

A Guide for Communities Working with Academics on Participatory Research Projects¹

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Introduction

This guide is for communities interested in participatory research and engagement with academics as part of participatory projects. It has been written by community members, activists and academics who have been involved in research of this kind. It is intended to provide communities with basic explanations of the background to, and motivations for, participatory research, as well as overviews of the processes of research, the implications that communities should consider when deciding whether or not to participate in projects and the key steps participants can take to minimize risks and maximize benefits. What follows should be regarded only as an introduction to the topic and should be read in combination with more detailed work on specific elements of participatory research outlined in the references list below. While there are many other forms of engagement between communities and academics, such as practice placements, site visits and teaching contributions, this guide deals only with participatory research – a process which can stem from, or provide the basis for, other instances of collaboration. It is freely available online on the website of ‘A Cross-Cultural Working Group on “Good Culture” and Precariousness’ (<http://wp.lancs.ac.uk/good-culture/a-guide-for-communities-working-with-academics-on-participatory-research-projects/>), a participatory project involving community members from Ashington, Northumberland, and Aboriginal groups around Brisbane, Australia. It was during the development of this broader project that the need for an introductory guide emerged. It is hoped that drawing on those experiences, among others, will help community members and academics to find mutually beneficial means of advancing research capable of improving the lives of those participating in it.

Background

Traditional forms of academic research, in which community involvement is not sought from the outset, might be described as research *on* communities. Participatory research is focused on working *with* communities. It concerns a number of different

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approaches to conducting research with communities which range from some participation at one end and co-production, in which academics and communities work together to produce research (Durose, Beebeejaun, Rees, Richardson and Richardson 2012), at the other (Durose et al, 2012). It can include working with communities to make decisions about the research topic, methods and questions appropriate to their lives and needs; involving community members in the research inquiry by carrying out some or all of the research/fieldwork, with training and support from the academic researchers, and involving communities in the production of analysis, reports and other research outputs.

The reasons for participatory research are many. As McAllister (1999, 8) has stated,

The rationale for using participatory research may be functional, to encourage community participation in order to improve the usefulness of the research to local people. For example, to help develop farming technologies more suited to the local area and needs or to improve reach and speed of adoption of new methods and technologies. Another reason may be for empowerment or social transformation, to strengthen local people's capacity in decision-making, in research, and in management of local resources, in order to improve their awareness of options and to strengthen their ability to act on their own behalf... Often participatory research is both functional and empowering.

There are many benefits for academics and communities working together on issues which are of interest to both.

For academics, working with communities can enhance and help shape the aims of research, offer a better understanding of fields of research and demonstrate the relevance and value of projects in the real world, which is of relevance to the concept of public value, in which organizations measure and try to enhance their contribution to society (see Kelly, Mulgan and Muers 2004). Taking participatory research seriously can lead to change in such things as 'research governance frameworks', which exist to shape the principles, requirements and standards for research (Beebeejaun et al, 2014a). More than anything, perhaps, the experience of participatory research can lead researchers to re-evaluate their research, their profession and their place in society.

For communities, it can be useful to note that academics have particular skills related both to exploring and understanding events and processes and to articulating ideas in written and spoken form. These skills can add insight and value to a project or campaign. Academic involvement can also increase accountability for community researchers where community voices are strong and engaged (Durose et al, 2012). Funding from non-academic sources is very competitive and bids to secure resources often require detailed area profiles, statistical analysis and evidence from research that can often only be provided by academics. However, academic involvement need not mean that methods or outputs be 'academic' in nature. There is great variety in the ways in which research can be produced and articulated, particularly with regard to 'beyond text' methods (such as photography, videography, art, etc.) which can be

enjoyable and engaging for communities who may be marginalized by traditional academic methods (Beebeejaun et al. 2014b)

As such, communities and academics have a mutual interest in collaboration. At the very least, such collaboration increases the chances of projects or campaigns being funded, recognized and/or endorsed.

Collaboration between academics and communities can be extremely rewarding as well as challenging. Building a good working relationship and setting common guidelines is essential to ensuring to a healthy partnership that will enable all parties to achieve the best possible results while managing expectations of what is achievable.

The Initial Stages

The first contact between academics and communities has often been made by researchers with existing project proposals which require community participation, or by communities with specific projects which require specific forms of academic expertise. Increasingly, however, there are academic forums which actively solicit requests for participation, such as the Community-Academics Research Links (CARL) at University College Cork, which enables organizations to engage with students (undergraduate or postgraduate) who carry out the research under the supervision of an academic supervisor, and the Participatory Research Hub at Durham University. These offer communities opportunities to engage with academics from a range of different disciplines and with a range of different skills on an affordable or *pro bono* (fee free) basis. There are sources of philanthropic and Government funding for community projects and programmes which require academic evaluation as the projects or programmes are being implemented, including the Young Knocknaheeny (see Pobal 2015) Prevention and Early Intervention Project in Ireland. This means that forums, such as CARL and Participatory Research Hub (see links below), are especially valuable in particular settings, providing communities with means of approaching academics with a particular end in mind.

More often than not, though, communities need to know how to respond to the first contact from academics. At this point, an academic or research group should have developed an outline of the project which will indicate the broad issue to be examined and the scope of potential community engagement. Where the research is co-produced, this may be very open-ended, meaning that the community and researchers then shape the project idea *together*. Participatory research, particularly in its more ambitious, co-production forms, challenges traditional research processes, which prioritize the ideas and approaches of academics. Existing power imbalances can be redressed so that the research is not about the ‘expert’ and the ‘community member’.

Communities need to be aware from the outset of the following issues:

- 1) Why is the community being contacted? Does the community have specific collective resources, such as a shared identity or experience, or interest which enables a project to be developed? It is essential that the reasons for the

contact are made clear so that communities can understand the impact of the research on their individual and collective interests.

- 2) Are there any vested interests at play in the project? Is the project being pursued for reasons which may undermine interests within the community? It may be that the project is of benefit to all people in the community, but it may also be that the research is being funded or promoted by an organization with interests, perhaps financial, which pose challenges for the community.
- 3) What are the existing interests of people within the community? It may be that a participatory project enables community members to think seriously about the nature of their individual and collective interests. Often, these interests are invisible, but it is very important for communities to consider these interests before engaging in a project which may affect people in unpredictable and unintended ways.
- 4) To what extent can communities collaboratively shape the research and the way in which that research can be conducted? In participatory research, it is expected that communities shape the goals and nature of the research with academics. It is important that communities understand their power to control research which affects their interests.
- 5) What are the practical and logistical implications of the project? Research projects concerning different areas of life require different resources (money, time, spaces, etc.) and different forms of participation with different implications for the community before, during and after the research is completed. It is essential that thought is put into the longer- as well as shorter-term demands that a project places on people, including after the academics have left.
- 6) What training, if any, will be required for community members to engage in the project? It may be that community members' existing expertise, with regard, for example, to cultural knowledge, is sufficient for the project to proceed. However, individuals may require research training with regard, for example, to data collection. This can be of great value to community members, enhancing their skill set, but it may also require time and effort that is devoted to other areas of life.
- 7) What, if any, funding is available and how will it be managed? Will the funding be used to pay for research participants' time or will they work on a voluntary basis?
- 8) What ethical guidance exists for the research? Universities have ethical review procedures, which mean that research projects which involve human beings usually have to be approved by research committees to ensure that the people involved are treated with respect and have their interests taken seriously. Researchers working in participatory projects will often develop ethical procedures in stages with communities to ensure that the project retains the support of communities as it proceeds. This means that communities often have opportunities to withdraw from projects without further consequence, ensuring that communities hold great power to shape research as it is taking place.
- 9) What methods of data collection will be used? In some cases, there may be a need for 'beyond text' methods, such as the use of 'photovoice' or other arts-based approaches (see Wang and Burris 1997), to engage groups which may

not have high levels of literacy or who may be more interested in, and engaged through, the use of more innovative methods.

- 10) In what ways will data be available and used? Linked to the ethical consideration, researchers have to be clear about the use that they wish to make of data. Participants must be made aware of the uses made of data and should always be aware of when contributions or information will not be anonymous.
- 11) In collaborative research projects, establishing ownership of the research is essential. Put simply, who is acknowledged as contributing to the research and how does that acknowledgement take place? Moreover, who gets to disseminate the findings of the project? Although these issues appear to arise on completion of the research, such questions of ownership need to be resolved in the initial stages of the collaboration.

In order to examine some of these issues, a clear project proposal is crucial. This should outline clearly the proposed research and may include an appropriate and intelligible title, topic, description, background, aims, methods, expected outcomes and timetable.

Often, the proposal may contain academic language, including jargon and technical terms, that is difficult for non-specialists to understand. It is incumbent on the research team to ensure that the proposal is accessible and understandable for communities if participatory research is truly at the heart of the approach. Jargon is over-used in academia and communities should not be embarrassed or afraid to point out where meaning is not clear. It is important that community members reflect on the first contact and identify areas of ambiguity and confusion in order that everyone is fully aware of the implications of conducting the research.

Communities should remember that they have great power in the early stages of a project. They can refuse to participate and, therefore, prevent the project from proceeding in the way it is proposed. As such, it is in everyone's interests that people know precisely what they are going to do in the project. This means that there should be a lengthy preliminary period of discussion between academics and communities. It may be that months of engagement are required before the expectations, aims and objectives of the research and the reasons for each individual's participation are clear. More than anything, it may be that people need to develop trust in academics and it should be expected that academics are prepared to invest time in developing trust. Put simply, it is essential that all parties assess whether working together be practical and productive. Although there may be time constraints and deadlines which appear to require that speed in developing the process, it may be that, if trust cannot be developed fully by any deadline, there are good reasons for both communities and academics not to proceed with the project. In projects involving people's everyday lives, there are very good reasons to require a high level of trust and to exercise great caution when considering the implications of a project on those lives.

Key Steps

If there is agreement that there is value in the project, communities need to ensure the following:

- 1) Establish a language that can be understood by all to discuss and plan processes and structure to make it easier to work together.
- 2) Involve participants in decision making and governance of your research project in order to promote democratic practice and encourage debate on how to ensure all parties have the ability to be heard in a fair and consistent way.
- 3) Consider the effect of policies and procedures that participants may be bound to as part of their role within their community and also those of the university.
- 4) Agree on ethical principles, protocol for safety, handling conflict and safeguarding.
- 5) Create a written working agreement or contract which sets clear boundaries. This can be flexible so amendments can be made as the project and the participants develop. A working agreement can include a framework for measuring the progress of your research and outline basic agreed practices. It could also be used to set clear guidelines and promote accountability for agreed responsibilities, working as a written reference to decisions that have been made.
- 6) Familiarize everyone with policies and procedures around ethics, such as handling personal data, equality and diversity and talk to others who may have experience of similar research projects.

During the project

Involving the community in research projects from the beginning will forge a sense of ownership regarding the research data obtained. The way in which the research is documented as well as an early decision on ownership and rights to the research data will determine how the research will be put to use and the impact it has on the community involved. Being open and clear about the use of the data from an early stage may avoid potential conflict. Ideally, sharing the research data and responsibility for interpreting the findings will create more possibilities for further involvement and greater impact.

Involving the community in the analysis and interpretation of the findings can be challenging. Ensuring that analysis is an inclusive process and that all partners agree on the interpretation of the research data can be difficult and may be a learning curve for some partners. However, it can add valuable alternative perspectives on the meaning of the research data. Developing a joint strategy for analysis, evaluation, data sharing, dissemination and the reaction to dissemination early on will ease the process.

A joint evaluation on how the research project has gone as a whole will open up the opportunity for all to reflect on and learn from the procedure. An inclusive reflection of the procedure followed can be of benefit to future research projects.

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Links

Community-Academic Research Links, University College Cork:
<http://www.ucc.ie/en/scishop/ac/>

Participatory Research Hub, Durham University:
<https://www.dur.ac.uk/socialjustice/prh/>



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