

**Community University Research Partnerships-  
A Critical Reflection and an Alternative Experience**

**Eric Shragge in conjunction with Jill Hanley, Steve Jordan, Charlotte Baltodano,  
Jaggi Singh, Martha Stiegman and Aziz Choudry**

**May 2006**

In recent years community-university partnerships have become the ‘flavour of the month’. There are pressures from funding bodies such as SSHRC on the academic side and Social Development Canada (HRDC or whatever its current incarnation is) on the non-profit side to build partnerships on research projects. In this discussion, I will ask how can research partnerships be built on principles of equality and mutual interest, in which each group benefits. More important for me is to ask how can struggles for social and economic justice be furthered by these relationships? The discussion will begin with some contextual and wider social questions, examine aspects of the SSHRC CURA program and conclude with a practice example of the collaboration between the Immigrant Workers Centre and the researchers involved in this project over the past 4 years and more recently with Solidarity Across Borders. Lessons from this experience will be shared.

First, what can be gained by community organizations and what can be gained by university researchers in research partnerships? For community organizations participation in research projects can bring several important benefits. Research can help with building and deepening a social and political analysis that can be used to strengthen intervention. Projects can help the organization’s members or staff build skills in research, and interviewing. It can be used as a means of recruitment as people interviewed can be acquainted with the organization during the research project. With the dissemination of results, the organization may become better known, and build credibility, legitimate their own knowledge of social situations. Further, it can support the organization because there should be a transfer of financial resources to the organization to compensate for the staff time, and use of its facilities. University researchers gain legitimacy for their project because an organization on the ground participated in it. The researchers are able to access research subjects for interviews, and dissemination to the wider community. In addition, researchers can gain insights to the issue they are researching from the local knowledge and the perspective provided by the community. Ideally the relationship can benefit both sides but it is not always characterized by equality.

Second, what are the possibilities? Power relations between universities and communities are not equal. Local organizations rarely have enough resources, and research money is often held out to them as

an incentive for participation. In addition, the amount allocated to research in comparison to direct work is disproportional. For example the amount our budget per year is higher than that of the total budget of IWC! Research partnership despite this fundamental inequality in resources and status can be situated along a continuum from what Halperin(1998) describes as ‘local colonialism’, to ‘collaborative research...research done *with* the community and not *to* the community(p.7).”(Nyden et. al. :1997). In discussing other forms of community partnerships, Panet-Raymond contrast partenariat with paternariat (partnership with paternalism). Power is a central dimension. Returning to ‘local colonialism’ Halperin argues “Colonialism is about power-the fact that some people have it and some don’t. It is about outsiders imposing themselves on insiders....They (outsiders) manipulate local community people by imposing a certain kind of rigid order and by asserting their superior class status, managerial skills, and generally greater ability. (p.253-254)” In applying these positions to university-community research, the important starting point in forming the research relationship that is the answer to the question-what drives the research? Is it the community organization that has a defined agenda and approached the university or is the research project externally driven by the possibility of funding from outside sources? Is there an ongoing relationship between the university researcher and the community organization or is it one established for the specific purpose of the research project? In other words, is the partnership ongoing and the research part of the relationship or is it set up as an externally dictated condition of funding?

Third, another issue is the context, which includes the importance that funding bodies put on community-university partnerships. It is important to view them as part of a wider rediscovery of community by government in the context of a neo-liberal transformation. There is a long argument here about the increased role of local organizations with the restructuring of the state and the redefinition of the role of government in service. Part of this is the demand for greater capacity and competence in community in order to manage its new role. The sector has professionalized as it has taken on an expanded role. Adding research to its agenda increases the pressures and 1 part of the shift as legitimating community as an extension as sub-contractor for the state. Research, directed by state funded programs and administered through the university is yet another way that community organizations are pushed into less ‘political’ roles and away from being advocates for social and economic justice. The research agenda of the social economy is an example of how government has encouraged community organizations into an entrepreneurial role and coupled this transition with accompanying money and research partnerships.

Fourth, the following comments were prepared for a committee on research of the Canadian Community Economic Development Network. They were prepared as the Martin government announced that the social economy would be supported and that SSHRC would fund both regional and a national hub for the development of social economy research. The structure of these grants follow in the tradition of other SSHRC programs- Community-University Research Alliances (CURA).

The structure of these research programs puts power and authority in the hands of the university.

It does so in the following ways:

- The definer of what constitutes ‘good’ research (usually excellence) is the funder (e.g. SSHRC) and a peer review drawn from other university researchers. The criteria are based on two basic factors-the scholarly presentation of the project and the track record of the researcher. This leads to a situation in which innovative, unconventional research is difficult to fund and outsiders tend not to be funded. Thus for a project to be acceptable traditional ‘science’ must be respected (Note: there have been changes in what is considered science with the emergence of qualitative research.). A researcher is acceptable if s/he has achieved a certain level of status in the academic community- the more funded research, the more likely one is to receive funded research. The implications are that if a community organization wants to participate in a project and have it funded by an organization like SSHRC then it is dependent on the track record of the researcher and the methodological approach and ‘science’ of the project.
- The initiator of research is usually the university researcher. The project is presented in her/his name along with a team of academics. The researcher will then approach a community organization(s) for collaboration with the project. In these cases the project is already advanced in its development particularly the main focus, the theoretical framework, the problem to be studied based in the academic tradition and literature and the methodology. In other words, in these cases the community organization acts to legitimize and to participate in an inquiry that is largely pre-defined and packaged for marketing to a funding body.
- The definition of what is knowledge and what is a legitimate research project rests in the university and in its canon of knowledge. This is reinforced by academic grant writing and by bodies such as SSHRC. Community knowledge is usually judged less important and valid. The basic definition of knowledge is in the hands of the university.
- Traditionally one of the justifications of SSHRC grants is to train and support graduate students. As a consequence a lot of the money of the grant goes in that direction. This is an appropriate function for research grants but it does limit the participation of those working in community organizations.
- If projects get funded, the money goes to and is administered by the university that gets overhead money for the project. Further, transfers to community organizations are not one of the usual budget lines in a grant from SSHRC. Control over budget is an important element.

Given all the above, this does not imply that community organizations cannot work as equal partners in projects. The way that can occur is that there is a researcher committed to making that happen and stretching and manipulating the usual research rules and policies. The community sector if it is to be an

equal partner in research grants should not rely on the intentions of a researcher but there should be policies that guarantee that happen.

What policies can contribute to an equal relationship between universities and community organizations? There must be a cultural shift that acknowledges the knowledge, and experience of the community sector. Research must fit into the priorities and strategic needs of organizations and there must be a substantial financial reward for participation in the research project. Some concrete policies are as follows:

- There must be money up front to prepare the research project. This would support a mutual transfer of knowledge that would sensitize the university to the priorities, issues, traditions, context, and values of the community organization and that would allow the university researchers to present their orientations, past projects and values. If in this exchange there is common ground and interest then a research project can be developed. The process is a key element and would allow the time to build a reciprocal agenda before an actual application is presented. The risk here is that the funding body would have to advance up-front money on very little except an agreement to explore the idea of a project. At least some of the money would directly compensate the community organization for the time of its staff or members who participate in the exploration.
- If there is agreement to proceed, then the process of preparing the grant should be recognized not as a technical, university-based task but as a consultative process that must be supported. The research project should reflect the needs of the community organization and this might take time.
- Built into a project budget has to be money that goes to the overhead of the community organization. The day-to-day finances of a community do not cover the demands of a research project. This money should be used at the discretion of the organization to balance the demands of a research project.
- Training and capacity building for members of the community organization should be built into the research grant. This includes release time as well as courses and seminars. There is a research knowledge base and this information will contribute the capacity building of organizations to more effectively define their own research agendas.
- The application should be a joint application from both the university and the community organization. The project is co-directed and all expenditures are jointly determined. The money may be located in the university as long as there is overhead for the community organization and there is a co-signing of all documents.
- Review committees within the funding body should have a significant percentage of community representatives to decide on the allocation of the research awards.

These are some of the policies that can help balance the unequal relations that have historically been in place in government funded-especially SSHRC-research grants. These changes will not

necessarily change all of the imbalances. Part of the changes required is shifts in the understanding of research by both the university and the community. The university researcher has to be willing to relinquish significant power and control with the sanction of the funder. The community has to become active in defining how research can be used to promote its own agenda and how it can integrate research into its daily activities.

Fifth, this discussion raised some of the problems and tensions related to university-community partnerships; is it possible to work differently? The research project in the WALL network in which I am involved examines the experience of immigrant workers. It is a partnership between several university-based researchers and the Immigrant Workers Centre in Montreal. However, the position of the researchers is more complex. I am PI of the project and Jill Hanley is one of the co-researchers. Both of us were part of a group that founded the IWC in 2000. Both of us have continued to be active in the centre. I am president of the board of directors and Jill has been an active board member and at times has taken the role of co-coordinator. Because the organization does not have a lot of money, board members are expected to play active roles, working on committees, participating in day-to-day operations, initiating activities etc. Thus both Jill and I play active roles in the daily functioning of the centre and have taken leadership in a variety of its activities. The idea of the research project was discussed informally with staff of the centre and some board members. Before submitting the grant proposal the question to be answered was-what is in it for the centre? This question was framed in relation to both material and political dimensions. Since its beginning, the IWC has always been in a precarious financial situation and participating in a research grant could only occur if the project compensated the centre for the time and the space it used. Therefore, this was built into the budget as one way in which the partnership was recognized. Related to this was the hiring on one of the part-time staff, Marco Luciano to the project. Marco, an immigrant from the Philippines, was a former labour organizer and involved in many Filipino organizations. He participated in all research team meetings and was the key person in recruiting people to interview and he participated in the interviews. Because he was a frontline worker at the IWC, his presence enabled people to participate comfortably in interviews. In addition, his role in meetings was to raise strategic questions about organizing and push the team for relevant lessons from the research. His involvement brought the project closer to daily struggles faced by workers and to issues that individuals brought to the centre.

During the project there was an ongoing inter-relationship with daily practices at the IWC and the interviews. This was a huge plus for making the project helpful in gaining insights such was the importance of individual mentors in helping people learn to stand-up for their rights. However, in relation to the accountability of the project to WALL, this was perceived as an unplanned and unpredictable method of gathering people to interview. As the IWC evolved in its relationship with other social

movements and community organizations, it began to work more closely with Solidarity Across Borders (SAB). This social movement has organized with non-status people living in Canada and advocated for the regularization of their status. The IWC has also been working on this issue, mainly through its connection with domestic workers. Our research group saw this as a particularly vulnerable group in the labour market and began to interview some people in that situation. Marco moved to Toronto in the spring of 2005 and the research team decided it was important to replace him with someone else situated close to the frontline. Jaggi Singh, one of the frontline organizers with SAB, joined the project as a researcher. This resulted in increased collaboration of the research project with both the IWC and SAB. Concrete outcomes included access to new groups to interview including agricultural workers, and the dissemination of our research through a special issue of the SAB newspaper on migration and labour. Many of the articles in the paper and the use of testimonies drawn from interviews come from the research project. The IWC also contributed a major article on basic rights for immigrant workers. The newspaper, printed in English and French, will be widely distributed in immigrant, labour and activist communities.

The above is a brief summary of some aspects of the partnership of the IWC and the WALL research project. There have been many benefits but some problems. One of the problems is that because the IWC functions in an informal way with many activities happening at once, there is limited opportunity for formal discussion of the research project with a wider audience in the centre. We hope to do this after as we begin to produce more working documents. Another issue is that there is not a clear separation of the research from day-to-day issues in the centre. The project, in some ways, becomes directed by the issues and questions brought to the centre. It necessitates flexibility in research planning. Because of the flexible arrangement of the project, the rational research plans and results were not always forthcoming as expected by the management committee at WALL, creating some tension. However, these seemed to get resolved. At the level of dissemination, there is less emphasis on scholarly output and more on popular documents. However, there will be some more academic products in the next year.

Finally, the results of the research partnership have produced a lesson. Knowledge that supports the struggle for economic and social justice comes from the intersection of theory, practice, experiences of those living the issues and critical reflection. This project has given the IWC, SAB and the researchers an opportunity to do this.

## References

Halperin, R. (1998) Practicing Community: Class Culture and Power in an Urban Neighborhood, University of Texas Press Austin.

Nyden, P., Figert, A., Shibley, M., and Burrows, D. (1997) Building Community: Social Science in Action, Pine Forge Press, Sage Thousand Oaks, California.

Panet-Raymond, J. (1992) "Partnership: Myth or Reality?" Community Development Journal, Vol. 27, No. 2, April, p. 156-165.

*Research for this paper was funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC).*