

Researching your own community: Peer research in practice

Elaine Arnull and Shilpa Patel
PPRG, Middlesex University

Presentation to SRA Conference
December 2005.



Presentation overview

- Presentation draws on 3 research studies
 - 2 involving young people and 1 people from the Somali community.
- The studies in brief;
- “Nuisance or necessity” – the costs and benefits of a peer research methodology.



The Studies - 1

- Evaluation of 5 youth schemes in a London Borough during the latter half of 2002.
- The schemes were funded under a Joint Securities Initiative aimed at addressing local estate based community safety measures undertaken since 1999.
- Aims of the research were to assess the impact of the schemes on fear of crime in the target neighbourhoods and to assess the diversionary impact of the schemes on young people.



The Studies - 2

- An examination of the provision for young people in the development of new facilities in a London borough.
- The research was funded by the Youth Services within the borough.
- The aims of the research were 1) to talk to young people about the developments and find out what they might want to be developed; and 2) to use the research findings to facilitate the young people's in-put into the planning process.



The Studies - 3

- 12-month study funded by the Home Office.
- Examination of khat use within the Somali population and community attitudes about the issue.
- Aims – the level/nature of khat use; perceived health effects of using khat; whether khat use associated with alcohol/illicit substance use; whether khat use associated with offending. (Also: Ethiopian, Kenyan and Yemeni communities – smaller scale).



The Studies overall:

- All 3 studies were based on a principle of using members of a community to access their own community – peer research;
- The peer researchers were all trained using the same basic method (Arnull 2002);
- The peer researchers were paid for the training and research phases;
- In 2 of the studies peer researchers were involved in some analysis and write up.



Differences in the studies

- They covered different social policy areas;
- They varied considerably in scope – i.e. national vs local;
- They raised different issues for the research staff teams;
- They were with different groups of ‘peers’ - seeking to access ‘peers’ as part of a community; as part of an age range; as part of an ethnic group.



Peer research – nuisance or necessity?

- Access – are specific groups difficult to reach using ‘conventional’ methods? Does peer research necessarily mean:
 - More accurate answers? (Griffiths, 1998).
 - Improved access to information? (Aldous et al, 1999).
 - A shared culture / language is essential to access and trust? (Winters and Patel, 2003).



Peer research – nuisance or necessity?

Cont'd

- Access – what are the potential disadvantages of using peer research?
4. Peer researchers may increase access to particular groups, but may limit access to others (Arnull 2003; Patel forthcoming);
 5. Integration – Should research with ‘hard to reach’ groups continue to be done via peer research? (Patel forthcoming)



Peer research – nuisance or necessity?

Cont'd

- Data - quality and interpretation:
- ‘Distance’ between lead researcher and data collection;
- Accuracy of data;
- Who ‘owns’ the research;
- Who should interpret the research;



Peer research – nuisance or necessity?

Cont'd

- Level of support required:
- A physical presence – support, safety, confidence giver and motivator, ‘monitor’ or manager;
- Telephone support and supervision –sometimes at all hours!;
- Administering and negotiating payment(s);



Good practice in peer research

- Capacity building.
- “Endings” to fieldwork: time for peer researchers to reflect on their experiences and saying “thank you”.
- Involving peer researchers in report writing, e.g. a Findings paper.