Co-Produced Participatory Approaches to working with Citizens in Rochdale

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Introduction

This briefing paper seeks to examine the approach adopted of co-produced participatory research with a number of different initiatives located in Rochdale: Rochdale Community Champions; Rochdale Citizens involved in the Integrated Working project and the Citizens Hearing project. This paper attempts to ask questions about the wider social policy implications of working with volunteers to engage with and research policy and practice issues, and the impact that facilitating such an way of working can have on participants.

A Co-Produced and Participatory Methodology;

These projects have primarily used co-produced participatory methods. The aim of this briefing paper is to reflect on the positive and empowering effect of participatory action research on a community of volunteers. The aim of social justice research is empowerment (Levin, 2012). The theme of social justice is included throughout this research project, through the use of Participatory Action Research (PAR) as a research technique; the research methodology intends to have an emancipatory function. Empowerment can be understood as a

> 'shifting or dynamic quality of power relations between two or more people; such that the relationship tends towards equity by reducing inequalities and power differences in access to resources' (Baum, MacDougall & Smith 2006:855).

Co-Producing knowledge with members of a local community or set of communities has the potential to stimulate social change. Knowledge and power can be linked, creating a framework for examining a process of changing social reality (Foucault, 1980). Foucault (1980) sees power as resulting from interactions between people, from institutional practice and from the exercise of different forms of knowledge. Foucault (1980) argues that relations between knowledge and power vary in societies and are organised through relationships of class, age, gender, religion and sexuality. Participatory action research seeks to take knowledge production 'beyond the gate-keeping of professional knowledge makers' (Huang, 2010). For Foucault (1980) there is a direct relationship between knowledge production, social practices and ways of being. The response, also, depends on the power relationships between the various agents.

The role of participatory research then acknowledges differing perspectives of power and social reality and uses a social justice technique to ensure that alternative perspectives are heard. Empowerment cannot be realised if participants are treated as subjects. Participatory research, involving research participants in the research process, co-producing knowledge, holds the focus on empowerment through research (Bell and Pahl, 2018). Participatory action research is framed in an epistemology of

power that questions the nature of knowledge and the extent to which knowledge can serve the interests of societies powerful, reinforcing societal hierarchies (Bennett and Roberts, 2004).

Participatory Research & Voice

Recognising the inequalities of power within the research process is important, for there is no neutral transmission of voice (Bennett and Roberts, 2004), the researcher is inevitably intervening and must acknowledge the responsibilities of their profession and the imbalances of power that emerge from that role (Lister and Beresford, 1991). It is important to consider who participates. Participation is a right (Bennett and Roberts, 2004), but there are a variety of power differentials in communities (Cornwall, 2000). Inclusive approaches need to recognise voices that may be silenced to account for the differentials in power within communities and to seek out 'hidden' groups (Norton et al, 2001). Difference exists in visible and invisible forms (Jones, 2015) and the power relationships to the variety of forms of difference can be uncomfortable to voice. Not everyone will be free, available or willing to participate throughout the research process (Cornwall, 2000) and an interactive approach to participation can be recognised and woven into the research aims in order to gather a range of perspectives.

The Social Justice Role

The primary focus of participatory research is that it is a collaborative process between researcher and participants (Levin, 2012). Participatory research is distinctive in that it holds the social justice goal – to enable action. Action is arrived at through participation in a reflective cycle, research participants collect data, analyse their data and then decide on appropriate action. Participatory research has a social justice function in that it pays particular attention to power and the hierarchy that exists between researcher and research participant. Participatory research techniques were used to embed the research within the Rochdale projects.

The Projects

Rochdale Borough's Active Citizens and Community Champions

Background: Rochdale Borough Council hosted the Community Champions while this work was carried out. The Big Life Company now hosts the Community Champions. Community Champions are volunteers who provide capacity building activities such as literacy, IT, mental health, debt or finance support to others in their community. As part of an investment in the training and development of the volunteers, workshops and a programme of activities focussed on leadership and research training was agreed between Rochdale BC and   Edge Hill University's Institute for Public Policy and Professional Practice (I4P). This participatory research training was co-designed with colleagues from Rochdale with the aim of empowering volunteers to conduct self-identified small scale community research projects. The training ran over three consecutive years with three groups of Rochdale Community Champions, 2013, 2014 and 2015.

Goal: The goal of the project was to offer an opportunity for the Rochdale Community Champion volunteers to develop their own peer research projects.

Co-Produced Practice as Research: Rochdale Community Champion volunteers were trained as community researchers. The training focussed on undertaking locally based research and participants were introduced to the skills and knowledge associated with: planning a locally based research topic, framing research questions, gathering research and interpreting the evidence gathered. Rochdale Community Champions were then encouraged to work together in small groups and develop their own locally based research project. Some Rochdale Community Champions chose to work in groups, others chose to conduct an individual research project. The research conducted reflected the diversity of volunteer interests and skills. The volunteers were supported by Edge Hill University staff who offered regular supervision sessions. Research took a variety of formats; digital content, Semi-Structured Interviews, Narratives of Change.

Results / Action: The research was collated into a celebration book (Goldstraw et al, 2014, 2015). This process was important for the volunteers to have something that celebrated their hard work and created evidence that could be used by public services in the Rochdale Borough to shape key reform or transformation projects.

Place Based Integrated Working

Background: Rochdale Borough Council commissioned further research with I4P, to reflect on their Place Based Integrated Working initiative. Rochdale Borough Council wanted to ensure that local people played a significant role in the locality based teams that were established. The interest in and experimentation with Place Based Working was also connected to the Greater Manchester Combined Authorities Public Service Reform programme. Following a successful integrated working pilot in Kirkolt, Rochdale, an integrated working project was set up within the Lower Falinge and College Bank areas of Rochdale. As part of this integrated working approach, I4P were invited to join the project team which was established with the intention of using participatory and co-produced approaches to develop a community of practice.

Goal: The aim of the research was to create a community of practice that could work with the skills and local knowledge of residents to develop an opportunity for reflective practice with the integrated working team.

Co-Produced Research: The research began with an extensive literature review that mapped existing evidence for successful integrated working before drawing on the qualitative data from a series of structured and semi structured discussions held at specifically planned workshops and reflections on one-to-one interviews between residents and local authority staff, in order to track what success means for integrated working in Rochdale and in particular what it might mean in Lower Falinge and College Bank.

Results /Action: Based on a complex and contested process of dialogue and mutual

respect for other professionals and local residents, as well as reflection, I4P's participatory analysis considered ways of working which were informed by a localised and particular understanding of place as well as respecting the needs and rights of local residents. The Literature Review and the knowledge developed with the 'community of practice' was published in an I4P Report (Goldstraw (ed.), 2017) and influenced Rochdale's contribution into the Public Service Reform process within the Greater Manchester Combined Authority.

Rochdale Citizen Hearings

Background: This work developed from the Integrated Working research with I4P and was commissioned by Rochdale Borough Council. In Greater Manchester, the possibilities associated with the devolution to the city region and an elected mayor created the potential for decision making to happen more locally. The Citizens Hearings Project was set up by Rochdale Borough Council to hold a more participatory conversation and to explore the potential of mutually beneficial relationships between the key public sector agencies and the citizens of the borough .The Citizens Hearings aim was to gather a mix of Rochdale Citizens from across the Borough to enable them to help contribute to the priorities and practice of the service providers. The Hearings were held in the council chamber and as part of a carefully structured preparatory process identified two key themes for action: relationships and cooperation.

Goal: The purpose of the Citizens Hearings is to reach a point where, for each theme, a series of key issues were identified, from the point of view of the citizens present. These issues focussed on : cooperation and relationships and defined the priorities for action in the 12 months ahead.

Co-Produced Research: The project seeks to place the voice of the citizens of Rochdale at the heart of Public Service Reform. The project began as two formal hearing sessions in the Council Chamber where Citizens invited system leaders to present on the two chosen themes; Relationships and Co-operation. Citizens then

asked pre-prepared questions of the System Leaders seeking to demonstrate what *enacting accountability* and *establishing the voice* of citizen involvement would look and sound like. Council the system leaders were required to respond directly, in person, to Citizens in the Council Chamber. The project facilitated resident voice and promoted understanding between professionals and residents.

Action / Results: This project is in its beginning phases and is part of a twelve month project that began in May 2018. This work is linked directly into Greater Manchester Combined Authorities Public Service reform agenda via a *Leading GM* project. Reinforcing strong relationships with Rochdale Borough Council and developing existing links with the Leaders in Greater Manchester project, *LeadingGM*, is led by Metro Mayor Andy Burnham. *LeadingGM* is part of the public service reform initiative, to mobilise a community of leaders from across all sectors. The Citizens Hearing project will be working with I4P at Edge Hill University to support the project and those involved.

Conclusions: A Critical Reflection on the Approach

Participatory research is considered a method to challenge their power relations which 'keep in place dependency and domination in the relationships between privileged dominant and marginalised groups of people' (De-Koning and Martin 1996:4). Participatory research recognises a need to link research with empowerment, education and action (Hall 1981). Participatory research draws on Friere's epistemology. Friere's (1972) concept of Praxis argues that action and reflection are united. Through Praxis critical consciousness develops, this leads to action through a process by which people see their situation less an inescapable social historical reality but a reality which they have the power to transform. Indeed, Friere (1972) highlights the importance of participatory research in its ability to offer a critical awareness of the world, through the links that it creates between knowing and learning. Friere (1972) argues that people who have 'lived their lives in marginalised and deprived positions need to develop a critical insight into the structures, ideas and practices in society' (in Koning and Martin 1996:6). Conducting ethical participatory research that holds both integrity of the community voice and academic integrity is challenging (Levin, 2012).

Participatory research approaches can help identify need, prioritise and contextualise issues within people's lived experience and give direction to policy development. Shor (1993) suggests that critical consciousness has four qualities; power awareness, critical literacy, de-socialisation and self-organisation/ self-education. Shor suggests that

> 'De-socialisation means recognising and challenging the myths, values and language learned and critically examining values operating in society' (Shor 1993:32).

The aim of participatory research in the context of the Rochdale Projects is to create Rochdale Citizens that are critical thinkers, that can engage with the Public Service Reform agenda within the Rochdale Borough and within the Greater Manchester Combined Authority as informed and empowered individuals to the challenges of the policy context in which they volunteer.

Developing a Poly-Vocal Conversation

When aiming to achieve a poly-vocal conversation (Sonnino et al, 2016), one must question if rejection of all power inequalities is achievable? (Hammersley, 2000). The researcher by their role within a community automatically ascribes to themselves a power, of the knowledgeable, of the external that they cannot easily overcome. Researchers whether they ascribe to hierarchical power relationships or not, claim intellectual authority by publishing their findings. This is a challenge when working in communities, negotiating power can be difficult. Using a process of 'conscientisation' (Friere, 1972) the researchers sought to acknowledge the power that they held and to negotiate their voice with self-awareness, prioritising the voice of the Rochdale Citizens.

Safe Spaces for Voice: Honesty and Trust

Managing expectations and being clear about what is possible within organisational and policy constraints is key to building trust within communities. Developing a safe space (Vaughan, 2014) for participatory research to happen is important. Co-produced participatory research that aims to empower the voice of lived experience of citizens must hold an integrity of approach (I4P, 2018). This integrity of approach involves a respectful approach to those with lived experience, being clear where their voice can hold impact and where system constraints may present insurmountable barriers to change.

Conclusion

The co-produced participatory approaches enacted in Rochdale Borough have produced evidence of the power of the voice of people with lived experience within a place. This evidence has been used and is, in the case of the Citizens Hearing project still being used to impact on Rochdale Borough and Greater Manchester Combined Authority Public Service Reform Initiatives. There are challenges to this approach; creating safe spaces to share knowledge and addressing power hierarchies within organisational structures is challenging but the value of enacting social justice by involving those with lived experience of the effect of local, regional and national politics is irrefutable.

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