

CCEDNET

Issues of Research Policy

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The basic critique that I am raising is one of power and who has it. In recent years community/university research partnerships have been in vogue. The relationship tends to benefit the university researchers who have been able to 'work with' community organizations but have the power to define those relationships. The following are some of the ways the university has power to control and define the research. In practice, some projects have been flexible but it is at the discretion of the university researcher.

- 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, 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 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.