Working at the interface of research and practice: the value and challenges of community liaison officer roles

by

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Abstract
Sociological research at universities frequently involves liaison with communities. Although many university research centres and projects employ community liaison or project staff to work with and manage relationships with communities, very little has been written about the advantage of this approach and almost nothing of associated challenges.

We draw here on a small study of university-based collaborative health research conducted with and for communities experiencing various forms of disadvantage. The project involved interviews with 23 participants. In roughly equal numbers participants were university-based researchers, community liaison officers and community representatives. Some participants reported extremely positive experiences of working as or with a community liaison officer, while others were more circumspect.

The purpose of this paper is to present ideas about circumstances in which employment of liaison staff is likely to be effective. We also report participants’ views on some of the disadvantages and difficulties encountered. For instance, roles for these staff are frequently ill-defined and some researchers find it difficult to relinquish tasks to non-academic staff. Finally we provide suggestions for consideration by research centres either employing or considering employing community liaison staff.

Introduction
This paper reports on a small exploratory study of strategies for collaborative research at universities, based on semi-structured interviews with university-based researchers, community liaison officers (CLOs) and community representatives who had been involved in collaborative research projects with universities (MacLean et al., in press). The majority of research centres and projects involved were based at the University of Melbourne. Our research explored three research centre models where dedicated CLOs or community development staff are employed to facilitate community engagement. We also interviewed researchers and CLOs working on individual research projects where liaison staff were employed or where the researcher performed a community liaison role him or herself. Much of the discussion generated at research interviews centred on experiences of employing CLOs or working as a CLO.

University research centres and individual research projects that engage with communities are increasingly seeking funding to employ non-academic liaison staff to manage relationships with communities and their representatives and often also to assist with research dissemination. Nonetheless, little has been written on the employment of dedicated CLOs in universities, and almost no discussion of
difficulties associated with the CLO role is offered in the literature. A US report suggests that staff familiar with both research and community settings can play a ‘translational’ role between partners in research (Community-Campus Partnerships for Health, 2007: 6). Israel and colleagues (1998: 186) recommend the employment of a ‘community organiser’ on research staff ‘who is able to bring together people in the community, who has a history of community involvement, and who is respected and perceived as a leader in the community’. In Australia, Mitchell and Walsh (2003) argue that academic staff face institutional and professional impediments to establishing and maintaining relationships with community partners. They recommend therefore that dedicated intermediaries such as CLOs are required to maximise the value of social research. Tattam (2006) has suggested that while they do not usually undertake research themselves, CLOs require a good understanding of research.

Mitchell and Walsh (2003) also argue that community liaison staff are well placed to disseminate research findings. Nutley and colleagues (2007) recommend similarly that dedicated ‘knowledge brokers’ – individuals or agencies – be funded to work with researchers and agencies to translate research findings for practitioners and communicate research needs to universities.

Employment of CLOs in universities raises complex methodological, industrial and organisational issues. The purpose of this paper is to contribute ideas which might usefully be explored through larger studies.

**Research method**

This project used a critical reflexive methodology (Fook, 1996). Two of the investigators were included as key informants. Ethical approval to conduct the research was acquired from the School of Population Health Human Research Ethics Committee. Participants provided informed consent and were offered the opportunity to read draft sections of the report (on which this paper draws) referring to their contribution.

Twenty-three participants took part in semi-structured research interviews comprising: seven research staff; seven community liaison, community development or project staff employed in research centres (all referred to here as CLOs); and nine representatives of community agencies. Interviews utilised a conversational approach (Bourdieu, 1996). Transcripts and research notes were coded using the qualitative software package NVivo. A thematic analysis (Huberman and Miles, 1994) was used to structure the coding.

**Need for community liaison staff**

The literature describes a range of elements common to successful research collaborations between communities and researchers. Firstly, research partners should be involved from the very beginning of the project. Extensive negotiation and consultation is likely to be required prior to the commencement of any project to formulate and agree on common goals. Respective roles of all partners should be clearly defined and partners must be sufficiently flexible to renegotiate arrangements if required. A meaningful role for community workers in the research, and mutually
trusting relationships must be established. It is important also to build the research skills of community participants in the research process (Pyett and VicHealth Koori Health Research and Community Development Unit, 2002, Community-Campus Partnerships for Health, 2007, Israel et al., 1998, 2003, National Health and Medical Research Council and Consumers’ Health Forum of Australia, 2001, Pyett, 2002, Roussel et al., 2002, Winter et al., 2005). Developing and maintaining research partnerships requires major investments of time. It also demands expertise that some researchers do not possess. Hence some researchers and research centres have sought funding to employ CLOs.

Interview participants identified a range of benefits from employment of CLOS. For instance researchers and CLOs reported that community liaison enabled them to forge cooperative relationships with communities and to maximise research impact:

We all have a belief that you’ve got to give back to communities. But it’s more than that. Your research needs to make a difference… We have a dream for a different world, that’s social change. (R)

We had a commitment to not just feeding back to the sector but to try to make a contribution in whatever way we could. (CLO)

A service provider whose agency had collaborated with another university centre ‘felt that there was a genuine partnership’ and that her agency’s contribution had been valued and respected by university community liaison and research staff. Staff interviewed at one research centre believe that the presence of CLOs has altered the culture of their organisation:

I would be very surprised if there was a researcher at [our centre] who doesn’t recognise the value of having that sort of community work happening hand in hand beside them and most of them now do their own community work because they’ve been taught a particular style of operation, and they’ve embedded it. (CLO)

From our research, the nature of CLO roles appears to be largely influenced by researchers’ existing strengths and the stage which research projects were at. Within our sample one CLO did some research interviewing. Generally, however, their work focused on managing relationships with project partners and negotiating research access. Where they were employed late in a project, much of the CLO’s focus was on research dissemination.

The experience of staff at the Australian Research Centre for Sex, Health and Society (ARCSHS) illustrates the diversity and potential of the CLO role. Initially CLOs at ARCSHS focused on building relationships with communities and potential research users to inform the Centre’s research agenda. As ARCSHS’ research profile developed, the CLOs’ role assumed a new focus on disseminating research outcomes (Mitchell and Walsh, 2003). Researchers at ARCSHS maintain responsibility for disseminating findings in academic contexts through journal articles, teaching or conference papers. CLOs, on the other hand, disseminate findings to research participants and relevant communities including policy makers, clinicians and educators, and populations of people from whom participants are drawn. This is done through writing community reports and articles for industry magazines, holding workshops and discussions, and developing information booklets or comics (see
Walsh, 1998, Hillier et al., nd). CLO activities also include liaising with media, commenting on government policies and initiating meetings with bureaucrats to discuss potential uses of research. CLO activities at ARCSHS are funded through research budgets; however, staff have also obtained funding specifically to produce evidence-based educational or resource materials (Mitchell and Walsh, 2003).

Community liaison works well where it receives high level support from centre directors and where a distinct role has been established. Research participants frequently referred to community liaison at ARCSHS and community development at Onemda as models they would like to see replicated elsewhere. Community development or liaison staff have been employed at both ARCSHS and Onemda since their inception and each body now has teams of workers. At Onemda community engagement is seen as essential to research and so community development staff are in no doubt as to their importance. At ARCSHS the community liaison team is similarly well-established. This suggests that having a critical mass of CLOs employed in a centre or unit over a number of years may help to establish respect for the role and develop clear and recognised functions.

**Challenges encountered in employing community liaison officers**

Some of the challenges reported by research participants were:

- the diverse nature of the role and lack of sense of value
- researchers’ difficulty in relinquishing tasks to CLOs, and
- managing conflicting demands of researchers and communities.

Relatively few CLOs are employed in universities and so the nature of this already diverse role is frequently ill-defined. Research participants agreed that these positions are difficult to fill with appropriately skilled staff. Some CLOs spoke about a period of difficulty during the early period of their employment while the team worked out their various responsibilities. In a few instances CLOs felt that their expertise was undervalued by academics. One former CLO was emphatic about never again taking on a similar role because it became a de facto administrative role:

> That’s the reason I’m not interested in applying for any community liaison jobs. I don’t want to spend hours organising catering for an event or standing in front of a photocopier.

An academic expressed concern that CLOs are employed on contract and there are no established career structures or performance measurement tools for their work. Like academics, liaison staff were concerned that much of their workload was not countable through performance appraisal systems at universities. They felt that valuable aspects of their work were very much under-recognised:

> I know that if I had to tick a box on the academic work that I’ve done, most of them would be empty… As a staff member you’re judged on your performance by journal articles and what you’ve written. There’s nowhere [on the forms] where it really values the networks that we have and the brokerage that we do. (CLO)

Researchers who had worked with a CLO were sometimes ambivalent about the wisdom of employing specific staff in this role. Some found that communities wanted to hear from researchers about research outcomes and were dissatisfied when
academics were not available to them. One researcher found it difficult to relinquish the liaison role and wondered whether employing a research assistant (RA) in a more junior role, along with additional administrative support might have been a better choice:

Having had CLO, I’m not sure that I would do it again. I’d certainly have people doing some of the administrative work. I’d probably employ a RA to do some of that engagement. What I found was that it was far easier to do that engagement if I was doing it myself, if I actually made the links. It was particularly critical as we began to disseminate because I knew the research in a way that the CLO really didn’t.

Another researcher spoke similarly of having only gradually become comfortable about working with CLOs. She told us that initially she was anxious that the CLO would take over her work. After completing a few projects this had changed and the researcher feels now extremely comfortable with the community liaison approach. She believes strongly in the importance of employing dedicated CLOs but is also cautious that researchers should remain engaged in community work:

I think if all you do is just hand over your research at the end, it deskills you, it disconnects you from the community…There’s some middle ground where you are using the strengths of the community liaison while not absolving yourself of the responsibility or your connections.

CLOs may be subject to competing expectations or demands from communities and researchers. Liaison staff employed in US institutions indicate that this can be a difficult role and staff may lose respect within their communities if they are perceived to be accountable to universities (Community-Campus Partnerships for Health, 2007). Some staff interviewed for the present study also found their conflicting allegiances very difficult to balance:

I thought the idea would be that I would consult the community and then we’d do what the community wanted. Instead there was a bunch of researchers with their own ideas about what they wanted to do (CLO).

Likewise, some community representatives interviewed felt that liaison staff should be based in communities and not in universities so that their first loyalty would be to communities and not to researchers or universities.

Suggestions for future community liaison

Three main suggestions were made for enhancing community liaison at universities. These were:

- clarifying and professionalising the role
- envisaging CLOs as knowledge exchange experts, and
- additional university and funding body support for community liaison.

Participants advised that researchers seeking funding to employ CLOs should ensure, as much as possible, the tasks to be allocated are functions they are prepared to hand over and are not predominantly administrative. Where CLOs are employed it is critical that roles be carefully defined and their work be acknowledged and recognised. Some argued that educating academic staff on the potential contribution of CLOs would also be valuable or that CLOs should be encouraged to seek funding
for discrete projects in cooperation with researchers. Because of the risks of isolation for staff in community liaison roles, we believe that CLOs should be employed in teams wherever possible. Establishing a professional network of CLOs and researchers who work closely with these staff might assist people to address issues around CLO roles, performance assessment, career structure and sense of value.

Participants noted that experienced CLOs are able to help researchers plan a strategic approach to knowledge exchange, for instance through arranging meetings with government officials. A couple of researchers commented that CLOs were really useful in helping them pitch their research messages effectively to specific people or groups or in liaison with media. Some research participants suggested therefore that CLOs should be conceptualised as knowledge exchange specialists. Knowledge exchange is an important part of the role which CLOs have developed at ARCSHS. Our research suggests, however, that many CLOs are employed specifically to maintain relationships during research data generation and collection phases, and that research exchange is not always central to their roles. While the CLO role must be broader than knowledge exchange, this function is increasingly understood as important within universities and offers opportunities to demarcate an area of expertise for these staff.

Many participants advocated that universities should fund additional CLO positions and that funding bodies should also recognise the importance of CLOs when assessing grants. A couple of participants suggested that some kind of centre for community engagement and research exchange would help to develop community liaison as both a profession and collaborative research as a respected methodology:

It would go an enormous distance to improving the situation if [the university] would acknowledge that this was a critical part of research and what research is for. Just like they’ve got a research and graduate studies office and a magazine ... If they actually supported some central capacity for this kind of thing or supported a few positions in key research areas. ... At the moment I’ve never really seen much acknowledgement that this is a legitimate activity for a university to engage in... There’s more the idea that research will just diffuse itself into the community rather than somebody will actively play that role (CLO).

Mitchell and Walsh (2003) have argued that dedicated funding lines are required to demonstrate an institution’s commitment to community liaison. The NHMRC recommends that funding organisation provide resources for ‘consumer participation facilitators’ in key research agencies for at least several years’ duration (National Health and Medical Research Council and Consumers’ Health Forum of Australia, 2004: 26). La Trobe University now contributes to funding a CLO position at ARCSHS. This suggests that there are currently opportunities to develop community liaison within universities.

Employment of dedicated CLOs has worked well in research centres where their role is clearly defined, well understood and valued by researchers. Our research indicates that ongoing attention is required to clarify professional roles, develop support mechanisms for CLOs and to investigate opportunities for career development.
References


