

## BY WAY OF INTRODUCTION: Community-based social justice research

This introduction is based on presentations by Chris Dixon, Cleve Higgins & Jaggi Singh, and was compiled and written by Jaggi Singh. Chris and Cleve presented on the “Community-based social justice research” panel at the Study in Action 2011 Undergraduate and Community Research Conference, while Cleve and Jaggi have together facilitated community research workshops at QPIRG Concordia.

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*“Knowledge itself doesn’t make change for the better, it’s people with knowledge that do.”*

This is the second volume of a modest but growing Montreal-based undergraduate and community research journal. It’s one of the rare spaces to promote and share a “community-based social justice research” model. What is that model, and how does it differ from traditional ideas of research?

Let’s first break down the term “research,” which can often be intimidating and alienating to many people. Research, simply stated, is “knowledge work.” It’s the diverse things we do in our lives to acquire information, skills, and a deeper understanding of our society. Defined in this way, research is something everyone can engage in and produce. If you work for a wage, if you’re a parent, if you’re studying, if you’re analyzing current events, you’re doing knowledge work. Social struggles for survival, and for a better society, inherently produce some of the most vital and innovative forms of knowledge.

Unfortunately, many of the ways people undertake grassroots research, as part of their daily lives, and within their communities, is not validated or recognized as such. There are very rare instances where our research can be presented in a respectful, empowering way.

University education in particular trains us to see academics and intellectuals as the specific people who come up with important ideas and understandings about the world, while the rest of us remain spectators to their debates and

discussions. More fundamentally, the traditional research paradigm ends up serving the interests of power and privilege, and helps to maintain those very systems that we're surviving under and mobilizing against.

There are some obvious examples of research in the interests of power – when conducted or funded by the military, by business roundtables, and by right-wing think tanks. In many other cases, though, it's not so obvious. Still, the overall effect is more or less the same: traditional university-based research basically sustains the idea that ordinary people can't be trusted to control the institutions that directly affect their lives.

In opposition to "research in the interests of power," the community-based social justice research model is rooted in the idea of "research as a tool of social transformation." By empowering previously marginalized and oppressed communities and by providing support to social movements for justice and dignity, research tries to better the world, not reinforce its injustices. Community-based social justice research, like social movements at their best, offers new possibilities and alternatives.

Community-based Social Justice Research	Institutionally-based Traditional Research
Grassroots	Experts
Process-oriented, incremental	Results-oriented, final product
Subjective and rigorous	Presumed objective neutrality
Popular, useful	Corporate, profitable
Collective	Individual
Accessible to everybody	Professionalized
Holistic	Compartmentalized
Prioritizes community accountability	Prioritizes institutional and professional accountability

The values and methods underlying community-based social justice research are synonymous with the ideals that motivate non-hierarchical grassroots organizing in the first place. It's worth exploring some of those values and methods (they're outlined in the table above, contrasted with institutionally-based traditional research).

Clearly, a community-based social justice research approach places the emphasis on a collective, interactive process and making holistic links between subjects and people. It's the antithesis of the ivory tower academy.

As part of a grassroots research method, the community-based social justice research approach respects the constraints of social movements and day-to-day survival. This method validates taking the time needed to actually work with people and movements - respecting their timeframes - as part of an ongoing process. In this method, people are agents of their own knowledge, not objects to be examined, prodded, or studied.

“Subjective rigour” acknowledges that we all bring biases to the research that we do and critiques that presumption that anyone possesses overarching “objective neutrality.” But, at the same time, community-based social justice research does strive for rigour, meaning research that is fact-based, informative, accessible, and reliable. Claiming “objectivity” is certainly no guarantee of accuracy, and the community-based social justice method honestly admits our biases, working within them to share knowledge.

Importantly, research is always accountable to somebody. People who study and work in universities are very accustomed to being held accountable by professional scholars. This happens through all sorts of everyday procedures, including classroom assignments and tests, qualifying exams in graduate school, tenure decisions, and academic publications.

Doing effective community-based social justice research requires an alternative, grassroots accountability, what can be called “movement-based accountability.” When researchers understand ourselves as responsible to movements and people, we have to grapple with important questions: How do we determine what we research? How do we make sure that our research actually furthers social justice struggles? And how can those with whom we work in solidarity hold us accountable?

There aren’t yet many well-developed mechanisms for formally elaborating this kind of accountability, although there is more and more discussion of things like “co-research,” “militant research,” and “movement-based research.”

While there’s a seemingly stark contrast between a traditional research model and the community-based social justice research model, it’s worthwhile to nuance our understanding. There are definitely community-based approaches that can co-exist with the academy and universities can provide some openings for supporting alternative research methods (the Community-University Research Exchange is one such example).

Within this volume we highlight, in part, university-based research from undergraduates. On one level, this encourages newer students to see themselves as

researchers who can be engaged with the community. Moreover, undergraduate research does not have to be perceived as a precursor to eventual graduate work and entry into the academy, but rather something valuable in-and-of-itself as a way of engaging our community in diverse ways.

We are sharing research in this volume in the form of writing and art. This is also a reflection of the diverse ways we can communicate our research, through oral history, skill sharing, popular gatherings, multiple forms of media, and much more.

Ultimately, what distinguishes community-based social justice research is that it is about building capacities – it's about nurturing and strengthening the knowledge and analysis of people engaged in struggle.

The community-based social justice model of learning and research is not something that is new; different communities and cultures worldwide have applied it in diverse ways, for generations. One of the inspiring books that outlines this model in practice is Paolo Friere's *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed*.

Fortunately, we have some local models that attempt to put the values of community-based social justice research into action. This journal, sharing the research and expression of artists, activists, undergrads, and community organizers, is one such effort. The Community-University Research Exchange (CURE) and the annual Study In Action Undergraduate and Community Research conference, from which we've selected just a few submissions for the content of this year's *Convergence*, is another. This triad of projects, affiliated with Quebec Public Interest Research Groups (QPIRG) at Concordia and McGill, is one modest but very important local contribution to the building of an alternative research model and a growing community of researchers, broadly defined, who together *converge* to transform the world.