CHANGE MAKERS
SYMPOSIUM
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RESEARCHING
WITH
COMMUNITIES

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ABOUT RESEARCHING WITH COMMUNITIES, A CIFAR CHANGE MAKERS SYMPOSIUM:

CIFAR’s Change Makers dialogue “Researching with Communities” was held in partnership with United Way Toronto and York Region on November 26, 2015 in Toronto. Robin Cory, strategic advisor to non-profits and foundations across Canada and member of CIFAR’s IdeasExchange Advisory Council moderated the event. The four speakers were West Neighbourhood House Executive Director, Maureen Fair; Access Alliance Multicultural Health and Community Services Executive Director, Axelle Janczur; CIFAR SIIWB Associate Director and Senior Fellow, Philip Oreopoulos; and SIIWB Advisory Council member Kim Matheson. Leaders from United Way member agencies, CIFAR fellows and other researchers from across the Greater Toronto Area discussed how to build effective collaborations and achieve greater impact together.
RESEARCHING WITH COMMUNITIES

On November 26, 2015, in partnership with the United Way Toronto & York Region, CIFAR held a Change Makers dialogue to explore how to build effective academia-community collaborations in order to achieve greater impact. This event brought together service providers and academics from across the Greater Toronto Area to share knowledge and experience of the research process in order to identify how to better collaborate on improving policies and programs that serve our communities.

Robin Cory, strategic advisor to non-profits and foundations across Canada and member of CIFAR’s IdeasExchange Advisory Council moderated the event. Speakers included two members from CIFAR’s Social Interactions, Identity and Well-being program, Associate Program Director and Senior Fellow, Philip Oreopoulos and Advisory Council member Kim Matheson, and two leaders from United Way member agencies, West Neighbourhood House Executive Director, Maureen Fair and Access Alliance Multicultural Health and Community Services Executive Director, Axelle Janczur. Presentations were followed by break-out group discussions and a larger group reflection on important learnings from the day.

CREATING COLLABORATIONS THAT MOVE RESEARCH INTO ACTION

Building mutually beneficial relationships across academia and community has the potential to push research into action for the betterment of our society. Creating such partnerships provides an opportunity to better understand complex social problems facing our communities and to ensure that the programs, policies, and advocacy strategies designed to address them are informed and effective.

KIM MATHESON
Conducting community-led participatory research with First Nations communities

Kim Matheson is on CIFAR’s Advisory Committee for the Social Interactions, Identity, and Well-Being program and is a Professor in the Department of Neuroscience at Carleton University. She spoke about her Youth Futures research project in First Nations communities in Sioux Lookout, Ontario, a region where the youth suicide rates are 50 times higher than in the national average for children under 15 years old.

Launching factors for the Youth Futures research project included key community champions. Prior to beginning the project, an interdisciplinary conference addressing the health gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Canadians spurred thinking on how to address youth suicide. Once started, the project included key community champions who helped to encourage, guide and support the research team’s work.

Integrating the community’s priorities required a great deal of flexibility in defining the project. The
team realized that it must be flexible and work with existing programs where possible. This flexibility also meant standing back, understanding and contextualizing the situation, especially in defining who the community was. When facing this, a local community of practice can help guide academics when they make such choices.

Expectations of engagement matter. Research teams must be aware of the limitations faced by both researcher and community groups within a context of uncertainty and limited resources. Collaborators must be adaptive and look for opportunities to fill gaps when commitments fall through.

Academics should ask themselves, what do we do with the data? Who is the data for? Research teams should consider how to make data accessible and improve data literacy within the communities and organizations that they work with.

Communications is a necessary part of the research project. Research is not just about publications but should extend to public communication and can serve as the basis for advocacy. Evidence-based advocacy is sometimes the driver for these collaborations.

AXELLE JANCZUR
Best practices in transformative research and program planning

Axelle Janczur is the Executive Director of Access Alliance Multicultural Health and Community Services in Toronto. She spoke about how Access Alliance has been working to use research to improve service delivery for their clients.

Research should attempt to make sense of the root causes of community-level challenges. Research can be transformative for communities when it is built on top of local priorities. The social determinants of health are an important example of how research frameworks can promote positive community level change.

Community-based research should be greater than the sum of its parts. Academics should take grey literature seriously and work to convert evidence to something that is user friendly for rapid-uptake to impact decision making and knowledge building formats. Organizations should consider how they can use research and evidence as a strategic catalyst, combining hard data with qualitative evidence and narratives to inform decision making and improve services.

Know what success will look like. Community organizations and academics need to understand how to develop a broader, transformative measure of success and effectiveness for research. This could include internal rigor, external rigor, and/or social policy impact.

Both academics and organizations have important roles to play in driving transformative change. Social movements, political involvement, and research knowledge must come together to promote transformative change as these three forces are integrated and interconnected. Knowledge translation is key to this process. Academics should think beyond publishing research in an academic journal and likewise, community organizations should work to mobilize champions in policy, media and community. Communicating knowledge effectively to multiple stakeholders is integral to the process of change.

“Community research is not rocket science, but a process science”
— Axelle Janczur

Community-research collaborations should be solutions driven. These collaborations should aim to find ways to offer tangible solutions (interim and long-term; individual and system level) with concrete steps for how to make them work. As a community organization, highlight the cost savings to taxpayers that your programs provide if research is effectively embedded in its design.
Maureen Fair is the Executive Director of West Neighbourhood House in Toronto. She explored how community organizations and academics can achieve greater credibility together in the mutual pursuit of policy change.

Academics can add credibility to community-based research projects. Academics have up-to-date knowledge of community-based issues and have rigorous research methodologies. There is also an assumed objectivity and a perceived lack of self-interest in the outcome of the research when an academic is involved. Academics can add real value when their research focuses on understanding behavioral insights (e.g. behavioural economics, social psychology) as this has the potential to uncover new insights and help to inform policies and programs for community organization. Academics should remember that the use of ideology or ideological-sounding language however can be disadvantageous when constructing research projects or advocacy agendas (e.g. using the term ‘neoliberalism’) as it can deter meaningful conversations between stakeholders with entrenched interests.

Community organizations can add credibility to academic research projects. Community organizations improve relevance by the ability to identify issues that are meaningful to the community with the potential to generate political interest and support. Community organizations can help develop appropriate solutions that support the inclusion of people who are most affected or who have lived or experienced the problem, minimizing unintended negative consequences in policy design. Accessibility is improved by ensuring that the research is ‘explainable’ to the community and helps to keep community members and the broader public engaged.

Within community organizations, there is often a lack of resources and core skills to produce rigorous research. There is a widely held distrust of quantitative methodologies and use of control groups, coming from a fear that these methods may miss important nuances. However, quantitative methodologies can add real value to understandings of programs and service delivery when done right. Additionally, community organizations and academics often do not follow-up with crucial mobilization and advocacy efforts, stemming from the belief that research results are sufficient proof of a problem or need.

“Academics and community organizations have complementary strengths that need to be harnessed for credible, effective advocacy.”

— Maureen Fair

What does an ideal partnership between academia and community organizations look like? There should be an explicit shared goal of improving public policy for the community being researched. Additionally, there should be a shared responsibility for credibility, including a commitment to be checks and balances on each other’s work in order to protect the credibility and effectiveness of the research. Each partner has different and complementary roles in gathering and using evidence to change public policy in order to make best use of the positive attributes of each sector.
Phil Oreopoulos is Associate Director and Senior Fellow in CIFAR’s Social Interaction, Identity and Well-Being and a Professor of Economics at the University of Toronto. He discussed his three year running research project that evaluated Pathway to Education programs in Regent Park, Toronto and at other expansion sites. Pathways is an organization helping youth in low-income communities graduate from high school and successfully transition into post-secondary education.

Academics can add value to evaluating an organization’s program. Involving academics has many benefits including helping to provide ‘arm’s length’ credibility to an organization and helping to identify the potential for causal inference and the development of credible comparison groups. Additionally, academics can provide alternative perspectives, identifying and reassessing bottlenecks that may to improve services, and supporting internal capacity for investigation.

Academic-based evaluations of an organizations’ program also has disadvantages. Academics and community organizations may have different incentives for doing research. As such, clarity is crucial when developing a collaborative project. Organizations must be aware that research conclusions might be negative and collaborators should have a willingness to accept negative outcomes of evaluations in order to get closer to evidence-based programs and policies. Additionally, by bringing in external evaluators there is often no control or less control around the communication of results of the research. Additionally, it may be the case that to make the evaluations possible, operations of programs being evaluated may need to be changed in order to accommodate evaluation activities.

Research results may be surprising and have spin off effects. Through the external evaluation, the Pathways research project uncovered significantly different results depending on the site the program was implemented in. This result spurred qualitative work to look at the mechanisms taking place that might explain these differences. Thought should therefore be given to evaluating a program as a whole, but also to improving a program internally. Results of a study may also lead to new studies and initiatives. For example, previous research demonstrated that texting is effective in getting parents to interact more with kids and to have youth complete or renew aid forms to go to college. Texting may provide an opportunity to send salient reminders, motivation, and tips, while also allowing easy two way communication. Such findings could be developed into pilot projects that could be tested in a randomized control trial to understand effectiveness.

Program evaluations can be mutually beneficial. Evaluation can help improve the credibility of community organizations as organizations are better able to demonstrate that they are doing something that is meaningful and impactful, based on evidence. As a community organization, reaching out to academics at universities who are interested in qualitative work may help spark collaborative projects. Giving academics access to people and data is often very attractive to them, especially for young academics looking for new ideas and topics.
INNOVATION IN ACTION

Steps to creating better academia-community organization collaborations:

• Use evaluations as opportunities for continuous learning
• Support the training of employees and relevant community members in research skills, data literacy, and evaluation
• Identify internal champions and create an inter-organizational or interdisciplinary steering committee to guide research
• Be open-minded to the collaborative relationship and potential research results
• Discuss the possibility of negative results at an early stage and be open to change
• Determine a common definition of success between partners
• Build into any new project sufficient time to undertake knowledge mobilization activities

For a more detailed guide on developing academia-community organization collaborations based on the breakout groups and attendees reflections from this event, please refer to Building effective collaborations across academia and communities: Insights from CIFAR’s symposium “Researching with Communities.”

LOOKING FOR MORE?

Videos from each session of this symposium are available at https://vimeo.com/cifar/. You can learn more about the Change Makers event series, including information on upcoming events, at http://www.cifar.ca/change-makers/