

# Progressive participatory research: stress factors in Manenberg

*Most of the segregated black areas of South African cities are overcrowded and underserviced. Life under these conditions must have an impact on the mental well being of such communities. The Manenberg Research Group, together with the community of Manenberg, undertook a survey to identify the major stresses experienced by this urban community in order to work out appropriate ways to deal with them. In this article, they draw on the research project to address the question of what makes research progressive and participatory in practice.*



**Manenberg - the community has worked together to establish a People's Centre with facilities to address stress in a progressive way.**

Manenberg, 20 kilometres from Cape Town, houses about 60 000 of those whom the state has classified "coloured". The highly politicised Manenberg community is amongst the poorest in the Western Cape. In late 1986, churches and community organisations took up the challenge of dealing with the consequences of the wave of political repression experienced between 1984 and 1986. Together they launched a project to build a Manenberg People's Centre where those striving to empower the community could be united under one roof. The inclusion of a facility to address the psychological impact of stressors (factors causing stress) in the community was suggested. After consultation with progressive psychologists, it emerged that psychology offered few interventions that are appropriate for South African working class communities. It was from this realisation that the Manenberg Research Project was born.

## **Documentation and empowerment**

The central aims of the Manenberg Research Project were:

- to document the material conditions that make it difficult to survive in Manenberg. This, it was hoped, would highlight the rights for which this community is striving;
- to understand people's perceptions of the problems and stressors they experience living in Manenberg, their resources and their ways of coping;
- to develop appropriate strategies within the Centre to empower the community to deal with the stressors.

## **Life stressors and coping strategies: central themes**

Some of the central findings from the research project's community survey are highlighted below. The focus is on those life stressors about which residents expressed the greatest concern, and the most typical ways in which they sought to deal with them.

### **The consequences of poverty**

Poverty combined with unemployment and the high cost of rent and electricity, constituted the major stressors for the community. 29% of potential wage earners were unemployed and even among those who were employed, 46% of the average-sized households, consisting of six to seven people, lived on incomes below the 1985 poverty datum line of R345.00 per month. 10% of households were totally dependent on small state pensions and grants, and only 13% earned over R801.00 per month. The generally low level of formal education decreases the chances of residents being employed in positions that pay a living wage. On average, 17% of the people had only primary school

education and 9% were illiterate. Only 2% had received education at the tertiary level.

Just over half the residents (52%) dealt with the consequences of poverty by appealing to government authorities for assistance, ie. the Rent Office, the City Council and the Department of Coloured Affairs.

## The "deprived" environment

The second major stressor noted by 88% of those interviewed was termed "the dangerous environment". This included high levels of gangsterism, crime and violence, which made residents fear for their personal safety. The illegal sale and abuse of alcohol and drugs was named by 68% of those interviewed as the third stressor of major concern to the community. This was followed by the problem of grossly inadequate community facilities and the deprived physical environment such as poor roads and street lighting and the lack of medical and child care facilities.

78% of residents interviewed said that they did not have a way of dealing with these stressors and only 11% said that they turned to the police for assistance with crime. 46% of residents coped with substance abuse by speaking to a minister, a doctor, a social worker, a school principal or a trusted family member.

## Interpersonal conflict

In addition to the community stressors mentioned above, 33% of residents felt that the most serious problem facing their families was conflict within the family and between marital partners. Overcrowding is one of the negative consequences of the housing shortage in Manenberg and it worsens conflict within families. On average, two to three people occupy each room (including those not designed for sleeping purposes) in each dwelling. 16% of residents said that the housing shortage was a severe stressor.

44% of residents turned to a minister, a doctor, a social worker, a school principal or a trusted family member for help with family conflicts. 93% approached government authorities for assistance with overcrowding.

Once the survey responses had been analysed, a workshop was held with community organisations to evaluate the research process and its findings. It was felt that the only major problems that had not been revealed in the survey were those of incest, child abuse and spouse battery.

## The central lesson of the research project

For progressives in the social sciences, perhaps the most crucial lesson to be learned from the research project is that South African working class communities perceive

social science research to be both exploitative and irrelevant. Their experience of researchers in general, seems to have been that of privileged academics intruding on economically deprived communities, invading the privacy of residents to collect information that is neither useful nor meaningful to those being studied. More often than not researchers benefit, not those whose participation makes the findings possible.

Most of the community organisations working on the Manenberg People's Centre were not completely convinced of the need for the research project. After lengthy discussion, a mandate was given to do the research, but only in the last 9 months of this 30 month research project, was there unified acceptance of the value of this kind of work.

## **What makes research progressive and participatory?**

### **Accountability**

Accountability to those being researched and to the broader democratic movement is generally accepted as being the essential element that distinguishes progressive from traditional research. Clear structures must be set up to ensure accountability operates in practice.

The very first task of the research group was to define the ways in which each group involved in the Manenberg People's Centre project was to be accountable to one another. The research group was directly accountable to the body representing the community organisations coordinating the development of the centre. This involved progress report backs at all meetings of this body and consultation before making major decisions regarding the research.

The research group was to be accountable to the broader community by actively involving the community in all stages of the research, by seeking to resolve conflicts and queries through workshop discussions and by sharing the findings in ways that were useful and meaningful to the community.

### **Relevancy**

Although the initiative for this project came from some members of the community itself, the usefulness of the research was debated throughout the project. This critique proved to be an essential test of the relevance of the research and a process through which people could work through their misgivings about social science research. Regular workshops were held to facilitate this dialogue.

It was only whilst interviewing residents that members of community organisations realised the worth of the research. They came to understand that even progressive organisations could be out of touch with the very people they aimed to represent.

Interviewers reported that in listening to people's responses they really came to understand the extent and severity of the stressors affecting those living in Manenberg. The Civic Association found the results to be of particular importance, reporting that such findings are not easily dismissed by the broader society and are therefore a credible means of bringing the plight of the oppressed to the attention of the public and particularly, the authorities. Organisations are now planning their own research for a variety of purposes.

A workshop was held to evaluate the project and the overall feeling was that it had shown the value of this type of social science research.

### Participation, active sharing and non-exploitation

Residents were involved in all phases of the research, from problem definition and planning, to interviewing and evaluation of the findings. Research skills were redistributed to the community through the training of those who participated in the research process. Volunteers were trained in survey methodology and interviewing skills. Many have reported that the research skills they developed have been valuable in organisational work. (Those who completed the training and did survey interviewing were presented with certificates and their details were given to sympathetic university departments as potential employees.)



**The severe shortage of adequate accommodation in Manenberg affects both the physical and psychological health of the community.**

The findings were made accessible to the community through workshops in which written reports were presented and discussed thoroughly. The main findings of the door-to-door survey were written up as a pamphlet and distributed throughout Manenberg.

Furthermore, skills and experience were not shared in a top down manner from researchers to the community. Those residents who participated in the research continually evaluated the research methodology, as well as the findings. It was their active criticism that enabled the research group to avoid the pitfalls of traditional social science research. This break from a fixed research design required in traditional social science, to a dynamic method informed by practice and feedback, was one of the greatest strengths of the project.

The multiple cycles of planning, research action, feedback and clarification among those involved, showed the understanding of the residents to be just as legitimate a form of knowledge as that provided by social science. This strategy served to draw in and to sustain the participation of residents, thus increasing the relevancy of the findings for the community at large.

A decision was taken to prevent any research group member from gaining financially from the research project and it was agreed that no member could use the research to achieve an academic qualification. The research group had to be consulted and a mandate obtained before any information related to the project could be published and, where possible, papers would be written and published as a collective.

The strategies outlined above allowed the emergence and testing of a model for progressive participatory research.

## **Concluding comment**

There is power in knowledge. Just as social science research has been used to enhance the power of the privileged, it has the potential to empower the oppressed. Thus, in striving toward national liberation in South Africa, it is important that social science be treated as a sphere in need of democratisation.

The Manenberg Research Project has demonstrated the tremendous potential of research that is conducted according to the principles of accountability, relevancy and the active sharing of skills and experience.

The next phase of the research project has just begun. The Western Cape Branch of the Organisation for Appropriate Social Services in South Africa (OASSSA) has taken responsibility for developing the Community Counselling and Training Centre (CCATC) at the Manenberg People's Centre. The function of this facility is to empower Manenberg residents to deal with the psychological consequences of life stressors. An OASSSA working group has been set up to formulate the structure and guidelines for the functioning of a co-ordinating body and a working committee for CCATC.



**Social science research should be relevant and accountable to the community involved. It should empower the community rather than the researchers.**

One of the functions of the co-ordinating committee will be to use the research findings to develop appropriate community interventions. At present the working group is focussing on defining the relationship between CCATC and university departments interested in service provision that is both democratic and community-based.

It is hoped that in sharing our experiences of the Manenberg Research Project, others will use and improve on this model of progressive participatory research and that this will lead to the democratisation of social science research. We have learned that the most valuable understanding of a community is reached through active and ongoing participation in that community, not in the minds of social scientists who interpret the world from the ivory towers of academia.

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