, 1987).

Indeed, community based research has been discussed as leading to increases in networking practices. Community based research involves the building up of useful contacts and consequently the strengthening of social networks (Greve, 1975).

Clearly, community based research offers many benefits to individuals and groups employing the methodology, as the literature illustrates. These benefits can be theoretically ascribed to social regeneration contexts if the approach were to be adopted within them. Furthermore, these benefits
can be maximised through the use of support, training and the dissemination of models of good practice.

What are its problems?

However, all research is problematic and the literature confirms this by highlighting several negative aspects associated with community based research.

Firstly, the problem of power imbalances is frequently discussed. Researchers vary in their orientation towards people as active subjects in the research process and towards critical scrutiny of both themselves and their objectives. Consequently, it has been argued that consideration must be given to issues of power and control (Cockerill et al, 1998). Ideally power differentials should be neutralized so that the interests of the powerful do not take precedence over those of other participants (Stringer, 1996). This approach to power complements arguments that a bottom up approach is the best way to facilitate the process of community based research (Israel et al, 1996). However, how realistically this can be implemented in practice remains questionable. The literature argues that one of the major difficulties in achieving participation is overcoming the power differences, which often disempower participants (Nichols, 2002). Finally these power differences and the challenges of dealing with heterogeneous groups involved in the process are argued to add time and strain to the process (Mathie and Green, 1997).

Furthermore, partnerships are also problematic in relation to power imbalances. Partnership is a discourse often adopted within policy makers’ discussions but the problems of power imbalances in the practice of partnerships are widely overlooked (Taylor, 2000). In effect research can become part of the problem rather than the solution because holding the capability of defining need and focus means being powerful (Lloyd et al 1996). Both partnership and empowerment do not just simply happen, they require facilitating and resourcing. The question remains as to whether partnership research creates the illusion of change, co-opted to maintain the status quo or whether it really does make an empowering difference (Lloyd et al, 1996).

Secondly, establishing trust can be problematic. Given that research does not always achieve its aims, it is unsurprising that a lack of trust is also illustrated as a problem. This frequently discussed challenge again relates to the relationships between researchers and non-professionals in that there may be a lack of trust and a perceived lack of respect between them (Israel et al, 1998).

Thirdly, the issue of legitimacy is raised within the literature. Questions of legitimacy can arise when this approach is adopted because some commentators do not regard community based research as genuine. The predominance of the scientific method in some areas may make it difficult to convince colleagues, funders and potential partners of the value of this type of research (Israel et al, 1998). Indeed, despite community based approaches being widely accepted a concern still persists that the scientific integrity, reliability and validity of these studies is compromised.
(Telfair and Mulvihill, 2000). Despite these criticisms, advocates answer that scientific and objective approaches to research have traditionally ignored the most vulnerable and least powerful (Mertens, 1999), therefore they too are open to criticism.

Another area in which potential problems may arise is that of representation. Involvement, especially involving the most vulnerable is a challenge. Key questions, which require answers, include who actually represents the community and more crucially how the community is defined (Israel et al., 1998)? Community is another discourse employed within policy makers’ jargon, often without the recognition that communities are diverse rather than homogenous entities (Taylor, 2000). Folkman and Rai (1997) in reflecting upon facilitating a participatory community self evaluation describe their overall experience as maneuvering between different world views and coping with the pressures, anxieties and frustrations which followed.

Finally, time is identified as a problem within the literature. Community based research is more time consuming than traditional research as a result of establishing trust and good working relationships amongst all of those involved in the process. Thus, problems may result from the perceptions of some partners about the speed at which results should be delivered (Israel et al., 1998).

Clearly, the literature ascribes a range of barriers to developing and implementing community based research. These obstacles may well play a role in social regeneration contexts and as a result must be recognised.

**Application to social regeneration contexts**

So how do community based approaches relate to social regeneration? Hypothetically it is possible to suggest areas where community based research can contribute within regeneration contexts. There is scope within social regeneration contexts to use such research in a number of ways.

**Change of focus in terms of evaluation objectives**

Firstly, community based research can be used to change the focus of research objectives. Clearly, different types of data emerge from different styles of data collection. Currently, many social regeneration evaluations focus upon target meeting and financial accountability. The data coming from such evaluation and appraisal mechanisms is generally designed to ensure value for money and rigorous project management (Harrison, 1998). In simply examining if targets have been met traditional evaluation approaches fail to ascertain if such outputs were what the community really wanted or needed. They also overlook quality within the results achieved by the projects. Blalock (1999) argues that the nearly exclusive emphasis on outputs and results of programmes, frequently in the absence of commitment to collect information about how and why results occur, may be leading to flawed social policy and misguided judgments about programmes.
Indeed, this focus upon quantifiable outputs may also overlook the ‘softer’ aspects of success such as the benefits of participation, increased capacity and improvements in quality of life. Barr and Hashagen (2000) argue that the lack of an agreed agenda within community development initiatives between what gets achieved and what funding agencies want leads to a lack of focus upon qualitative outcomes. It is not sufficient to define programme effectiveness and quality by counting the number of people serviced or the numbers attending because these measures are limited constructions of programme effectiveness. Social programmes should be accountable for the difference they make in the lives of their participants and not just for providing a service (Green, 1999). These meanings for participants and the quality of their experiences are arguably not measurable in quantitative terms (Patton, 1980). In order to answer questions relating to this type of success, detailed in-depth descriptions representing people in their own terms are required. Indeed, it has become increasingly apparent that added value is a key issue for the voluntary sector, with an associated need to demonstrate it. Some regeneration initiatives do not achieve the ‘hard’ outputs set out on paper yet they most certainly will have made some sort of progress. Wainwright (2003) calls this the ‘distance traveled’, and argues that such progress can be seen as stepping stones en route to the hard outcomes. Such stepping stones are achievements and therefore should be measured alongside quantitative outputs.

Clearly, community based approaches could be used to provide such qualitative detail and to shift the focus from outputs to outcomes, particularly as local people would be at the heart of the research process designing the agenda. Hence a community based approach could incorporate alternative conceptualisations of success into findings whilst increasing local involvement and including the voices of the programme recipients. This might go some way towards combating many of the problems associated with the performance measures often used within social regeneration. Indeed, evaluations within the voluntary sector should be carried out using the same principles that govern community development work itself (Wainwright, 2003) that is in the least communities themselves should be involved at every stage of the process.

Furthermore, although many social regeneration programmes complete evaluations these often tend to be carried out after a project’s life span has ceased. However, evaluation is not an event, it is continuous and should be integral to practice because it provides reference points and therefore allows critical judgments to be made about the future (Barr and Hashagen, 2000). Community based research can be used to evaluate programmes on a more continuous basis and to steer social regeneration in the directions defined by target communities. Indeed, the increasing body of literature within the evaluation field arguing for the involvement of community members in the evaluation process recognises that those living within deprived community settings are often excluded from knowledge and knowledge generation (Mertens, 1999). The techniques discussed in relation to the many styles of evaluation are applicable to social regeneration contexts. Alternative approaches can gain the involvement of local people in evaluating projects relevant to changes occurring within their local area.
Secondly, community based approaches can enable regeneration programmes to gain key information on crucial local issues pertinent to specific community settings. Some local data is already available however this generally does not illustrate what the community wants to see, which improvements they rate as the most important and what they think about current and planned interventions. Community members are key stakeholders and their views are important and perhaps more easily accessed through community based consultation.

In addition, both community workers and researchers tend to view what counts as knowledge differently (Corrigan, 1986) demonstrating how social relations within the research process play an important role in the creation of research evidence (Truman and Raine, 2001). Community based research can act as a mechanism for allowing the voices of the community to emerge and as a means of shifting the balance of power (Barnes and Mercer, 1997) and there is some evidence to support this. Collis et al (2003) describe the advantages of such an approach. The local researchers employed in their project added both breadth and depth to research findings. They were more capable of picking up on interviewee’s fears and concerns and their different backgrounds allowed them to draw contrasting conclusions to professional researchers working on the project.

Indeed, local people hold local information which is useful in designing research, gathering data, targeting key groups and including all sections of the community (Richie, 1996). Coulton and Hollister (1998) argue that neighbourhood information is an essential element of community building; a community can not truly create a responsive or responsible agenda for change without knowledge. Groups within different communities have the ability to diagnose their own problems based upon their complex understandings of the way in which the community operates. Consequently, communities can set their own agendas to move regeneration forward but to do this they need space and the possibility of acting outside wider partnerships (North and Bruegel, 2001). Local people know the problems, they understand what motivates people and they have the power to make solutions work (Ward and Lewis, 2002). The possibility remains that community based research is a potential vehicle for local communities to set their own agenda and in setting their own agendas, local communities may ensure greater regeneration success.

Furthermore, the services provided by social regeneration programmes are for the local community and crucial to their success is remaining relevant for users. Community based research can stimulate new ways of looking at ongoing projects and services, and can help community groups to respond to local pressures by adjusting their priorities (Cooper, 1986). Moreover, social regeneration initiatives need information that is timely but which only uses modest resources to gather (Coulton and Hollister, 1998). Again, this is an area in which community based research has much to contribute.
Community based evaluation can also be used to audit existing strengths in a given area. Skinner and Wilson (2002) discuss using research to assess community strengths by looking at groups and services within a given area, examining organisations, the support they receive, the support they require and how they can be enhanced. Community members can conduct this research to facilitate better organisation of service provision within given areas by avoiding duplication. Such an approach allows for local diversity to be reflected within the research findings.

To meet targets

Community based research can also contribute to social regeneration programmes through the achievement of targets. Often regeneration programmes have pre-determined targets such as training community members, recruiting volunteers and more generally capacity building. Using community based research can contribute to these targets in several ways. Local people are resources (Ritchie, 1996); therefore their involvement increases the resources available to meet targets. Thus, community based research can add to volunteer numbers, job creation and skills improvement whilst simultaneously gaining useful and relevant local information.

Community development is said to operate on a core set of values, which include community led collective action, participative democracy, empowerment, problem focused learning and collaboration (Barr and Hashagen, 2000). Such principles also apply to social research within regeneration settings, when research is used to achieve community development goals and ends. Indeed, it is arguable that no clear line exists between the activities of community development and social research used in this way because they both draw upon a similar pool of knowledge and skills. Local people doing research are engaging in a form of community learning and skills development (Greve, 1975). Thus, the ‘spin-offs’ of involvement in research are the development of confidence, knowledge and skills valuable to both individuals and the wider community (Richie, 1996).

A further target for many community development initiatives is the creation of and participation within networks. Community based research can contribute to networking as it helps to extend contacts within localities and develops involvement from others (Cooper, 1986) for example, volunteers, local respondents, partnership agencies and funders. Thus, community involvement in project design helps people to build relationships with each other (Stoecker, 1997). Consequently, such research can provide people with a clearer understanding of power, local structures and local decision making processes (Cooper, 1986). Networks arguably operate as structures of opportunity, which can facilitate or frustrate, access to different kinds of resources. This may be especially important in cases where deprivation is geographically concentrated (Phillipson et al, 2004). Community based approaches can operate to open up networks and to develop linkages, allowing participants to unlock and access positive opportunities.

Finally, research can also become part of the process of creating targets as well as meeting them. Hawtin et al, (1994) argue that it serves no useful purpose to simply produce information for its own sake. However, an action
planning approach to research identifies issues and priorities whilst measuring targets by establishing if points on an action plan have been met. This approach is useful in demonstrating the value of regeneration to local people who may be both sceptical and cynical.

Contribution to sustainability

Community based research as an approach can also contribute to social regeneration in terms of making a sustainable impact. Such models arguably have a more lasting and sustainable impact when compared to other research approaches. Hills and Mullett (2000) argue that when orthodox research ends then so does the project however, this is not the case with community based research. Community based approaches arguably make a lasting contribution to the community in because of the enhanced capacity they create in terms of the community being able to engage in research and evaluation. Many social regeneration programmes have a short life span and only implement short term projects leaving the sustainable impacts they make open to debate. However, by employing community based research and providing local people with skills, sustainability is arguably more achievable after the end of the projects life span because local people are left with knowledge and skills to use in the future. This acquisition of new skills and knowledge is an essential component of community based research (Hills and Mullet 2000).

Problems Within Social Regeneration Contexts

On a theoretical level and on a more practical methodological level, community based research seems to offer social regeneration a positive contribution. However, as previously highlighted it must be recognised that such approaches are unlikely to be used without problems. Some problems may emerge specifically within regeneration contexts.

On a practical level, social regeneration organisations have multiple and competing demands on both their time and resources. Institutional demands can make it difficult for people in organisations to devote time and energy to community based research projects (Israel et al, 1998).

A further practical problem may relate to funding. Funding is a major issue within social regeneration and it is common for initiatives to have time limited resources. Consequently, there can be an associated impact upon the viability of any potential projects involving community based research. Even if community members are willing to volunteer for research projects, it is likely that they will require training and support from others, involving time and money that may not be available. Thus, community based research faces barriers in obtaining funding and indeed in meeting the expectations of funding institutions (Israel et al, 1998). Furthermore, if funding is successfully gained for community based research other problems may ensue. The funder’s agenda has to be seen as exerting a primary influence within all research projects (Lloyd et al, 1996) and this may differ from the agenda agreed within the community. There may also be pressure facing
professionals in relation to the construction of knowledge for funders in specifically accepted ways (Corrigan, 1986).

Indeed, funding agency expectations may impact in a wider sense in that social regeneration projects are targeted initiatives and targets often must be achieved to secure future funding. This has implications for the role of community based research if it does not fit with existing targets. Consequently, achieving targets may act as a further practical barrier to the actual realisation of community based research.

A further problem in social regeneration contexts may relate to diversity because communities are not homogenous entities and this can result in problems in terms of representation. This leads to theoretical questions such as who really reflects the community’s views? Do groups within the community have competing agendas? What about language differences and cultural diversity (Israel et al, 1998)? The question of who sets the agenda in community based research is always a problem and there is no easy solution (Richie, 1996). Consequently, community projects and settings pose difficult and unique challenges in designing and implementing sound evaluations because differences in emphasis and direction may create a lack of conceptual and practical fit between service providers and evaluators (Telfair and Mulvihill, 2000). Furthermore, even if multiple stakeholder’s views are included in setting research objectives, it still may be difficult to represent all voices equally. There may be dilemmas regarding how to decide which stakeholder’s views take precedence over others (Schroes et al, 2000). Such issues of representation can lead to negative consequences because where processes for inclusive participation are inadequate and where community consultation is deficient, a real sense of alienation can develop in the community. Such alienation can create rifts that go beyond the boundaries of any particular project and affect the self image and future viability of the community (Simpson et al, 2003).

Community itself then requires examination in relation to applying community based research in practice. Within current social policy discourse, community is viewed as positive and unproblematic. Robson (2000) argues that community is considered a positive, symbiotic state and that the concept is used to evoke ideas of co-operation, lack of conflict and democratic decision making. However, communities can fracture along religious, racial or ideological lines and have been sites of exclusion as well as inclusion (Crow and Allen, 1994). Thus, ‘community’ based research may not be about homogenous community ideals and could be used to effectively support one section of a community, marginalising and excluding others and ultimately fracturing communities. Perhaps more fundamentally, despite community being one of the oldest concepts in the sociological book, it remains one of the most challenging and contentious (Yar, 2004). Community can be defined and understood in various ways therefore, the same is also true of community based research. Ultimately, both community and community based research can not be examined without reference to current sociological and political discourse.

Of course social regeneration programmes do not exist in a vacuum, they are part of a wider political climate. The evaluation literature argues that an
understanding of the political context and the views of the larger society are necessary to give clues about acceptance and support in relation to specific programmes (Nichols, 2002), including social regeneration. Therefore, an assessment must be made of the political climate surrounding the need to be addressed by a particular programme, as well as the likely political support. Clearly, if the political environment does not favour specific interventions then even positive research and evaluation findings may be deemed as being of little value, irrespective of the innovative methods used to collect them (Nichols, 2002). Furthermore, research is only a minor player when compared to political realities.

Even if there is support for such approaches, both funding and time are available and the political environment is tolerant, participation remains vital. Participation can be a problem within any research project and in any social regeneration setting. Most community based approaches assume that active participation will be achieved from community members and other stakeholders. However, this may not always be the case. Schroes et al (2000) discuss how several of the key assumptions of the empowerment evaluation approach were not fully supported in their case study of Comprehensive Community Initiatives, including active participation and support for the evaluation process. Although much has been written about the advantages and disadvantages of empowerment evaluation from the evaluator’s perspective, little evidence has been gathered assessing how the approach is viewed through the eyes of the evaluation consumers (Schroes et al 2000). This is arguably the case in many community based research approaches. So there are challenges in gaining involvement, which include finding the stakeholders and then convincing them of the benefits of participation (Lincoln, 1998). However, the literature does offer some discussions around factors that may contribute to successful participation. Ayers (1987), following on from a case study and subsequent discussions with participants, suggests the implementation of administrative support, clear goals and a time limited process. Furthermore, a sufficient number of stable members are required to complete tasks. However, even if participants are successfully recruited, this may not mean successful community based research as theorised within the literature. Issues of participation, knowledge creation, power and praxis are not abstract phenomena but authentic tensions actually enacted within community settings (Wallerstein and Duran, 2003). Participation and contemporary urban regeneration’s vehicle for it, partnership have a capacity for tyrannical decision making and reproducing inequalities (Jones, 2003). Yet participation remains a key tool in the success of community based research approaches. As a result problematic participation may mean ineffective community based research.

Following on from active participation, such models also require the active dissemination of research findings. However, the issue of dissemination and the use of knowledge within such contexts is not straightforward. If there is no link between producing evidence and ensuring the effective communication of the findings, the sustainable impacts of any community research project are questionable. Both research and action are necessary for success (Cooper, 1986) implying that the production of research findings should not be considered as the end of the process. For research to have an impact, findings need to be circulated so that the information enters the public domain
(Hawtin et al, 1994). Indeed, current work in neighbourhood revitalization often occurs with little critical attention to the ways in which knowledge is used in these experiences. Arguably knowledge can operate to structure and limit what can be done within regeneration. Consequently, local knowledge despite being perceived as privileged and insightful because it is generated from experience is still seen as less significant than ‘expert’ knowledge, which is necessary to ensure change (Fraser and Lepofsky, 2004). Clearly, this has implications for community based approaches and begs the question of whether such research will simply be perceived as inferior local knowledge by experts or whether the process will provide empirical evidence that can be used by local people to achieve change. Evidently, the policing and control of knowledge within social regeneration settings must be recognised as problematic. Dissemination is also linked to ownership and control. A problem that may emerge in any community based research setting is that of ownership: who will own the research; who will use the product, and how will the product be used?

In addition, several methodological barriers exist when applying community based research within social regeneration settings. Firstly there is the complexity of measurement that may arise. Community change initiatives are complex and obviously aim to achieve developments in social, economic and political areas to improve the quality of life for residents within specific communities. As a result of this complexity a key question in relation to the evaluation of social regeneration programmes is what should be measured, how and when (Gambone, 1998)? No research design with finite time, money and human resources can examine all of the possible relationships between activities, outcomes and contexts in a community (Gambone, 1998). Regeneration covers a wide range of activities and the fact that no single tool can be used to measure the full spectrum of impact means that organisations simply have to be quite specific about what they want to measure (Wainwright, 2003). Secondly, there may be a lack of research skills. People need research skills in order to undertake research projects. Clearly, people can be taught some skills however, other issues may arise during the course of the research process if adequate support is not available for novice researchers. Thirdly, there is a lack of both literature and empirical evidence about community based approaches being applied within social regeneration contexts and therefore a corresponding lack of existing models of successful research and good practice. Theoretically this can hinder the development of community based research as an approach because of the lack of evidence for new users to interpret and follow.

**Summary**

Although community based research and evaluation is now more frequently discussed within the literature especially in fields such as health, social welfare and the evaluation arena, they are not approaches that can or should be applied to every population, or to every evaluation question. This is true of any field in which the approaches may be applied, including social regeneration. Community groups therefore have to decide if research is likely to be the most effective means to their success.
Clearly community based research is not a magic solution within local settings because in adopting it as an approach, problems are likely to occur. These include power imbalances (Stringer, 1996), lack of trust, issues of legitimacy (Israel et al 1998), representation (Taylor, 2000) and time constraints (Israel, et al 1998). Furthermore, such approaches are demanding for all those involved during all phases of the project (Schroes et al, 2000). As Barr (2002) argues, attention must be paid to inequalities in participation, the need for leadership, resources and different needs and interests. Indeed, barriers not only concern practical limitations but also the perceptions of individuals engaged in such research about what is possible for them to achieve in terms of influence (Truman and Raine, 2003).

However, if the barriers to community based research are overcome, a range of benefits can result. These include skills development (Green et al, 2000), the development of social relationships (Schloves et al, 1998), positive local outcomes, increased local knowledge (Ayers 1987) as well as strengthened local networks and empowerment at the individual level (Greve, 1975). Furthermore, community based research can also provide accurate and reliable information for decision making (Ritchie, 1996). Indeed, community based approaches can bring together people of diverse skills and knowledge, contribute locally grounded and empirically sound information and increase the likelihood that the results will be used by the community involved in the research (Cockerill et al, 1998). Discussion is likely to continue within the literature as models of community based research are applied more in practice and developed further.

This review of the literature highlights that little reference is paid to such an approach and its potential use within social regeneration contexts. The literature tends to overlook the links between community based research and social regeneration.

As this paper illustrates, community based research has much to offer social regeneration programmes in terms of being both a useful research and evaluation tool and a mechanism from which to build skills amongst local community members and groups. Indeed, community based research, despite its problems has been argued to help integrate knowledge into strategies to provide both community and social change within marginalized sections of the population (Israel et al, 1998) and this is often the aim of community development work. Thus, research is a small but powerful tool especially if such research ensures that non-researchers are able to obtain and use information for their own purposes, to gain greater understanding of their circumstances and to achieve more influence over their lives (Holman, 1987). Research in some cases can help some individuals to express their needs and demands as well as to campaign for their own purposes. Clearly these aspects of research remain pertinent to social regeneration settings, with community based approaches offering a mechanism to meet several associated targets of community development.
References


Schlove, R.E. (1997) Research by the people, for the people. Futures 29, 6, 541 – 549


---

Biography

Louise Warwick-Booth holds an ESRC CASE Award the University of Sheffield, examining community based evaluation and exploring its contribution within the social regeneration context of Objective One, South Yorkshire. This project explores the potential contribution of community-based research and evaluation to social and economic regeneration programmes by examining the pitfalls and benefits of applying such approaches within regeneration settings. Her research interests are community development, evaluation, models of research and social capital.