



## **Commentary: Utilities of and barriers to ‘Community Scholar’ as an identity**

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Policies, including those related to disabled people, are to be informed by evidence generated through research (Bowen & Zwi, 2005). For example, under Article 74 of The United Nation’s document, *Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*, it is stated that the follow-up and review processes at all levels will be “rigorous and based on evidence, informed by country-led evaluations and data which is high-quality, accessible, timely, reliable and disaggregated by income, sex, age, race, ethnicity, migration status, disability and geographic location and other characteristics relevant in national contexts” (United Nation, 2015). Much of the evidence called for has to be generated at the local, community level. Although there is a dire need for evidence to inform policy, especially as it relates to marginalized groups such as disabled people, existing ways in which evidence is being generated is not satisfying the quantity and diversity of evidence needed to inform policy. And the World Health Organization *World Report on Disability* is just one report which outlines the need for more evidence as it relates to the situation of disabled people (World Health Organization, 2011).

We posit that an increase in high quality research performed at the community level especially by members who belong to marginalized groups and employees of organizations linked to marginalized people is needed to address this evidence gap. Question is how can we increase community based research?



## **The ‘Community Scholar’ identity**

The concept of the ‘Community Scholar’ has been used in various ways. One is as an academic engaged with the community in a mutually beneficial partnership (Calleson, Jordan, & Seifer, 2005); terms such as ‘community university partnership’, and ‘community-based participatory research’ (Allen, Culhane-Pera, Pergament, & Call, 2011) highlight this relationship. Another meaning is where the community member is the scholar (Nicholls, 2003) which fits the shift from Community-Based to Community-Driven Participatory Research (Mariella, Brown, Carter, & Verri, 2012; Montoya & Kent, 2011; Wahbe, Jovel, García, Llagcha, & Point, 2007).

We suggest that the concept of the ‘Community Scholar’, with the meaning of the community member being the scholar, may be a useful identity to entice community members to engage with research leading to the generation of high quality research performed at the community level *by* community members which include community members who belong to, or are linked to, marginalized groups. The ‘Community Scholar’ identity might do so in various ways.

## **The ‘Community Scholar’ identity: Impact on undergraduate student**

Most undergraduate students will not go on to pursue a career in academia, in particular undergraduate students who are in degrees which are focused on marginalized groups, such as disabled people. The undergraduate students in these programs in particular will likely work in the community after graduation. Furthermore many of these undergraduate students see themselves as community advocates, educators, and service providers but not necessarily as scholars who generate scholarly evidence to inform community policies, services, education, and advocacy. The ‘Community Scholar’ identity may entice undergraduate students to envision themselves to perform



research as part of their community employment and community involvement in general after they graduate. As such they might seek to gain research training to obtain the knowledge, skills, and tools necessary as a 'Community Scholar'. They could endeavor not only to take research method classes but to join research groups to perform hands on research to gain skills such as obtaining ethics approval, academic writing skills, submission to journals and critical and analytical thinking skills they would need if they chose to be a community based scholar.

### **Benefit of the 'Community Scholar' identity: The Community organization and their undergraduate practicum students**

Many students who will work in the community after they graduate would have been placed in community organizations as part of their degree training. The 'Community Scholar' identity may change the perception of practicum students placed on community based projects. At the same time students who obtain knowledge on how to perform research could change the perception of the organizations on the types of projects the organizations are willing to arrange for students by exposing the organization to the 'Community Scholar' concept.

### **The 'Community Scholar' identity: Impact on graduate students**

The 'Community Scholar' identity may also be beneficial to course and thesis based Master's degree students and PhD students. In this case it may not be so much about being enticed to learn about research (although this might depend on the curriculum) but rather, being enticed to think about working and conducting research directly in the community after they graduate.

### **The 'Community Scholar' identity: Benefits for students**



We posit that the ‘Community Scholar’ identity allows undergraduate or graduate students to establish a long term role with an organization through contribution of their ability to conduct research, produce data, and publish the work academically by working with the organization to generate evidence that is relevant and timely to the organization. This role as a ‘Community Scholar’ is different from academics who temporarily come into an organization to conduct research, or researchers hired by the community organization to support a research project. The trained student as a ‘Community Scholar’ would not only have the skills, experience, and knowledge to conduct research, but as an active member of that community they would also have established relationships and a clear understanding of the research purpose and research needs and how the findings may impact community members they are linked to through their organization and their embeddedness in the community. This in turn could decrease dependence of community organizations on hiring researchers who may not be invested in the organization’s development. Publishing the research performed on behalf of the organizations academically and non-academically in an open access fashion would allow the organization and the ‘Community Scholar’ to further educate the community. Generating data as a ‘Community Scholar’ can support community services, education, policies, and advocacy which will demonstrate the benefits of organizations and their services through empirical data to the community members.

### **The ‘Community Scholar’ identity: Beyond post-secondary students**

The ‘Community Scholar’ identity is not restricted to conferred students. Some ‘Community Scholar’ programs already exist which invite community members who identify as ‘Community Scholars’ into Universities to learn research skills. These ‘Community Scholar’ programs could be expanded whereby Universities would not only play a role in giving their students the skills they need in order to be ‘Community Scholar’s, but also train community members who may be interested in being ‘Community Scholars’. If the concept of ‘Community Scholar’ becomes more visible in



the community the interest of the community to be trained in research may grow. Furthermore these 'Community Scholar' programs could also be used to expose the University to the methodology and scope of research which are being conducted in the community by community members through an exchange of views on research methodology and research scope. Expanded in this way these 'Community Scholar' programs would add in a positive way to the community engagement strategies of many Universities and it may also lead to an exchange of views on research between the University and community members which would be beneficial to both.

However, just being interested in being a 'Community Scholar' is not enough for the concept to be useful. Various supporting frameworks have to be in place. We identify two following this section.

### **Barrier to the utility of the Community Scholar Identity: Need for diversifying what is accepted as evidence**

What is and should be accepted as evidence to inform policy and other areas has been debated for some time. Different academic fields generate different types of evidence. Often the debate is between the validity of "hard science" versus "soft science". Discussions are ongoing around how mixed method evidence or evidence based on qualitative or quantitative approaches should be generated and which method is most appropriate to inform matters such as policy. Inter or transdisciplinary collaborations as a means of evidence are discussed as well. Then there are discourses around "Citizen science"(for two references see (Kullenberg & Kasperowski, 2016; Silvertown, 2009), democratizing science and DoItYourself (DIY) Science and discussions which exist around the utility of research using traditional knowledge employed by indigenous people. As to disabled people how much money is spent on generating medical evidence versus evidence covering the social situation of and impact to disabled



people? How the discourses mentioned in this paragraph will play itself out will impact whether, or under which circumstances, research conducted by Community based Scholars will be accepted in areas such as policy. It will also impact whether academic literature and other databases which are not open access so far will become open access and which models will be used to ensure open access (ie. who pays for it?). Both discussions are of importance to 'Community Scholars'.

### **Barrier to the utility of the Community Scholar Identity: Need for open access to academic and other literature**

Some Universities, at least in high income countries, continue to grant their student alumni access to the University databases. As such students from these Universities would have access as 'Community Scholars' to academic and other literature needed to conduct their research. However, many Universities do not provide this service. Furthermore, many potential 'Community Scholars' may not be an alumni of any University and will not have access privileges to the University's databases unless they have obtained adjunct status with a University. Realistically, many will not be able to obtain adjunct status. As it is today, the majority of potential 'Community Scholars' do not have access to the information they need to fulfill this role. The effectiveness of the 'Community Scholar's' role will increase exponentially if open access to academic and other literature is granted. To give one example, an online open access platform accompanying the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development which depends on many stakeholders including community groups and members is envisioned to "facilitate access to information, knowledge and experience, as well as best practices and lessons learned, on science, technology and innovation facilitation initiatives and policies. The online platform will also facilitate the dissemination of relevant open access scientific publications generated worldwide" (United Nations, 2015). Given this claim it seems that the platform is less effective the less open access publications are available. Therefore, the more databases become open access the



more 'Community Scholars' will be able to generate community based data to inform projects like the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. However, the question remains as to whether open access or non-open access data is currently informing the science, technology and innovation application and policies of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and who has access to the data that informs the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

## Conclusion

Although exposing people to the 'Community Scholar' identity is not going to solve the problem of generating enough evidence-based data especially with respect to marginalized groups such as disabled people by itself, we suggest that the 'Community Scholar' identity, where the community member is the scholar, has the potential to change how students of Universities perceive themselves and their role in the community. It also has the potential to change how community organizations perceive themselves and their contribution to the diversification of evidence and the empowerment of communities including rural and low-income communities to generate evidence which is seen as rigorous enough to inform policies.

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