

PEER RESEARCH IN ACTION I: MODELS OF PRACTICE

Roche, B., Guta, A., Flicker, S.

Community Based Research Working Paper Series

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We:

- conduct research on the social determinants of health and health disparities, focusing on the relationships between health and housing, income distribution, immigrant health, social exclusion and other social and economic inequalities;
- identify and advance practical and achievable policy alternatives and solutions to pressing issues of population health;
- support community engagement and capacity building including complex systems thinking;
- work in numerous collaborations and partnerships locally, nationally and internationally, to support social and policy change to address the impact of the social determinants of health.

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Executive Summary

Community-based research (CBR) is guided by the core principles of collaboration and partnership, where community members, community representatives and academic researchers work to use social research to effect social change. Participatory research methods underpin the work of community-based research initiatives; where community members and their representatives are engaged as co-researchers in the process. Peer research has emerged as a popular form of CBR research where community members are trained and supported to participate as co-researchers.

The inclusion of community members in CBR through peer research initiatives is thought to enhance the quality of the data collected, allow for the expertise of “lived experience” to be incorporated over time, while promoting capacity building at the local level. Yet few research teams have explicitly articulated their framework for a model of peer research and the decision-making processes of including community members as peers in research. In this first paper of our three-part series on peer research in Toronto, we explore how research teams defined peer research, how they integrated peer research in their community-based research projects, and what kinds of challenges they identified in the peer research process.

In interviews and focus groups with academics, service providers and peer researchers about their experiences, we have identified three broad models of peer research:

- The advisory model: Peers play an advisory role (on steering or advisory committees).
- The employment model: Peers are research staff/employees on studies (involved in the tasks of the research study, such as collecting the data).
- The partner model: Peers are partners or leaders in all aspects of the research.

Most often, peer researchers were recruited to work on projects in an advisory or employee capacity as paid research staff. In both approaches, peer research works best when roles, responsibilities, and expectations are made explicit—and include a frank discussion of the limitations of these approaches in capacity building, empowerment, and participatory research. Although it is used less often, the partner model, defined by shared decision-making, shows great promise toward reconciling some of the challenges of ensuring meaningful inclusion of community members in research.

WE ENCOURAGE COMMUNITY-BASED RESEARCH TEAMS TO:

1. Define fundamental concepts and key questions about the intent and scope of peer involvement in a community-based research project to help determine when best to use a model of peer research and for what purpose.
2. Reflect on their rationale for using a peer research approach beforehand; clarity about the intent of such an approach can minimize issues and strengthen the benefits of using a peer research approach.
3. Define in explicit and practical terms who constitutes a “peer” on the project to help clarify the goals and intentions of the initiative, as well as clarify for peers their roles on a project.
4. Establish in detail the roles and responsibilities of peer researchers and other team members at the beginning of the project. Clarifying the assumptions and expectations that accompany each position minimizes the potential for miscommunication, and may be instructive in identifying capacity building needs of all team members.
5. Recognize that peer researchers may have unique needs around support and supervision; ensuring that support mechanisms are built into the project will strengthen the ability of peer researchers to play active roles on Community-based research projects.

Introduction

Community-based participatory research “emphasize[s] the participation, influence and control by non-academic researchers in the process of creating knowledge and change” (Israel, Schulz, Parker, & Becker, 1998, p. 184). The participation of community members in research is believed to enhance the validity of research findings and assist in ensuring that research results are used to inform and foster social change at the local level. The benefits of community involvement in research are well recognized; they include improved access to and greater representation of marginalized groups in research; data that are richer in quality and more authentic in their representation; and the creation of opportunities for local capacity building and empowerment (Minkler and Wallerstein 2008; Israel et al 1998; 2005). These benefits are often (although not always) realized through authentic partnership approaches that leverage the skills and assets of all team members.

Community members are thought to bring expertise that is informed by life experience to research projects, including perspectives on the issues at hand and insights about solutions. Actively engaging and involving members of the community in research has, however, not been without its challenges. Community-based research initiatives are often better at establishing partnerships among community representatives (i.e., agency staff) than among community members themselves (Flicker, Guta & Roche 2009). This finding raises critical questions about the assumptions that underscore community involvement in research (Dewar, 2005).

In an effort to achieve greater and more meaningful community participation in research, there has been an increase in the number of projects that engage “peer researchers.” Peer researchers (sometimes referred to as PRs) are members of a research project’s target population who are trained to participate as co-researchers. In some cases, peer researchers partner in all facets of a research project. In others, they are instrumental in one or more aspects of a research project (e.g., participant recruitment and/or data collection). To date, there has been little critical discussion about the nature of peer researcher participation in community-based research.

The dearth of data on peer research in practice has meant that questions remain regarding the authenticity of community participation, how power differentials are addressed (if at all), and how participation may impact the lives of community members in social

or economic ways that have not been fully appreciated (Roche 2008; Greene et al., 2009).

The Wellesley Institute has created a three-part series of papers examining the use of peer research as a model of Community-Based research in practice. In this series we consider Models of Practice; Management, Support and Supervision, and Ethical Issues as they surface in the context of Peer Research in Action.

Research Design and Methods

In 2007, we began to examine community-based research projects that adopted a peer research approach to better understand (1) the processes (recruiting, hiring, training, and managing) used with peer researchers in various aspects of community-based research; (2) the dynamics among peer researchers, their respective communities, and other members of the research team/hosting organization; and (3) the ethical, social, and practical issues that are particular to peer research models.

Our study began with a working definition of *peer researchers* as members of the target population who are trained to participate as co-researchers. This definition functioned as an important starting point and reflects our observations as researchers engaging in and supporting community-based research. In the course of our study, however, we learned that the definition of *peer research* and the role of peer researchers shift according to context, community, the nature of the project, the understanding of community-based research, and over time.

Academic leads and community partners who had used peer research models in their community-based research in Toronto were invited to attend two focus groups to identify and discuss ethical, social, and practical issues related to using a peer research model.¹ Most of those who participated worked as research managers or staff at non-profit agencies in Toronto that were broadly engaged in addressing the social determinants of health.

Peer researchers were recruited for individual semi-structured interviews to discuss their experiences. The peer researchers who participated reflect a diverse group in terms of age, gender, sexual orientation, socio-economic status, culture, and ethno-racial identity. Sixteen individual interviews were conducted with peer researchers.

¹ Projects were identified from among those that had been funded in full or in part by the Wellesley Institute.

Interviews and focus groups were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim for coding and analysis. We conducted a thematic analysis using a coding scheme drawn from respondents' verbatim accounts of their experience. Coded data were analyzed and compared by theme, range, and type of peer research involvement, as well as the nature of the experience with peer research for both service providers and peer researchers.

In Part I of our three-part series on peer research, we examine models of practice of peer research and how they have been used in community-based research in Toronto.

Peer Research Models of Inclusion

It's always worth the challenge, because ... when it works, it's perfect, and when it doesn't work, it's still really something interesting. (Service Provider)²

Participatory methods have a well-established history in both research and practice in several disciplines, such as public health, nursing, community development, and agricultural development (Hall, 1992; Minkler & Wallerstein, 2008; Wallerstein & Duran, 2010). Peer research models in health promotion can range from peer-supported initiatives to peer-educator interventions (Branfield & Beresford 2006; Staley, 2009). There are especially strong links between peer research models in health promotion and peer research models in community-based research (Turner & Shepherd, 1999). Broadly, both areas seek to draw on the insights and experiences of community members and to incorporate local knowledge in the identification of health and social issues facing communities and the development of solutions (Backett-Milburn & Wilson, 2000). Longer term goals are to enhance the input of community members in shaping service delivery and to inform public policy discussions and debates (Beresford, 2007). Yet little consensus exists on what constitutes community involvement in healthcare or in research (Minogue et al., 2005).

The aim of community-based research is to engage and enable community members to participate as “partners” or “collaborators” in the research process. Yet considerable variation exists in the design and implementation of research projects, and relatively few report

the details and nature of community involvement (Staley, 2009). Nonetheless, participatory methods have served as a template for “peer research” in Toronto, informed largely by the principles of community-based participatory research (CBPR) (Israel et al. 1998, 2005; Minkler & Wallerstein, 2008).

KEY PRINCIPLES OF COMMUNITY-BASED PARTICIPATORY RESEARCH:

1. CBPR recognizes community as a unit of identity.
2. CBPR begins with and builds on strengths and resources within the community.
3. CBPR facilitates collaborative, equitable partnership in all phases of the research, involving an empowering and power-sharing process.
4. CBPR promotes co-learning and capacity building among all partners involved.
5. CBPR integrates and creates a balance between knowledge generation and action for mutual benefit of all partners.
6. CBPR emphasizes the local relevance of public health and social problems and ecological approaches that address the multiple determinants of disease and well-being.
7. CBPR involves systems development through a cyclical and iterative process.
8. CBPR disseminates findings to all partners and involves all partners in the dissemination process.
9. CBPR involves a long-term process and commitments (Israel et al., 2005).

Community-based research and other participatory approaches strive toward power sharing, “research equity,” and the empowerment of community members through research.

A number of labels are used to describe community members who are engaged as active players in research, such as “peer researcher,” “service-user,” and “consumer” (Beresford, 2007). Broadly, these research projects may share common goals; however, how they are put into practice can vary depending on project structure, the resources available, and the nature of the community itself. The roles of community members may be substantially different from one community-based research project to another (Branfield & Beresford 2006; Dewar, 2005). How the roles of community members are understood can vary according to setting and context as well as the intent of community participation (e.g., to inform or engage with the community, or to lead a process) (Cornwall, 2008; Stoecker, 2009). Understanding the nature of community involvement in research

2 Many of our participants were affiliated with academic and community based organizations. We have chosen to use the label “service provider” as a way to differentiate these researchers from peer researchers.

calls for a critical examination not only of the degree of participation but also of “the opportunities and constraints for user participation within a given research context” (Truman & Raine, 2001, p. 219).

Peer Researchers

For many agencies and research partnerships, initiating a community-based research project that includes peer researchers offers an opportunity to work with a community in new ways. Working definitions of what constitutes a “peer researcher” have tended to be broad (e.g., a non-academic, non-community-based-organization researcher), while at the same time as project-specific as possible, based on key characteristics of the identified community of interest.

Typically, peer researchers are asked to self-identify as peers of the community of interest to the study. However, some peer researchers have struggled with expectations around their identity as “peers,” especially when confronted with the possibility of public disclosure. It is not unusual for members of a research team to be asked to present on the research process and the research findings at professional conferences and community forums. For peers whose experience is identified with highly politicized or potentially stigmatizing issues such as drug use, homelessness, or HIV/AIDS, there may be valid concerns about disclosure in such venues and they may not be prepared for public disclosure (Roy & Cain, 2001). Peer researchers may want to be seen as part of the research team as opposed to being publicly identified as the peer living with the issue. Choosing to personally name one’s status is very different from being publicly named, which can raise confidentiality issues:³

I had introduced [another peer researcher] to [a Member of Parliament] ... but [she] said, well, why did I introduce her as homeless, that I shouldn’t say anything about her, because a lot of the street people are very, they’re very worried that people will find out their problems, because [when] they did, they had bad experiences ... and later [the peer] said she had a real problem with me, because I had been giving out her personal information. (Peer Researcher)

The multi-dimensional nature of communities and of the research teams engaging in community-based

3 For a more comprehensive discussion of the ethical issues associated with peer research, see Part III of this series, *Peer Research in Action: Ethical Issues*

research can also raise issues about the usefulness of labels such as “peer researcher” and the assumptions that underscore their use. Using the label “peer researcher” may perpetuate the myth that everyone with a given experience embraces a shared identity, feels the same way about an issue, or recognizes their particular experience as a part of their core identity (Greene et al., 2009). In addition, questions arise about whether the designation of “peer researcher” can unintentionally have a polarizing effect in research teams, effectively segregating community members from other research partners (often composed of academic researchers and agency staff from local community-based organizations):

I think one of the problems with peer based research is how ... you define the word peer in the first place ... it did not address our social locations in terms of our occupations, the class we come from, our race, nothing ... [The] assumption [is] that identity can be the glue that holds us together when in actuality, that commonality doesn’t mean a whole lot when you have different understandings, different political goals ... one of the huge lessons I learned ... was needing to define and be vigilant around the word peer, and then not being afraid to defend that definition. (Service Provider)

Issues in defining “peers” can highlight the uncertainties and lack of consistency that often surround the use of peer research models in community-based research. Key questions to ask are as follows:

- Who are “peers” on a research project?
- What constitutes appropriate lived experience?
- How do peers relate to the broader community of interest?
- What are the specific roles and responsibilities that are envisioned for peers on a project in relation to other members of the research team?

The Lack of Clear Models

The community-based research projects that we learned about shared a strong sense of commitment and enthusiasm for engaging community members as co-researchers. Yet, few research teams have explicitly articulated their framework for a model of peer research and the decision-making processes of including community members as peers in research. This lack of specificity may be consistent with community-based research initiatives more widely, where broad, guid-

ing principles are cited but the operational practices remain “hidden and unarticulated” (McAllister et al, 2003).

A defining principle of community-based research is the active participation of community members across research activities. Yet many projects struggle to ensure meaningful participation while balancing the competing demands of data collection (e.g., recruiting enough research participants, completing data collection tasks in a timely way, getting data ready for analysis). Time constraints in research may fuel a sense of urgency around the completion of research tasks, overshadowing the needs of community members and limiting the inclusion of their insights and observations in a genuine way.

With few explicit models of peer research available, we analyzed the descriptions provided by academics, community partners, and peer researchers themselves on how community members were involved in practice in their community-based research projects. Our analysis gives insight into how research teams defined peer research, how they integrated peer research in their community-based research projects, and what kinds of challenges they identified in the peer research process.

Service providers were asked to recall why they decided to start using peer research as an approach in community-based research. Many indicated strong conceptual links between involving community members as peer researchers and participatory approaches in general:

[I had] mixed feelings, one of excitement, because, you know, we heard about all the peer led research models, and thought what a great way to do research and involve community members, because [we] had been struggling with how to engage community members in a meaningful way, and we thought, “oh, the peer led model seems to have worked in other places, let’s try it,” so we were on the one hand excited, and on the other hand, ... we do a lot of community-based engagement ... because of that we were aware of the challenges of doing on the ground, community engagement type of work, and we hear a lot of politics, and a lot of tensions, and challenges that are existing within the community that can get refracted and brought out, so we were concerned a little bit as well, but also, again, we knew, ok, we’re gonna come across a lot of complex [issues], cuz this is [a] very new trend, there is not much written on it, we can’t learn from, like, there’s not much, so it’s

going to be learning as you go. (Service Provider)

It is not uncommon for practitioners to “make it up as they go” in the absence of formal guidelines (Tew, 2008). For many service providers, establishing peer research programs was not far removed from the broader framework of community-based research. This framework helped inform the way in which they envisioned their projects, the principles that they used to guide their work, as well as the practical steps they took in engaging the community and implementing projects. Not surprisingly, in the research projects studied, how local agencies and their staff understood and implemented peer research approaches varied considerably.

Emerging Models of Practice

Based on interviews with academics, service providers and peer researchers about their experiences, we have identified three broad models of peer research:

1. **The advisory model:** Peers play an advisory role (on steering or advisory committees).
2. **The employment model:** Peers are research staff/employees on studies (involved in the tasks of the research study, such as collecting the data).
3. **The partner model:** Peers are partners or leaders in all aspects of the research.

Few research projects adhere to a strict model of practice. More often, they include community members in a mix of roles. For example, a project may involve community members as both part of a steering committee and the team collecting data. Less commonly, peers are research partners in a comprehensive way as lead investigators or co-investigators on studies. This may be due to logistical issues (lack of resources or infrastructure to support peers); limitations around skills, knowledge, and expertise (real or perceived); or the stage of involvement in which peers are brought on to a project (e.g., often following the design of the project but before the data is collected).

Significantly, some community projects have been successful at creating a partnership model of peer research in which peers are recognized as full partners or even lead investigators on a project. This success may be related to the strength and coherence of an identity shared by the community members involved in the work. For example, people who share a history of homelessness may not identify themselves as members of a “community” because their experiences can be different, whereas members of the transgender community may feel a greater sense of a shared identity as well as similar social histories. For the purposes of

this discussion, the three models will be considered separately, enabling us to reflect on the strengths and challenges of each one independently.

The Advisory Model

On research projects that adopted the advisory model, peer researchers were often members on steering or advisory committees. In some projects, a Peer Advisory Committee (PAC) provided high-level strategy and direction advice, generating ideas and providing feedback:

[The project staff] did the hard stuff ... like they did all the grunt work. They did the writing ... all the recording ... carrying around of things, you know, acquiring materials for the project, and so on. We were there again in this advisory capacity. They were actually looking for us to guide them as to how the project should go forward ... (Peer Researcher)

Steering and advisory committees are typically comprised of members of key stakeholder groups relevant to a research topic or initiative, as well as peer researchers. These committees and groups provide strategic guidance to research, make decisions on the implementation of a research protocol, and provide some support on the interpretation of research findings (including dissemination of results).

The processes and procedures for such groups are often outlined in a Terms of Reference document. A Terms of Reference document provides key details that can help guide the project or program, such as information on the group's mission, its objectives, the representation and composition of the group, the roles or responsibilities of group members, and the decision-making process.

At its best, an advisory committee can create real opportunities for community members to contribute their insights to a project. At the advisory committee level, peer researchers are positioned to take a broad view of the project or initiative. They are largely removed from the operational tasks of the research, and instead provide guidance on design and research methods.

For example, peer researchers in an advisory role may be asked to provide comments and advice on the construction of research surveys or interview guides, but they are not asked to get involved in the tasks of administering them. Peer researchers in an advisory role are at a distance from the everyday tasks of conducting research, which may enable them to sidestep the more contentious issues that can accompany data

collection in close-knit communities, such as ethical dilemmas or conflicts of interest:

There's also another new [project] that we've just started where [...] we've made the decision that we're going to have an advisory committee, they're [peer researchers] going to be involved in shaping the research, but that we probably won't involve them in data collection, [...], we're suggesting they won't be involved in the data collection, just because there might be some ethical issues around that, but they'll be involved again in data analysis, so we're sort of trying that out as well. (Service Provider)

The involvement of peer researchers in an advisory role could extend beyond research planning and framing to encompass activities across its implementation. For example, advisory committee members are often asked to give commentary on data collection tools (interview and focus group guides, surveys) in terms of content and style, as well as offering insight into the interpretation of data collected. For peer researchers, these are opportunities to draw on their experience—lived or observed—within their community, and offer valuable insights and course corrections for the research. In addition, they provide the advisory committee with opportunities to work with the research team in strategizing around knowledge translation and dissemination. Of concern, however, were instances in which peer members of advisory committees were encouraged to take part in restricted ways as members of the committee (e.g. advising on language and terminology for interviews or surveys and recruitment strategies) at the beginning of a project but then had little or no involvement in the conceptual work of wrapping up that project:

Well, I guess as an advisory member, it would have been nice to know or it would be nice to have ... to be kept in touch with as to what kind of impact research is having, either with the students that are going to be utilizing it in their education, or for their studies, or if it had any impact or influence on communities, agencies, or governments that would otherwise assist us. I'd like to see what has it done and where. That's the biggest thing about a project. It's like "Okay, we helped you do this, now what good was it?" (Peer Researcher)

A lack of clarity about a peer researcher's role on an advisory committee may lead to a misunderstanding

about the nature and extent of his or her contribution as a member of the team. At its worst, such miscommunication can undermine the value of recruiting community members to act as peer researchers; it can effectively devalue their contribution to the research project and reinforce fears of tokenism for community participants.

The Employment Model

The majority of research projects that we heard from used an employment model of a peer research approach. Often this meant that the initial project design was established prior to the recruitment of community members as staff. Community members who became staff on a study took on a range of tasks, from helping to formulate and refine a survey questionnaire or a focus group discussion guide to identifying and implementing recruitment strategies (often relying on their insider knowledge of communities). In this model of peer research, peer researchers were given explicit (although limited) training in basic research skills, including data collection methods.

Most projects provided a relatively similar training framework, which included information on the fundamentals of research design and methods, the unique features of community-based research, and the logistics of data collection and recruitment. Service providers described the nature of the training they designed and offered:

We did content both in terms of what the questions were about, but we also did things about health promotion, social determinants, anti-racism, anti-oppression, as well as research skills, so content specific to our questions, then kind of value based, philosophy kind of training, and then research skills training. (Service Provider)

Right at the beginning we did a bunch of formalized training sessions, there were about five or six, they were half days, and, you know, on what is community-based research, what is a survey, and then some of the ethics, and how to actually administer a survey, and then also, what do you do with difficult scenarios, how do you deal with crises, all those kinds of things, and then we had weekly meetings as well, that were partly to sort logistics. (Service Provider)

We just did a one day, where we talked about community-based research and using arts-based

methods, and focus groups, because the peers, we facilitated groups together, we did ongoing support and training, and then we met weekly. (Service Provider)

The similarities across informal training programs point to some shared understanding of the roles and responsibilities of peer researchers. The nature of training, in research methods and in the core concepts that underscore the work (e.g., the social determinants of health) took very different forms across projects. As a result, the tasks and roles peer researchers were asked to take on varied considerably.

Some peer researchers engaged in an expansive range of tasks and roles that could be intensive, requiring a commitment and dedication akin to the lead research partners on the project. This finding raises important questions about the way in which peer researchers are viewed as team members and, more fundamentally, how they are compensated for their time and effort.

I've been counting it up, I think [meeting] maybe almost 30 times in the last couple of years, and for three-hour-long meetings, right, and so there's been hours doing this, it's a long, fairly intensive process ... (Service Provider)

Other peer researchers experienced limited inclusion in the research process, engaging in tasks linked only with the recruitment of study participants and the administration of research surveys:

I didn't have much of a role in planning or informing the process, uh, not really, I mean aside from just sort of reviewing what was in the questionnaire or the resource schedule ... and we had some sessions where we all looked at it and they sort of changed some questions around based on the input of the peer researchers. But, yeah, that's about as far as ... and then selecting locations to go to ... we were part of that too—the peer researchers—that was about as much in terms of ... informing the process piece. (Peer Researcher)

The struggle between how much and how little to include peer researchers in research and in what capacities, emerged as an ongoing issue for both peer researchers and for other research staff. Few agencies or projects formalized their model of peer research beyond acknowledging that their work was guided by the principles of community-based participatory research. Those with more detailed project plans

tended to lean toward an employment model of peer research where individuals were hired to do specific tasks on projects that were usually outlined in a formal contract or, at a minimum, a job description.

The strength of this model is that it can offer a clear direction to community members and researchers alike with respect to the scope and breadth of expected tasks. In terms of capacity building, such clarity can ensure that skills training and field experience are well defined for peer researchers.

This model can also present a number of challenges. The principles that underscore an employment framework may at times run counter to the mentoring expectation that can commonly exist within community-based research projects. Unlike more conventional community-based research projects, peer research projects that use an employment model often assume that the research will provide more opportunities for skills development and training than shared decision-making. Employment models tend to be very task oriented, in some ways compartmentalizing the roles and responsibilities of peer researchers. Although this tendency may be helpful from an efficiency standpoint, it can create a barrier between peer researchers and other members of the team. As one peer researcher noted, divisions existed among team members, largely related to the separation of roles and skills:

I was always wondering like when are we going to meet the other rest of the team? We never really met the rest of the team. You know we never met the head researcher. (Peer Researcher)

Unintentionally, such divisions can serve to reinforce power imbalances, something that most community-based research projects strive to avoid.

The research design and the method of data collection often determine the role of peer researchers on projects. Administering surveys, conducting individual interviews, or facilitating focus groups all offer hands-on experience to peer researchers in data collection. Detailed training in data collection can alert peer researchers to the macro and micro issues that can arise and influence data outcomes; giving peer researchers a solid understanding of the process can help ensure the validity of findings. However, the brief training offered may be insufficient to the tasks of conducting research, or, worse, it may set up peer researchers for only limited opportunities down the road. In addition, service providers and peer researchers may find that their expectations are at odds with one another, espe-

cially around skill level and the degree of support that peer researchers need.⁴

Data analysis and interpretation were areas of research work that were often viewed as outside of the scope of most peer researcher jobs. The reasons for this varied. With some projects this was understood as a question of interest level (the belief that many peers were not necessarily interested in this stage of the project); limitations in skill level (whether the peers were sufficiently trained to engage in analysis); or perceptions around limitations in the capabilities of peer researchers, as one service provider notes:

[h]ow researchers usually analyze material ... they turn it into text [transcripts] and then they analyze it. How do you do that with a group of people who don't relate easily to text? (Service Provider)

Peer researchers who play a primary role working with the data on research projects are exposed to a lot of detailed information. This exposure can raise two core issues: the challenge of ensuring confidentiality and the potential for adverse reactions for the peer researcher (i.e., sensitive information might trigger traumatic or distressing reactions):

[T]he other thing I really do in my trainings and my supervision is "how do you manage your personal feelings that are gonna come up in the project," because, you know, some of the questions they may be asking people are things they may be struggling with, things they're dealing with, things that they do ... risk factors they may engage in themselves. How do you manage your self-talk and your personal triggers, and still stay a little removed from the person being interviewed, but still stay connected with them, and I think that's a very difficult balance for people. (Service Provider)

Experiencing emotional reactions to information collected in interviews, surveys, or focus groups is not unique to peer researchers (Wray, Markovic & Manderson, 2007). The process of conducting health or social research triggers memories, emotional reactions, or negative feelings for even the most experienced researcher. Peer researchers are particularly vulnerable, due to the limitations around training, if sufficient support is not built into projects. Moreover,

4 For a more detailed discussion on some of these challenges, see Part II of this series, *Peer Research in Action: Management, Support and Supervision*.

the demands of confidentiality mean that the usual community support systems that an individual uses are made unavailable. Having sufficient support mechanisms in place can help ensure that peer researchers are able to ask and gather sufficient data and that there is a consistency in the data collection process.

Informal “debriefing” emerged as a valuable support mechanism for peer researchers on some projects. *Debriefing*, broadly, is a proactive technique to alleviate stress and distress associated with service provision or clinical work, particularly in response to extreme events (Kinzel & Nanson, 2000; Spillet, 2003). In research (particularly qualitative research), debriefing is also a strategy that researchers use to critically reflect on research methods and practices, as well as examine personal responses to the information gathered in interviews and focus groups (Ezzy, 2002; Wray, Markovic & Manderson, 2007).

Debriefing can be beneficial to both the research project and peer researchers. For the research project, processing the insights and observations of interviewers and facilitators can lend richness to the interpretation of data, enhancing the information gathered in surveys and data summaries. For peer researchers, discussions following data collection can help reconcile any tensions that emerged in the process of data collection and serve as critical points for enhanced training and supervision. However, the time pressures that exist on projects can unintentionally limit the time dedicated to debriefing, something peer researchers noted as a concern:

‘Cause there’s lots to talk about, um, and not the details of the interview, but just the experience and how it made you feel and, uh, what’s going on in your life kind of thing. So I think that needs to be built-in to, um ... what do they call it ... just the venting, really. It has to be ... you have to be allowed to talk about it, and, sort of what you’re doing now, quite frankly, needs to be built into ... if you have to hear everybody’s tales of woe, um, the peer researcher has to be able to tell their story to somebody. (Peer Researcher)

Few guides on how to debrief in research are available, particularly in relation to peer researchers. However, what guides do exist are useful due to their simplicity and applicability across settings. Many community-based agencies and foundations for example, have produced tools for research and community capacity building that can be used or adapted for use on peer

research projects. The Girl’s Best Friend Foundation in the United States, for example, produced some valuable ‘debriefing’ materials as part of their series of research worksheets in participatory evaluation.

Tips for Debriefing Data Collection Activities

QUESTIONS FOR VERBAL DEBRIEFING OF THE PROCESS:

- How do you think things went?
- What were your impressions of the responses?
- What were the things that you heard more than once (themes)?
- What were the things that you found most interesting in the responses?
- What were the things you found most surprising?
- What additional questions does this bring up for you?

FOR FOCUS GROUPS:

- What was going on in the group in terms of body language?
- Were their particular power dynamics in the group that may have influenced responses?
- Were there ah ha! Moments for group members or the facilitator? If so, what were they?⁵

In reality a range of other factors – that had nothing to do with the skill level, interest or capabilities of peer researchers – influenced their inclusion or exclusion from the process. The division of labour with other members of the team on projects surfaced as a point of contention:

That’s where we started to have problems in terms of hierarchy. [The peer researchers] wanted to analyze too, and it’s like ... okay ... that’s fine but it became ... [the community partners and academics] were supposed to analyze the data and write the report up and do that kind of thing. (Service Provider)

The tensions that arise around expectations and the boundaries of particular roles are not surprising, but seldom fully articulated. It is worth acknowledging that

5 Adapted from Girl’s Best Friend Foundation. *Tips for Debriefing Data Collection Activities*. Chicago: Catlin Fullwood, 2005. www.girlsbestfriend.org/

for the service providers and academics involved, there was a professional need to publish that may have also influenced priorities around involvement and authorship in analysis and write-up.

On the project noted above, conflict surfaced when expectations about ‘who did what’ on a project shifted mid-course as peer researchers gained more confidence about their insights and capabilities. For the service providers this transition brought to light some questions or concerns about expertise (and perhaps professional priorities), but more fundamentally about how to accommodate shifts in the organizational structure of the project part way through.

The limited structure of projects and the demands of tight schedules may shape the boundaries of peer researcher roles on studies. The decision to restrict data analysis to agency staff and academics sometimes reflected the pressures of wrapping up projects in a timely way. One researcher speculated that the project would need to be extended by years in order to accommodate a truly participatory analytic process. Such examples point to some of the perceived complexities of training and undertaking analysis with peer researchers.

Yet, some projects came up with a variety of ways to successfully engage peer researchers in co-analysis with community partners and academics:

We had a few sessions where ... [staff] provided sort of a mini report on the breakdown of the numbers, and we sort of divided into little groups and focused on sections and we just wrote different comments about, you know, what does that number look like, what could be done with that data, like, what kind of argument could you make for, you know, expanding programs, or ... the general issue. (Peer Researcher)

[Staff] printed it and we worked with reviewing it, and reviewing it, and then ... everyone came together and we analyzed the whole thing. We cut it into strips, what was said—the highlight points—and we categorized—put them in groups, and kind of find headings for each group. (Peer Researcher)

[I]t was interesting, the melding, different levels of complication ... this is like real research, heavy duty research all of a sudden ... they took the top best 200 statements, we poured through all them ... and out of those 200 statements they were each cut and colour coded according to what area of the social determinants of health ... each one was analyzed

and put together in groups that seemed to belong together ... they had analyzed it to the most, fundamental level of knowledge, to catch everything. (Peer Researcher)

These examples demonstrate that meaningful involvement of peer researchers in data analysis is possible. The data analysis process can allow peers to develop new skills, which supports community-based research’s aim to build community capacity for problem solving and decision making.

Although such inclusive experiences can have a big impact on peer researchers, non-peer staff, and the project, it is important to recognize the limited scope of such capacity building. For one peer researcher, the experiences that made her a good candidate—her ability to navigate and survive bouts of homelessness—also made team researchers uncomfortable when they surfaced out of context. While attending a professional conference as part of the research team, this peer found herself in a situation where refreshments were readily available to attendees. Unfamiliar with the norms of professional practice in such a setting, she fell back on behaviours that are useful in homeless situations but were out of step with usual practice at a conference:

I was just basically, I was filling up my bag with the pop and the juice, and I thought well, “it’s a hotel” ... in this case, I guess people were looking and I didn’t stop, but I’d never done it that way before, so I didn’t know the difference. (Peer Researcher)

On some projects, research partners acknowledged the “invisible work” that could emerge during the course of their research related less to the tasks or duties of peer researchers and more to supporting peer researchers as they reconciled new roles and expectations. For one group of women, taking on new tasks related to knowledge exchange and dissemination was not easy or straightforward. The willingness of service providers to emphasize both practical and emotional support beyond the scope of research training helped ensure that the women could confidently accept a new role as spokespersons for the project:

[T]he women didn’t feel comfortable going [to the conference], they said “I have nothing to wear ... we spent two hours at Value Village with them, getting them clothes because we needed them there, in order to present, and they actually all did come, but we spent a lot of money at Value Village and

we spent a lot of money buying them coffee, buying them cigarettes, getting them to come, but the event was much more successful because the peer researchers were there, and if we didn't do that, they wouldn't have been there. (Service Provider)

It is important to note that an employment model can leave peer researchers with a limited set of research skills and few opportunities to leverage them into sustainable long-term employment. Moreover, restricting peers to data-gathering and recruitment roles may be at odds with conventional ideals of empowerment and the goals of using participatory methods in community-based research. In essence, doing so undermines the very intent of involving community members in community-based research and may represent a missed opportunity to draw on the experience and insights of community members (Roche, 2008).

The Partner Model

We decided to commit to a peer researcher led model, where again, we involve community members, our target community members, from the very beginning, their involvement is shaping the research, but also extending beyond that to actually training them to, to conduct the research, to do the analysis, to co-write together, co-present together, and to follow up on that commitment, we've tried to establish a good training program as well, but we've had lots of challenges on the way, lots of learning. (Service Provider)

The ideal for many community-based research projects is one where community members play an active and equitable role across all phases of research—from conceptualization to the dissemination of results. Few community-based research projects may reach this ideal due to the nature and logistics of project start-up, including the challenges of securing funding. More typically, they tend to include aspects of the advisory and employment models, where community members are recruited for specific roles on research studies. Nonetheless, in our study we identified a few projects that resist this trend and demonstrate the potential of a partner model of peer research.

In the partner model of peer research, peer researchers tend to possess a greater sense of shared identity with the community of interest than in the advisory or employment models. Typically, peer researchers are defined by specific demographic characteristics of the

community-based research project. For example, if research is being conducted on issues related to youth, “peers” could be understood as an age-related demographic profile (e.g., 13 to 17 years old). Similarly, a project may be focusing on the needs of individuals with a shared experience (e.g., homelessness, poverty, or racialization); “peers” could be understood as members who have that experience. Identifying characteristics or experiences helps refine the scope of the community of interest. In doing so, a profile of a peer researcher is established for the project. However, only a few of the projects studied engaged in explicit discussions about a peer researcher profile. Such discussions covered questions such as: What are the points of exclusion? What are the limits around lived experience? How does a peer researcher's profile or role change over time?

Research projects that employed a partner model of peer research seemed to take a different shape, reflecting in some ways communities with a greater sense of shared personal identity and a greater history of activism connected with that identity. For example, one project reflected the culmination of peers' long-term activism around mental health issues. These peers helped spearhead the project and were actively involved in conducting front-line data collection as well.

I don't think there was ever any question that [the group] was going to engage in research, that it would be, some form of peer research, and that is because that group is ... very much themselves engaged in kind of taking on the world, and advocating for all forms of changes around people with mental illness, and for them, the thought that they could be involved in a research project was just, it was, it's been part of their kind of growth as a group I think, their growth as, in terms of understanding what's possible for them and what isn't. (Service Provider)

The peer researchers involved in this project strongly identified with the community of interest, and were instrumental in driving the work and actively seeking qualified staff and training in order to answer their research questions themselves. In other research projects that followed a partner model, the research was similarly initiated by active community members and/or individuals with close ties to those communities. On these projects, peer researchers were encouraged to take on leadership roles almost immediately upon forming a working group. In this model, peer researchers have succeeded in challenging the somewhat con-

ventional practices of peer research—reframing their role from research support to one that encompasses greater decision-making and leadership potential:

One of our primary initial goals, in addition to team building and creating a sense of ... what our research goals and objectives would be. So, those were defined at the outset by the community members. What we needed to do, um, was to seek out academic partners in order to sort of actualize, and carry out our research, um, so we began the process of basically like recruiting and soliciting, like, um, proposals from different people in academic settings to be involved in this research project. (Peer Researcher)

The development of a partner model is not, however, always easy to achieve. The close ties in some communities can either facilitate collaboration and partnership or, alternatively, impede it. For one project, the “peer” label used in the research brought to the surface uncertainties about shared expectations and a shared vision in the community of their relationships to one another and the nature of community-based research as they understood it.

For research projects that have successfully transformed the peer researcher role from an auxiliary one to one of shared leadership, there can be a twist in mapping out the details of the initiative. For example, one group in our study quickly moved from recruiting peers to having peers control the involvement of academics and service providers. In the process they redefined the scope of the research, clarifying the nature of each partner’s goals for the project, as well as their personal and professional needs:

The best thing was very early on, once our academic partners were on board, we had a very open and frank meeting about what we each individually needed out of the project. We all were there at the table, but we all had individual needs in our lives. Publishing needs, but beyond the academic ones which you know, we also have credibility. One of my serious concerns was that I needed to be on a project, but I couldn’t be on a project that lost me credibility within my community. Just as much as not publishing for [the academic] would destroy her career, lack of credibility in my community would destroy mine. So even though the academics have their risks involved in a project, we had a very open and frank conversation about

everybody’s risks. Some of us had career-building goals, advocacy roles. We all had our own stuff and we put it out there and as a group, we agreed what we could do as a group to meet each individual’s needs and goals and mitigate the risk that each person had at that table. Through that conversation we realized, as a team, that the community members had just as much risk, if not more, than the academics, which put us all on a level playing field. (Peer Researcher)

On this project, the value of a peer researcher role moves away from basic skills training or and data collection to one that could foster personal goals, such as the desire for future advocacy in the community. The approach taken on this project also helped to ensure that each team member of the team’s recognized for explicit strengths and individual needs were acknowledged. This reconceptualization of the personal needs and goals of *all* research team members can effectively reshape our understanding of what constitutes “capacity building” in community-based research; it can also reframe and strengthen the partnerships among community members, academics, and agency staff.

Conclusion

Peer research has emerged as a popular form of community-based research in Toronto. The intent behind peer research is to provide meaningful opportunities for community involvement in research, while enhancing the potential for individual empowerment and local capacity building (through skills development). Despite the widespread promotion of peer research initiatives, little attention has been paid to establishing specific models of practice. In our brief study of research projects in Toronto, we asked academics, community partners, and peer researchers to talk about peer research as an approach to community-based research. Through detailed individual and focus group discussions, we pulled together a snapshot of models, techniques, and strategies used in the practice of peer research. Practitioners often drew on the principles of community-based research to inform the design of their initiatives. Three broad models of peer research were identified: the Advisory Model; the Employment Model; and the Partner Model.

Most often, peer researchers were recruited to work on projects in an advisory or employee capacity as paid research staff. In both approaches, peer research works best when roles, responsibilities, and expectations are

made explicit—and include a frank discussion of the limitations of these approaches in capacity building, empowerment, and participatory research. Although it is used less often, the partner model, defined by shared decision-making, shows great promise toward reconciling some of the challenges of ensuring meaningful inclusion of community members in research. It is critical to be mindful of the politics of close-knit communities, where competing notions of inclusion may be operating. Some common patterns are apparent across the models of peer research, and may prove useful in shaping best practices.

Recommendations

With little guidance available on what constitutes good participatory research, local projects and initiatives have largely designed their peer research projects using instinct and experience. Few community-based research projects provide “decision rules” to guide the replication of their project from design to implementation (Lilja & Bellon, 2008). Drawing from the observations and experiences of academics, community partners, and peer researchers in Toronto, we can begin to document the key ingredients of project design critical to the success of using a peer research approach in community-based research.

1. We encourage community-based research teams interested in peer research to consult professional literature (academic and “grey” literature) on involving community members in research. Although few reports and/or studies refer specifically to “peer research,” an extensive body of work exists locally, regionally, nationally, and internationally that considers the strengths and challenges of community involvement in research. Locally produced resources include *Inclusion Research Handbook*, by the Ontario Women’s Health Network (www.owhn.on.ca/inclusionhandbook.htm) and *For Us, By Us: Peer Research 101*, a short video produced by the Toronto Community Based Research Network (<http://torontocbr.ning.com/>).

2. We encourage community-based research teams to reflect on their rationale for using a peer research approach before they commit to using such an approach. Clarity from the outset can minimize issues among research team members and strengthen the potential benefits of using a peer research approach. Tackling fundamental concepts and key questions about the intent and scope of peer involvement in a community-

based research project can help determine when best to use a model of peer research and for what purpose. They could consider the following:

- When is it appropriate to use a model of peer research?
- Is there a particular model of peer research that is appropriate for our project?
- What are our goals in using a peer research approach?

3. We encourage community-based research teams to define in explicit and practical terms who constitutes “peers” on the project to help clarify the goals and intentions of the initiative, as well as clarify for peers their roles on a project. They could consider the following:

- What is the working definition of “peer” on your project?
 - What are the boundaries of that definition? Can we consult with community members about the appropriateness of that definition?
- How are the members of the team situated in relation to one another?
 - Is there a hierarchy? What is the decision-making process?

4. We encourage community-based research teams to establish the roles and responsibilities of each team member at the outset to help provide the necessary detail to operationalize working definitions and set out assumptions and expectations. Documenting the dynamics of peer research in action may help agencies and community members evaluate projects, and gain real insight into peer research’s added value as a form of community-based research. Importantly, doing so can clarify capacity building needs and possibilities, enabling peers to use research opportunities to their advantage (Watson 2009). A Terms of Reference document can be a useful tool in this area. An important consideration is to adjust to the needs and expectations of the project: What are the issues of credibility for community members and service providers alike?

5. We encourage community-based research teams to ensure that appropriate support and protection exist for peer researchers across situations and experiences to enable peer researchers to deal with the emotional aspects of conducting research in their community.

Debriefing or other support mechanisms can strengthen research teams, serve as integrated reflexive strategies in research design, and enhance the way in which the research team works with the data, potentially improving the contextual understanding of research findings and their interpretation (Ezzy, 2002).

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Peer Research in Action I: Models of Practice

Peer research has emerged as a popular form of community-based research (CBR) where research projects include members of the target population who are trained to participate as co-researchers. The inclusion of community members in CBR through peer research initiatives is thought to enhance the quality of the data collected, allow for the expertise of lived experience to be incorporated over time, while promoting capacity building at the local level. Yet few research teams have explicitly articulated a model of peer research and how community members are actually included as peers in the research process.

In this first paper of our three-part series on Peer Research in Action, we explore how research teams defined peer research, how they integrated peer researchers into their projects, and what kinds of challenges they identified in the peer research process.