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Researching Social Networks in Action

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Many communities across Canada today are challenged by conditions that approach social and economic disintegration. As agencies of the state cut back their financial support of welfare services, citizens are faced with both increasing levels of stress and fewer forms of relief provided by established institutions. For researchers, the challenges of a shrinking resource base are compounded by ongoing epistemological and methodological controversies within social science. The recent emergence of a "postmodern" critique of traditional social-scientific methodology arises from some profound reorientations in the philosophy and the social context of the social sciences, reorientations that are reflective of fundamental economic and political transformations. This paper describes the action-research program we have designed and implemented in response to these challenges.

Starting with a small core of citizens from the community of Hespeler, Ontario, we have been using ethnographic methods to trace the networks of which these people are part and the ways in which those networks are constructed and maintained. The insights gained from this inquiry process are being used, in turn, to develop methods of strengthening local support structures, through collaborative processes of research and action. Such strengthening forms of interaction are not only desirable on their own terms. They also provide a model for restructuring relationships among research participants, and among forms of knowledge and being.

Many communities across Canada today are challenged by conditions that approach social and economic disintegration. As agencies of the state at all levels cut back their financial support of welfare services, citizens are faced with both increasing levels

of stress and fewer forms of relief provided by established institutions. In this atmosphere, people often have little choice but to turn to their personal support networks, and to rely more than ever on family, friends, and neighbours to help get them through hard times. At the same time, however, the erosion of traditional geographic bases of community, the reduction of government assistance, and the increasing competition for scarce resources work to undermine social cohesion. Many social workers and their colleagues are distressed that the state, having earlier assumed moral responsibility for the welfare of thousands of disadvantaged citizens, now seems to be abandoning that obligation. The deepening crisis of community demands both better forms of understanding, and improved forms of collaborative action.

The "downsizing" of the government safety net also has important implications for the conduct of social research. Governments determined to curtail spending are slashing support for education, social welfare, and health-related services. The reduction of resources for what had been well-established state agencies has inevitably affected the scope and nature of research related to the functions of those institutions. Publicly-supported universities are themselves such institutions, and as such are increasingly under attack. The search has begun for alternative forms of social support, and social research, which will require something other than the continued expansion of government-funded bureaucracies.

The challenges of a shrinking resource base are further compounded by ongoing epistemological and methodological controversies within social science. Recent critiques of established forms of research methodology are reflective of some profound reorientations taking place in the philosophy of the social sciences. Those reorientations, in turn, reflect some fundamental transformations in the economic, political, and social context of social inquiry. As developed economies shift from material production to an information-based economy, the extent to which academic knowledge-production is implicated in the semiotic politics of the new economy has become more topical, and more problematic (see Manning, 1991). Within the academy, many are beginning to question the very foundations of the historical quest for a scientific understanding of society.

To some, these various challenges may appear to be coincidental, but for a growing number of social theorists, they represent interrelated manifestations of the exhaustion, and the declining final stages, of "late modernism" (see Giddens, 1991; Harvey, 1990). The modernist model was based upon an economy driven by manufacturing, in which the means of production were controlled by corporate capital. Successful versions of such economies could afford to support the meliorative (but still hegemonic) functions of a large welfare state, which in turn was provided with policy guidance by positivist forms of social research. For a growing number of social theorists, however, the modernist paradigm is simply no longer tenable, either as a description of the present, or as a model for the future. In its place, a concept of "postmodernism" which emphasizes the layered, symbolic, fragmented, contradictory, and multivocal nature of social reality is becoming increasingly important.

Concepts of postmodernist social inquiry challenge the monolithic authority of traditional scientific paradigms, and insist upon the importance of the local and particular. Some streams of the postmodern perspective are bolstered by the critiques of historically disempowered groups: feminists, people of colour, and others who have not often found their experiences fully or accurately reflected in social-scientific reporting (see Lather, 1991; Richardson, 1991). Those who have usually appeared in social-scientific writing only as "objects" of research are increasingly demanding the right be heard as "subjects", speaking of, by, and for themselves. Their claims are impossible to ignore.

Together, these challenges place a heavy load on social research—especially those forms of research which attempt to remain engaged directly with current social problems. In fashioning a response to the postmodern critique, many researchers have found a starting point in a rejection of positivism, and the adoption of more interpretive approaches. A number have been attracted to a symbolic-interactionist perspective, and an ethnographic approach to field research, which attempt to preserve and be true to the nuances of particular social contexts. Such research paradigms are, however (and perhaps intentionally), far from being tightly-defined, precise prescriptions for the conduct of inquiry. As Cohen and Manion (1989) have said of symbolic

interactionism, "the term does not represent a unified perspective in that it does not embrace a common set of assumptions and concepts accepted by all who subscribe to the approach." (p. 34). It is this situation which has caused us to devote a good deal of attention to the construction and justification of a research model, and an approach to field work, which we feel is adequate to the demands of our discipline, but which also addresses the needs of those who are seeking a better understanding of their social conditions.

We hope that, through this paper, we will be able to locate ourselves within the traditions of qualitative research, and to contribute to the development of those traditions. Contemporary practitioners of socially-engaged research must respond, we believe, to the philosophical demands of the postmodernist critique of science, even if they do not accept entirely the postmodern program. They must also answer to the ascendant ethical demands of the people they have so long claimed to serve. At the same time, engaged social research must cope with the shrinkage of its own immediate base of support, and the decline of the state institutions through which its findings have hitherto been implemented. In this way, the decline of old forms of working and thinking can provide opportunities for reconstructed forms of inquiry, forms which have the potential to be both more enlightening than traditional approaches, and more satisfying in the human relationships they engender.

In this paper, we will first describe the ways in which our approach attempts to come to terms with some of the epistemological challenges facing engaged social research. We will then illustrate the application of our approach to a large, privately-funded research project in neighbourhood relations which is currently under way in southern Ontario. Finally, we will suggest some of the ways we believe this model of engaged inquiry can address the need to strengthen social networks, at the same time that it contributes to theory through improved forms of dialogical understanding.

The Postmodern Critique

The postmodern critique of social science is not an attack on any particular methodology *per se*, but primarily on entrenched

views of what constitutes the "truth", and the socially-organized procedures for gaining access to that truth (see Manning, 1991; Marcus, 1994). Those procedures have historically tended to privilege the pronouncements of trained experts over the discourses of "ordinary" people, even to the extent of saying that the experts knew better than people themselves what those people were actually doing. Postmodernism questions the grounds for such practices. Postmodernists maintain that there is nothing inherent in expert testimony which can give it final authority over the discourse of other interested parties, who are informed by their own life experience. To some extent, then, the postmodernist critique of social science may be seen as a reaction against the submersion of individual experience and personal meaning in an abstract concept of society, which often denies the importance and the rationality of individual citizens and the forms of life with which they are familiar.

Another facet of the critique has its roots in the failure of modernist science to produce a more just, peaceful, and habitable world. It is aimed at all investigative techniques which rely on authority relations to privilege the discourse of elites over the understandings of situated participants. Postmodernist theorizing has thus brought forward for scrutiny a subject usually relegated to only incidental notice in social research: the essential power differences between researchers and researched, power differences based in class, gender, race, and a whole panoply of cultural disparities.

This is a particularly acute problem for what have come to be known as "applied" forms of social science. Social work, education, and a wide range of therapeutic disciplines are dedicated to acting in the world as well as studying it. They are committed to an effort to achieve some form of social betterment through the treatment of individual needs. They have come to be known as "applied" sciences because, within the modernist paradigm, they were expected to leave formal research and theorizing to the "pure" sciences, and simply act to apply the findings from sociology, psychology, economics, etc. This situation has traditionally relegated "applied" disciplines to a secondary status within the academy, where they have struggled to define for themselves a body of theory and a set of methodological procedures which

they can claim as truly their own. One of the reasons we prefer the term "engaged" rather than "applied" social science, is to emphasize our engagement with current social problems without the connotation that we are merely an adjunct to some more "pure" form of inquiry.

For engaged social scientists, who are concerned with social action as well as the pursuit of a scientific understanding of society, there is a cruel irony in the confrontation with postmodernist thought. Such researchers are often in agreement with much of the critique of the rigid, dominating, and anti-human forms of modernist science. But the alternatives offered by the postmodernist paradigm sometimes appear to lead toward forms of radical relativism, cynicism, and impotence in the face of continuing social problems (see Bernstein, 1983). The preoccupation of postmodernism with issues of discourse analysis and the deconstruction of culture contains the danger that it will lead to a complete dead-end in terms of involvement with social needs and social causes.

Within every dilemma lies an opportunity, however. The attack on the kinds of modernist science which involves only the discourses of elites may allow for a reconsideration of engaged forms of social inquiry within the academy. Research with a restructured agenda, which is willing to tackle the difficult ethical and methodological problems head-on, may be capable of addressing the postmodernist challenge, and of providing some tangible results of worth to the participants. It may even provide ways of coping with the shrinking resources of the welfare state.

The Grounds of Action-Research

The philosophical grounds for a research paradigm which discards positivist notions of truth, and which is self-consciously aware of its own position in the world, are well articulated by Winter (1987). Winter sets out to re-constitute the epistemological grounds for engaged social research by seeking to return to first principles regarding the construction and defense of reliable, empirically-grounded forms of sociological knowledge. Recognizing the ways in which historical accretions of ideological authority have distorted the sources of scientific reasoning, he seeks to locate "a criterion whereby an analytically justifiable

formulation of validity may be distinguished from the conventional authority of institutional roles *and* from the conventional authority of 'science'." (p. 5).

Winter finds some of the criteria he is seeking in the basic insights of ethnomethodology, although he also recognizes the shortcomings of this discipline. Writers such as Cicourel and Garfinkel pointed out that traditional social science, by drawing attention to the gaps and failures of everyday reasoning, ignored the great bulk of its effective and sensible accomplishments (see Cicourel, 1964; Garfinkel, 1968). Common-sense reasoning, they pointed out, is usually adequate "for all practical purposes". Such practical reasoning acknowledges the ever-present *necessity* of action in the world. Underlying its concentration on the practical, however, is ethnomethodology's almost botanical model of data analysis, and its conviction that there are "invariant structures" guiding everyday action, which can be discovered by close observation and analysis.

Ethnomethodology thus counters the modernist tendency towards grand theory by insisting on the value and interest inherent in practical, micro-level, everyday action. However, ethnomethodology by itself risks elevating common sense to the position of being the *only* knowledge of interest, and its analytical processes remain largely isolated from the sources of its data. It thus risks falling back into a form of unproductive essentialism. In a similar way, interpretive paradigms, such as hermeneutics and phenomenology, have in some ways posed an alternative to positivist science by erecting its mirror-image. Concentrating exclusively on micro-level phenomena and/or the interpretation of texts, such paradigms discount the utility of social theories which encompass macro-level concepts of stratification and exploitation. By contrast, we are seeking a position which acknowledges the importance of situated knowledge, but which also recognizes its limitations.

Engaged social research which is to be useful in providing grounds for social action must recognize that the simplistic generalizations and superficial analyses which Bourdieu calls "spontaneous sociology" often support prejudices and stereotypes, which in turn act to perpetuate many forms of social oppression (Bourdieu, Chamboredon, & Passeron, 1968/1991). Well-grounded

forms of engaged inquiry must recognize the ways in which public discourse is routinely distorted through its domination by powerful groups, acting in their own interests. What is needed, then, is a form of social science which recognizes and respects common sense, while trying to transcend its limitations. For Bourdieu and his colleagues, the starting point for such a science is a radical "epistemological break" with the everyday (Bourdieu, Chamboredon, & Passeron, 1968/1991; cf. Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992); but this may also go too far in reacting against common forms of reasoning.

As we review these traditions of social research, then, we find ourselves back in the alteration between versions of science as completely alienated from, or completely immersed in, everyday life—what Bernstein (1983) characterizes as the choice between "objectivism and relativism". What is needed is a way of reconciling this conflict, not through some final victory by one vision over the other, but by the propagation of a productive dialectic between them. In this regard, the conclusions of Winter and Bernstein are strikingly similar. Winter advocates a form of action-research which confronts its own context as directly as possible, and which attempts to involve subjects as active participants in the formulation of a theoretical analysis, as well as a plan for concrete action. Bernstein, as a philosopher, is less explicit about forms of empirical research, but the themes of his analysis are clearly resonant with our own goals. After reviewing several prominent philosophers of the twentieth century, Bernstein concludes:

> At a time when the threat of total annihilation no longer seems to be an abstract possibility but the most imminent and real potentiality, it becomes all the more imperative to try again and again to foster and nurture those forms of communal life in which dialogue, conversation, *phron—sis*, practical discourse, and judgement are concretely embodied in our everyday practices. (Bernstein, 1983, p. 229).

The kind of engaged social research we are advocating seeks to narrow the gap between scientists and other social actors, and to bring everyday knowledge and scientific knowledge into a constructive, dialogical relationship. It seeks to resolve the polarity between common sense and scientific discipline, but not out of a naive belief that some form of inoffensive compromise can be

attained. On the contrary, we will argue for a fluid, provisional construction of scientific knowledge which is always open-ended, sometimes contentious, and in a constant state of dialectical tension and revision. Such a position will inevitably lead to a certain unease, a disquieting state of permanent uncertainty that results from the abandonment of previous monolithic images of truth. That is the price demanded by a form of engaged social science which refuses to become another ossified set of bureaucratic practices.

Clearly, there is a great deal more that could be said about so large and difficult an area as the philosophical grounds of contemporary social research. As our emphasis is on action as much as deliberation, however, we prefer to move at this point to a description of our actual field methods, and to some of the preliminary findings of our current research. In assessing the challenges confronting engaged social research, we have been compelled to re-examine the "minority traditions" of action-research and community development which have shaped our own forms of praxis to date. These minority traditions have by now long histories of inquiry and activism, but they have never come to occupy centre stage in the academy. They derive from the basic recognition that many kinds of ignorance are imposed forms of social and political oppression, and that a lack of skills and information prevents many dispossessed people from acting in their own defense. The traditions we are trying to incorporate into our research designs include forms of critical inquiry which can open up the dialectical processes of knowledge production, as required by the epistemology we have described above.

The Company of Neighbours

"The Company of Neighbours" is an action-research project funded originally by the Donner Canadian Foundation, and now by the Trillium Foundation, and based at the Faculty of Social Work, Wilfrid Laurier University. Under the leadership of principal investigator Ken Banks, the project began its field work in the fall of 1992 (see Banks & Wideman, 1994). The site which was selected was Hespeler, Ontario, a formerly prosperous and close-knit town which has been profoundly impacted by recent economic and social restructuring.

The basic theoretical perspective of The Company of Neighbours has been heavily influenced by the work of Philip Abrams (see Bulmer, 1986). The intent of the project is to learn, through dialogue with communities, about the strengths and weaknesses of mutual aid relations engaged in (or not) by local people, and where relevant, to suggest how forms of support for such mutual aid might be reconfigured. In addition, the project attempts to identify ways in which professional social workers can restructure their roles, in order to become facilitators who can support local people in clarifying, and then achieving, their own goals. While this project depends upon community member participation throughout, The Company Of Neighbours remains primarily a research project, and is *not* devoted to introducing new social programs, expanding existing programs, or taking old programs away.

From the beginning, we have conceived of this project as a form of "participatory action-research". This form of inquiry now has a fairly long and well-established history, especially within engaged forms of social research such as social work (see Lees, 1975), economic development (see Fals-Borda, 1991; Frideres, 1993), and especially in education (see Kemmis & McTaggart, 1982). According to Carr & Kemmis (1986), there are "three important characteristics of modern action research: its *participatory* character, its *democratic* impulse, and its *simultaneous contribution to social science and social change.*" (pp. 163–164; emphasis in original). Guided by these impulses, action-research has struggled to define a style of ethnographic investigation which successfully bridges the gulf between researchers and researched, and which can be effective in promoting indigenously-defined forms of constructive change in the settings where it is used.

One of the commitments which action-research shares with emerging postmodern forms of ethnography is the importance of locating the "voices" of authors within their own context (See Dawson, 1994). The effort to do so is always partial, but it may help readers to know that the authors of this text first met as doctoral classmates at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, in the late 1980s. Ken's background is primarily in social work, and in the study of the social construction of professionalism. Marshall's background is in sociological research methodology and critical

pedagogy. Ken's role as Principal Investigator has put him close to the action of the project. As an external consultant, Marshall has contributed both technical expertise and the perspective of a somewhat more detached "outsider". Gail Wideman, the project co-ordinator, has interacted most closely with the participants, and contributed to other reports from the project (see Banks & Wideman, 1993; 1994; 1995-in press).

Without wishing to separate or reify these roles excessively, in what follows it will be primarily Ken's voice providing the story of action within the project, and Marshall's which provides the commentary upon that action.

The Company of Neighbours set out to investigate the local neighbourhood ecology, with a concentration on personal helping networks. To this end, the university-based researchers began by identifying, contacting, and interviewing a number of "key informants" in Hespeler. We did not wish to restrict our information-gathering to those traditionally identified as "community leaders", however. One of the most fundamental parts of the methodology developed for this project is the use of local citizens as field workers. It seemed to us that a clear implication of the research paradigm we adopted was that an inquiry into neighbourhood structures and personal networks was best conducted by the neighbours themselves. Local residents could be expected to feel at home in the community, and be able to draw upon their own knowledge of the area in selecting other participants. Through conversations with the key informants and other local residents, Ken located five volunteers who represented to some extent a cross-section of the inhabitants of the area. These five people were designated as the primary interviewers, and because of the fairly technical nature of their role, were paid by the project as research assistants, and given more formal kinds of training than the other participants.

Training for the research assistants was designed to be as participatory as possible. In addition to reviewing information about basic interviewing techniques, time was spent developing the framework for the interview questions in joint sessions with these participants, based on the goals and objectives of the project. Ethical requirements of field research were reviewed with the interviewers, and the need for strict confidentiality discussed.

Each neighbourhood interviewer was asked, in the first of two series, to interview twenty people that were in their network.

Although an action-research project assumes a different set of relationships among the various participants than that in more traditional research projects, the day-to-day field methods are similar to other ethnographic projects. We began work on an ethnographic network analysis, that is, an analysis that examines the contexts and key elements in the character of the relationships identified in interviews. In total, the university research team conducted 32 key-informant interviews, and the local interviewers conducted 160 interviews with members of their social networks. Field notes, reflective process notes, and transcripts of groups meetings have also been compiled.

Using a version of "grounded theory" analysis techniques (Strauss & Corbin, 1990), and a computerized database system (see Mangan, 1994), the field data are assembled, labelled and stored. These data are then analyzed, not on the basis of predefined research hypotheses, but through a process of examination which leads to the identification and refinement of emergent themes which appear to be important topics among respondents. To illustrate this process, we will discuss some of our preliminary findings, and the implications of our approach for future efforts in engaged social research.

Establishing Emergent Themes

The key-informant interviews gave us personal contact with local school teachers, social workers and business people, whose interests we recorded and categorized in field notes on the database. We developed a coding and sorting process which allows us to work from a large selection of keywords to collect similar statements that different respondents have made to interviewers. The coding is a layered process, with the researchers reflecting on the impact of new transcriptions as they are entered into the database, then culling and printing clusters of data by different combinations of keywords, until themes become apparent (see Tesch, 1990). Next, the participating interviewers are drawn into the discussion. By the time we decided on certain themes for our preliminary analysis, for instance, we had involved interviewers,

consultants and research assistants in the discussion of more than a dozen candidate themes over a six-month period (see Banks and Wideman, 1994).

When it comes time to produce reports from the computerized database, the researchers sit down with selected printouts of highlighted and edited data, and draft an initial version of the story that the collected interviews tell, using quotes frequently to preserve the flavour of the original responses. When this is done, the team takes these reports to the following two groups for verification: First, the "reflective groups" of interviewees who have volunteered to stay involved in the project by critiquing the meaning that we are drawing from the interviews. The reflective groups include one that grew out of our interviewer training, and a group of senior citizens who meet regularly to tell us of historical networks and patterns in the Hespeler community. Secondly, there is the "advisory group", made up of senior social-work administrators, public policy specialists and academicians, whose role in reviewing the process is more technical. At regular intervals, the research process is reviewed with this group, in order to confirm the intelligibility of the research for an external audience.

As can be seen from the structure of these two feedback groups, the research project is intentionally positioned between the traditionally-defined "service providers" and their "clients". Our goal and our expectation is that we can serve as a mediator between these groups, and foster new forms of interaction between them and other interested parties. Being more firmly grounded in local experience, we expect that these forms will prove to be more durable and self-sustaining than would externally-imposed forms of restructuring.

The Action-research Cycle in Action

Action-research of the kind we are describing has frequently been characterized as a "cycle" or "spiral" of reflexive activities: data-gathering, analysis, innovation, assessment, and reflection (see Carr & Kemmis, 1986, p.186). One story from the early phases of the project may serve to illustrate the kind of action-research cycle taking place within the Company of Neighbours.

After we recruited and trained the interviewers and met members of their networks in the community, we realized that there were many small gatherings around the community that were characterized by respondents as "hardly worth mentioning", but that were important for us to take notice of. Several of our interviewers and their friends had often talked about the evening gatherings of friends and acquaintances at a local donut shop. Membership in these gatherings was fluid, active participation was not required, and attendance was only noted if someone did not appear for several weeks.

One of Ken's early thoughts was that the Company of Neighbours should try to duplicate the donut-shop type of gathering at "Mom's Place", a restaurant next door to the site office. However, local ambivalence about the idea cooled his ardour for that initiative. In discussing this possibility, though, we found that local people who were members of our research networks were bringing memorabilia about Hespeler to our office. They would come in with collections of pictures and articles, discuss them, and perhaps inquire of others as to the names of certain people in the pictures. We put some of the pictures in our storefront window, which attracted still more people. Soon we established, at their bidding, a regular Tuesday afternoon gathering of various interested people to tell stories of "Old Hespeler", perhaps with a view to publishing them in newspapers, or even in a book. Within a few months, the "History Group" assembled a wealth of memorabilia. Motivated by their own enthusiasm, they have staged several open-houses at the site office, arranged for local-history monographs to be copied and sold at cost, and presented regular shows of memorabilia at the St. Luke's nursing home.

The general lack of structure of the History Group came in part from the lesson that we had learned in hearing about the other informal groups that were "hardly worth mentioning". Instead of imposing a conventional form of organization on these informal groups, we loosely followed the discussion-group model that we were told worked in Hespeler. By listening, and not talking much ourselves, by not imposing tight time-frames nor rules for membership or leadership in the gatherings, we supported these groups without trying to control them. Even so, we remained

uncertain of the outcomes of this process, pending the formation of the reflective groups, which followed the community dinner.

Reflective Group Activities

In December, 1993, a "thank-you" dinner was put on by the research team. Guests included our interviewers, the people that they had interviewed (who were invited personally by the interviewers), and members of the History Group. The group ate and sang Christmas carols together, and Ken asked those that were interested in helping the research team to assist in reviewing and interpreting the interviews we had collected. This invitation was the basis for membership in the new "Reflective Group". It was a moment of great risk, as in any action-research project, when participants are asked to take part in analytical activities which they may or may not be interested in, and to offer responses to the researchers which may or may not be complementary. As it turned out, these groups became linked in an action-research cycle that became even more egalitarian than we had hoped.

At the third meeting of the Reflective Group, three central ideas were articulated: first, it was suggested that, in order to strengthen community communications, a newsletter could be organized, if materials could be found within Hespeler. Second, some of the older people in town expressed a desire for more dialogue with local teenagers. They stated that they would like to compare notes on living conditions in the 1930s, as compared to now. It is interesting to note that, resonant with the themes of postmodernism, both of these felt needs concerned the decay of local interaction, and a longing for the re-establishment of a dialogical context.

The third theme that emerged repeatedly was that of rootless or unsupervised youth. The present situation among young people in Hespeler was clearly perceived as one of the strongest contrasts with the image of the community in the past. As shown by the following quotations, the remedies suggested were both repressive and supportive.[1]

R1: Get the kids off the street. I think they should have a law. They should have curfew. I don't think it should be ridiculous like 9:00, but 3:00 in the morning is a bit much.

R2: The older kids need skate parks, for instance—areas where they can go and play. There are lots of playgrounds for the children, but there is nothing for the youth.

R3: They had no supervision in growing up for one thing, and they could care less about other people's property. They need a community centre or whatever it's called, where they can go and do things so they won't be causing trouble.

R4: I would ask that they have the recreational facilities that keep the young people happy, playing together, neighbours and everything else, and not walking the streets looking for trouble, looking for something to do, because there's nothing to do in the community. . . .

In addition to comments such as these, several of the older people expressed an interest in hearing directly from young people what their experience of Hespeler was in the 1990's.

In response to these suggestions, Ken called the high school principal, who was one of the original "key informants". The principal enthusiastically referred him to the head of the History and Sociology Department of the School. This teacher invited Ken and a member of the Reflective Group to talk to students about the request for dialogue. Ken, in turn, invited the teacher and students to the next gathering of the newsletter group. The teacher arrived with several boxes of his own memorabilia, and five students arrived soon thereafter.

The participants admitted that, at first, they did not know how to "do" dialogue amongst the several generations present. Scrap books were passed around, then several of the older members told some stories. There was some discussion amongst the older people about conditions then and now. In order to keep older people from dominating the conversation, Ken kept prompting the students for their perspective on conditions, on their dreams and wishes for conditions in the community. After much overtalking and anxiety on both sides, several of the young people spoke out.

One young woman said that this was the first time that she could remember having been in a group consisting of such diverse ages where there was an exchange of ideas expected. Another young woman spoke of a desire to gather with friends to hear

"their music" live. Another thought that there might be interest in a coffee house. Other ideas were also mentioned, ranging from miniature golf, to integrated environments for housing, school, and work.

Ken noted later that the students appeared interested, and perhaps encouraged, to hear that older people who appeared successful and comfortable had also had a very difficult struggle at the beginning of their careers, and that by staying with it they had made a life for themselves. The older people were touched that these youngsters were interested in them and wanted to talk. Several students expressed an interest in doing a youth column in the newsletter. Since that gathering, the teacher has developed a plan to spend the summer researching and, along with both young and old neighbours, videotaping the memorabilia at the site office for use in the school as well as in the community. Later they plan to arrange for community members to come to the school to do "living history" dialogues, and to bring students out to the community for special classes and historical outings. Neighbours are also staffing the site office on Sundays and evenings and are planning inter-generational days in the park as we write.

Conclusion

The story of the Company of Neighbours so far is not terribly revolutionary. It remains to be seen whether the initiatives described above will sustain themselves. But it is worth noting that, as local residents expressed a need for new or renewed forms of communication and interaction within Hespeler, project researchers were able to listen, to clarify, to facilitate, and to reinforce the community's ideas. Such a process does not solve all of Hespeler's problems, nor can it be applied as a rote formula to other sites and kinds of research. Within Hespeler, we must continue to seek out voices from the community which have not yet been heard, and the ways in which those voices are connected with social networks. There are conflicts within the community which must still be confronted. In considering the implications of this project for other research endeavours, the conditions of local context and the goals of the research must be scrutinized carefully.

Even with these caveats, however, we feel that this project has begun to formulate a concrete response to the postmodern critique of traditional social work and traditional social science. The participants have developed collaboratively an action-research cycle which is promoting dialogical understanding among everyone involved, at the same time that it provides new insights for a restructured social-scientific understanding of the community.

Whatever the postmodernist critique of the foundations of social-scientific truth, we know that all people act all the time on the basis of information which may not be certain or complete, but which is often adequate for the practical purposes at hand. This simple fact may provide for a response to the postmodernist critique, which will allow for the continuation of engaged social science through the deflation of its more arrogant claims. Instead of searching for eternal verities of social structure and action, a more useful paradigm may be the identification and reduction of specific, strategic "areas of ignorance" (see Wagner, 1993).

As we write, our research project is still in progress, and it is too early to assess fully its implications for ourselves and all the participants. However, we believe that our approach holds great potential. Through our engaged action-research, we are attempting to address the long-standing paternalism of university researchers, and of social work and social assistance agencies generally. We are trying to locate forms of social action which do not require the sacrifice of individual dignity in the process of seeking, receiving, and offering neighbourly help. Such new forms are not only desirable on their own terms, but may also provide a constructive complement to the welfare state in response to the erosion of the publicly-supported safety net. As tax-funded supports are steadily weakened, action-research along the lines described can provide ways of fashioning an informed and self-reliant community response. In addition to promoting models of neighbourly co-operation, we hope that the legacy for participants in The Company of Neighbours will be an enduring model of how they themselves can conduct purposeful inquiry into their own social needs. This form of praxis is particularly appropriate given that we, as students of social policy, are morally challenged to reconfigure ways of doing social support in response to the state's capitulation of responsibility in this area.

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Note

1. Respondents are identified here only by code letters, in order to preserve the confidentiality promised to them. In later reports, however, we plan to ask respondents if they wish to be identified, in order to recognize their contributions to this research (see Shulman, 1990.)

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