WORKING WITH COMMUNITY RESEARCHERS

Overview

Community researchers are individuals who are members of a community and who are given training to conduct research in their own community. At CLES, we often involve community researchers in our work if we are researching a particularly sensitive issue specific to a certain social group. Working with a community also enables the research to be a two-way process, in which we can give something back to the communities who participate in our work.

Our recent experience of working with community researchers revealed numerous benefits which this approach can bring:

1) Training members of local community organisations in research skills builds their skills base and allows them to conduct their own research or be commissioned by others in the future.

2) In-depth community engagement can provide important insights into attitudes, beliefs and behaviour in particular communities which quantitative data cannot explain.

3) Community researchers can identify issues which were not considered when the research questions were developed. These can inform the research process, improving and adding to the questions asked and information gathered.

4) Working with community researchers develops new partnerships and improves communication between organisations in different sectors and hard-to-reach groups. It also encourages greater knowledge sharing which can have lasting benefits for improving public service provision.

5) Engaging with communities and community groups encourages the research participants to reflect on the issues being researched, discuss topics which may be difficult to broach in ordinary conversation, and develop their own solutions or actions to address them.

This CLES Findings reviews two recent research projects in which we involved community researchers. It discusses:

• how we worked with the researchers;

• important lessons learnt for future work; and

• the benefits that community researchers can bring.

The stages of a community research approach

The two pieces of research in which we worked with community researchers were:

• a community engagement project to increase NHS understanding of how women from black and minority ethnic (BME) communities perceive and use sexual health services in Manchester; and

• an analysis of the resilience of communities in Manchester which are considered to be vulnerable to extremist groups.

Community researchers were recruited to assist with these two pieces of work because the research required sensitive engagement with communities who may have been unwilling to talk to researchers outside of their own community. Community researchers can overcome this barrier because they are already in contact with people in the target communities, they are experienced in working with community groups, and they have the linguistic and cultural knowledge required to conduct the research sensitively.

Recruiting community researchers

A key factor in working with community researchers effectively is being able to recruit researchers who are reliable, knowledgeable about the subject matter being discussed, and who are already working with the target communities. In these two research projects, CLES worked with an associate who regularly works with community organisations in the target communities. This allowed us to identify people who had the necessary community engagement skills to carry out sensitive research.

Training community researchers

Once the community researchers had been identified, we facilitated a half-day training session for the community researchers. The purpose of the training was three-fold:

- Firstly, to introduce the community researchers to the principles of research methods, such as interviews, focus groups, and research ethics, and to provide an opportunity to practise interviewing skills within a classroom environment.

- Secondly, to explain the purpose of the research to the researchers. Given the sensitive nature of these research projects, having an opportunity to discuss the focus

of the research, which organisations were involved, and how the data would be used was important to ensure that the researchers were comfortable with their role.

- Thirdly, to provide the researchers with a series of practical tools designed by CLES for the particular research projects. The tools included interview and focus group guides as well as background information on the project and a guide to conducting community research.

Supporting community researchers during fieldwork

Following the training, the community researchers had the opportunity to work in pairs to carry out the research. We provided the researchers with advice about voluntary and community sector organisations which might be able to support them in setting up interviews and finding suitable locations to hold focus groups. Each researcher was allocated a mentor from our team who provided advice and support to researchers during their fieldwork. The researchers were also given a budget with which to cover their own expenses and provide refreshments at the focus groups.

Collecting data and de-briefing

The community researchers were asked to take notes during the interviews and focus groups and to type up their notes immediately after each session. A write-up template was provided so that the researchers all presented their notes in the same format. Once the fieldwork was complete, a de-brief meeting was held to discuss the community researchers findings and their experience of conducting research. The outcomes of the discussion were also useful for the overall research. The de-brief meeting was particularly important for understanding any difficulties the researchers experienced and how we could improve our support and training.

What we learnt

Some key findings emerged from our experience of working with community researchers:

Allowing time for practice is important

The community researchers felt that more time was needed to be spent during the training session on practising and reviewing the interview and focus group guides. Spending longer practising research techniques would have given the researchers more confidence before they began their fieldwork. Twinning a community researcher with an experienced social science researcher could also have given the researchers more confidence and enhanced their learning.

Community researchers should inform the research guides

Allowing time to discuss the questions in the guides with the researchers could also have improved the interview and focus group guides. Community researchers felt that their knowledge of the communities, localities and issues being researched could have informed the questions which were asked and made sure they were appropriate.

Support is required throughout the process

The community researchers were offered support throughout the research process and this was found to be important for encouraging the researchers, discussing any emerging problems, and assisting them with the practical aspects of the work, such as finding a location for a focus group. It is also important to ask the researchers to submit their transcripts continually so that any problems with the way the data is recorded can be addressed.

Providing a budget upfront is appreciated

Given that many of the community researchers were unemployed, it was important that they were provided with a budget at the outset of the project to assist in covering transport and other fees associated with undertaking the interviews and focus groups. The budget for their work was managed by the community organisations they belonged to and was used to give the researchers a stipend for their work as well as covering research expenses.

A standardised approach is good for analysis

Asking the community researchers to write up the outcomes of interviews and focus groups in a standard template helped CLES to analyse the data collected. The de-brief meeting was also useful for identifying common themes and issues emerging from the research and provided an opportunity for the community researchers to shape the data analysis. It was important however that the researchers did not do this as part of the data collection but simply provided their notes from the interviews and focus groups.

Timescales need to be flexible

Organising interviews and focus groups can take longer than expected. Engaging with communities requires time and it is important that research participants feel they know and can trust the community researcher. Building good relationships with the target communities can also lead to further contact and partnership working in the future. For these reasons, adequate time should be set aside for the community researchers to carry out their fieldwork.

Multiple benefits of using community researchers

1) Builds the skills of community organisations: By training members of local community organisations to carry out research, the researchers gain new skills which they can use to conduct their own research or be commissioned by others in the future.

2) Reveals the stories behind the statistics: In-depth community engagement can provide important insights into attitudes, beliefs and behaviour in particular communities which quantitative data cannot explain. This deepens our understanding of cultural issues and adds the 'how' and the 'why' to statistical data.

3) Uncovers issues unknown to external researchers: Community researchers have specific knowledge of issues which may not have been considered when the research questions were developed. Community researchers can inform the research process, improving the quality of the research, and discovering findings which would have otherwise been missed.

4) Creates partnerships and communication channels: Working with community researchers develops new partnerships and improves communication between organisations in different sectors and hard-to-reach groups. These communication channels can be used for sharing knowledge and information, and engaging with communities again in the future.

5) Encourages communities to develop their own solutions: Research should generate benefits for the participants as well as the researchers. Engaging with communities encourages community members to discuss the issues being researched. As a result of our community engagement, some groups developed new ideas for addressing issues in their community and are working with the NHS to share information about health services.

At CLES, we have found that working with community researchers is an extremely valuable way of engaging with a community and deepening our understanding of issues which are important to them. Community researchers can provide important information on how public services are used by their community and how services could be changed to more effectively meet their specific needs. Likewise, public service agencies can work with community researchers to share information about available services to ensure that people are able to access the correct services according to their needs. In-depth community engagement can therefore be an effective way of co-producing public services and ensuring that they function efficiently and are sensitive to local needs.

If you would like to know more about our experience of working with community researchers or the findings of these particular studies, please contact Matthew Jackson, Associate Director at CLES, matthewjackson@cles.org.uk or Clare Cummings, Research Consultant at CLES, clarecummings@cles.org.uk, 0161 236 7036.