

**Power, Agency and Rights: A Critical Participatory Action  
Research study on the transformational potential of  
Human Rights Education**

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the value of a Community Development approach to enhancing the transformative potential of community-based models of Human Rights Education (HRE). The UN's definition of HRE builds on the idea of human rights as a set of accepted standards and the purpose of pedagogical spaces to build a culture in which they are normalised and respected. Yet since the recent proliferation of HRE, growing numbers of accounts take a critical perspective that confronts the conservatism and historicism of HRE in its traditional "*declarationist*" form (Keet, 2007, p. 7). This *critical* orientation calls for a pedagogical "*renewal*" to return HRE to its emancipatory purpose and positions Critical Human Rights Education (CHRE) as a route forward (Keet, 2012, p. 7).

Yet given the relatively recent interest in this field, there is a comparative lack of practice-based studies that explore the critical position, and consequently the viability of CHRE as an alternative to the "*declarationist*" model. In this study, I use a Critical Participatory Action Research (CPAR) methodology to explore the ways in which an approach to HRE modelled on Margaret Ledwith's (2020) framework for Community Development may enhance its potential to create spaces for critical learning and transformative action. I do so by examining the way in which a UK-based Civil Society Organisation (CSO) piloted an HRE initiative with four community-activists over a six-month period. I suggest that, while there is need for more practice-based studies, Community Development is well positioned to advance CHRE through its direct engagement with issues around power and agency and argue for a closer alignment between the two fields with opportunities to strengthen both the theoretical and practical learnings between the two.

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## **Author's Declaration**

This thesis is my own work and has not been submitted in substantially the same form the award of a higher degree elsewhere. The word count for this thesis is 45,987.

## **Glossary of Terms**

**AG:** Advisory Group

**CR:** Community Researcher

**CPAR:** Critical Participatory Action Research

**CSO:** Civil Society Organisation

**CHRE:** Critical Human Rights Education

**EAR:** Emancipatory Action Research

**ESCR:** Economic Social and Cultural Rights

**HRE:** Human Rights Education

**ICESCR:** International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights

**PAR:** Participatory Action Research

**PANEL:** Participation, Accountability, Non-discrimination, Empowerment, Legality

**PR:** Practitioner Researcher

**OHCHR:** United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights

**UDHR:** Universal Declaration of Human Rights

**UNDHRE:** United Nations Decade for Human Rights Education

**UN:** United Nations

**VA:** Visiting Activist

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# Chapter One – Introduction

## 1 Introduction

The ratification of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) in 1948 has been followed by the incremental spread of Human Rights Education (HRE) globally. This was accompanied in 1999 by the UN's recognition of *The Right to Human Rights Education* and in the 2011 *Declaration on Human Rights Education and Training*, which directs member states to be more active in promoting HRE within their jurisdictions. The UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) defines HRE as:

*“Training, dissemination and information efforts aimed at the building of a universal culture of human rights through the imparting of knowledge and skills and the moulding of attitudes”* (OHCHR, 1996, p1)

This definition builds on the idea of human rights as a set of accepted standards and HRE as the means to establish a culture in which they are normalised and respected. This is commonly recognised as the traditional or “*technical*” approach to human rights (Coysh, 2017, p. 23), and dominates the mainstream narrative advanced by the OHCHR and others. However, a number of wider accounts challenge this view, offering a critical perspective on human rights that confronts their inherent conservatism (Hamilton, 2003), interdependence with neoliberal power structures (Douzinas, 2007) and disregard for cultural diversity (Daraweesh, 2013; Mutua, 2002). As a prominent proponent of this position, Keet (2007) describes this overall approach as “*declarationist*” (p. 7) due to its focus on the transference of knowledge from teacher to learner, and suggests that: “*Human rights education has, despite its ‘explosive reserves’, developed into an unproductive and declarationist pedagogy that works against the ‘critical’*” (Keet, 2014, p. 69).

Instead, he calls for the “*renewal*” of HRE via methods of introspective enquiry to develop a model of Critical Human Rights Education (CHRE) in its place (Keet, 2012, p. 7). Those who share this view are widely considered to have a *critical*

orientation and offer varied perspectives on the paths to “*renewal*” (Bajaj, 2011; Bajaj et al, 2016; Coysh, 2017; Honig, 2008; Hoover, 2013; Martinez Sainz, 2020; Zembylas, 2016a; Zembylas & Keet, 2019). Yet while there is a broad consensus amongst critical human rights theorists on the need to challenge the “*declarationist*” model, Coysh (2017) points to a disconnect between the theoretical vision for CHRE and comparative lack of practical studies that explore its viability. In this study, I explore the value of Margaret Ledwith’s (2020) framework for Community Development to realising this vision in a practice-based context.<sup>1</sup> The overall aim of this thesis is therefore to respond to fundamental questions raised within the *critical* orientation about the validity and viability of HRE in a globalising world and explore how Community Development may offer pathways towards “*renewal*”.

To do so, I spent two-years embedded as a research partner with a UK-based Civil Society Organisation (CSO) piloting a Community Development approach within HRE. I used a Critical Participatory Action Research (CPAR) methodology to approach the planning, implementation, and evaluation of a six-month HRE project engaging four activists (‘Community Researchers’) leading social change initiatives across the UK. The aim of the project was to guide participants through a supported learning journey to explore what a human rights-based approach could add to their work. I conclude that, while there are limitations to the claims to knowledge that can be made in a study of this small scale, there are promising avenues for further research into the value of Community Development to developing a critical model of HRE.

## 1.1 Research questions

This study is guided by one main research question and two secondary ones.

My main research question is:

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<sup>1</sup> ‘Community Development’ means different things in different contexts. I capitalise the term throughout this thesis to refer to the specific approach taken by Margaret Ledwith, rather than the development of communities generally.

*In what ways can an approach to HRE modelled on Community Development enhance its potential to create spaces for critical learning and transformative action?*

In my analysis, I break this down into two parts. First, I look at the ways in which Community Development enhances critical enquiry in HRE spaces (explored in Chapter Five). Second, I examine how this leads to transformative action for social change (explored in Chapter Six). To do so, I used the following secondary research questions drawn from the critical literature:

*How may a Community Development approach help to create a model of HRE that is self-critical and capable of recognising and addressing issues of power?*

*How may a Community Development approach help to create a model of HRE that accommodates multiple perspectives and incorporates conflict within processes of knowledge production?*

## **1.2 Background and context**

My experience as a practitioner working in CSOs that deliver HRE provides the backdrop for this study. I came to the PhD programme at Lancaster University to find out more about the theories that inform these pedagogical models and explore avenues to improve practice within the field. Although my intuition has always been that human rights has the potential to be an empowering narrative for those whose voices often go unheard, I have regularly been struck by our limitations as practitioners and as a sector when attempting to use HRE to equip people to enact meaningful change both in their own lives and at a structural level.

In my experience, the traditional ‘Know Your Rights’<sup>2</sup> format of HRE, focused on increasing learners’ awareness of their rights, often has little practical value in a real-world context in which their rights continue to be violated. While learners are routinely reported to have enhanced knowledge of their rights following participation

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<sup>2</sup> The increasing integration of the ‘Know Your Rights’ approach with community legal education programmes is explored further in Lupo, B (2019) Legal Rights, Real-World Consequences: The Ethics of Know Your Rights Efforts and Towards Improved Community Legal Education, *Northwest Journal of Human Rights*, 17(1), 1-23.

in these HRE initiatives, I rarely see this translate into any meaningful change in the multiple and interconnected ways in which they experience oppression. As I began to read more within the literature on human rights, and HRE in particular, I started to associate the 'Know Your Rights' approach with the "*declarationist*" model and share similar questions to those within the *critical* orientation about the need for the "*renewal*" of HRE.

### 1.3 Aims of this study

In this study, I draw primarily on the Community Development theory of Margaret Ledwith to inform my analysis of its value to the field of human rights.<sup>3</sup> For Ledwith (2001; 2008; 2016; 2020), Community Development encapsulates a social justice driven approach that connects theory with practice to inform action for social change. Her theory draws heavily on the critical pedagogy of Brazilian educator Paulo Freire (1970) and his rejection of what he termed *banking* education, in which 'learning' is a one-directional process passing knowledge from 'teacher' to 'learner'. She builds, in particular, on his theories on *problematizing* (where learners begin to question the world around them) and *conscientisation* (where they become critically aware of its injustices). She integrates these with the concept of *hegemony*, developed by the Italian Marxist philosopher Antonio Gramsci (1971), to describe how dominant ideas become embedded in oppressive societal structures. Designed as a road map for putting Freire's critical pedagogy into action, Ledwith's approach engages directly with the issues around power and participation that have preoccupied theorists within the *critical* orientation (Bajaj, 2011; Bajaj et al, 2016; Baxi, 2002; Douzinas, 2000; Keet, 2007; 2010; 2012; 2015; Martinez Sainz 2018; Osler, 2015; Zembylas, 2016a; 2016b; Zembylas & Keet, 2019). Her framework consequently offers a model for contemporary Community Development that is well positioned to respond to the gap in the critical literature by focusing on "*the potential for transformative change through authentic praxis.*" (Ledwith, 2016, p. 69)

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<sup>3</sup> I choose to use the term 'Community Development' for the purposes of consistency as this is the term Ledwith uses. In practice, it relates to many fields including 'community work', 'community action' and 'community organising' that simultaneously intersect (Craig et al, 2011). Ledwith locates her theory within the literature on community work and community activism, distinct from the use of Community Development in the context of international development.

In applying Ledwith's theory, this study has three key aims. The first is to contextualise the theoretical vision for CHRE in a practice-based context. This involves addressing key questions including whether a model of CHRE can engage meaningfully with issues of power, recognise a wider diversity of voices, and integrate theory with action to advance an alternative to the "*declarationist*" model. The second is to examine the value of Ledwith's framework for Community Development to help achieve this. This involves analysing the theoretical compatibility of Community Development and human rights and interpreting the data through this lens. The third is to explore opportunities to strengthen the relationship between the fields of human rights and Community Development and open avenues for mutual learning between these disciplines.

#### **1.4 Rationale for this study**

I have undertaken this study for two main reasons. First, because the increasing enmeshment of human rights with destructive processes of globalisation coincides with what Keet (2015) describes as a period of "*counter-hegemonic distrust*" (p. 46) in the international human rights regime. This explains the growing number of accounts that point to the oppressive effects of the "*declarationist*" model and the need for a critical alternative with emancipatory vision. In the literature review in Chapter Two, I outline the key components of this vision. These include a social justice orientation, integrated practices of self-critique, a dynamic and evolving process and a collective methodology that welcomes a wider diversity of voices. Yet despite this theoretical blueprint, the relative absence of practical CHRE studies reinforces the dominance of the "*declarationist*" model and in doing so, legitimises the neoliberal power structures associated with escalating concerns about climate change, wealth inequality and political instability (Apple, 2009).

A second key reason for this study is to explore the most effective strategies for developing a critical alternative to the "*declarationist*" model. While the relationship between the fields of Community Development and human rights has been explored, the learning between them is limited (Ife, 2009). However, I see two key ways in which Community Development may enhance practice within HRE. First, by

integrating these approaches, HRE may be contextualised within a framework in which political struggle is an explicit objective, enabling a shift away from the cyclical patterns of learning associated with the “*declarationist*” model, and towards a trajectory that embraces rupture and renewal (Coysh, 2017). Second, Ledwith’s emphasis on the integration of theory with practice as part of a unified *praxis* offers an opportunity to translate the vision for CHRE into practice, creating pedagogical spaces in which practices of critique can be intentionally embedded.

### **1.5 Contribution to knowledge**

I aim to make both a theoretical and practical contribution to the literature on human rights. From a theoretical perspective, I position this study within the *critical* orientation, which takes as its starting point the destructive effects of the “*declarationist*” model and seeks pathways towards “*renewal*” (Bajaj, 2011; Bajaj et al, 2016; Coysh, 2017; Keet, 2012; 2015; 2017; Zembylas, 2016a; 2017c; Zembylas & Keet, 2019). I show in Chapters Five and Six how the Community Researchers interpreted and developed key concepts within human rights and argue that this offers valuable insights into how ideas such as ‘Power’, ‘Agency’ and ‘Rights’ are conceptualised within HRE. This responds to the suggestion that CHRE needs to not only be critical, but epistemologically “*pluriversal*” in order to be theoretically aligned (Zembylas & Keet, 2019, p. 152).

From a practical perspective, Coysh (2017) observes, “*The available scholarship on HRE in community-based settings to date has largely focused upon accounts of HRE practice [...] written by HRE practitioners.*” (p. 76). She therefore suggests that, at best, these offer secondary accounts of HRE that de-centre the direct experiences of the wider participants in these pedagogical spaces. By using a CPAR methodology, this study provides detailed direct accounts of the Community Researchers’ experiences of the learning process and perspectives on human rights and aims to bring a wider diversity of voices to the forefront within the human rights narrative.

In my analysis, I show how they engaged critically with HRE through methods of critical enquiry (in Chapter Five) and re-formulated a human rights-based approach

to better serve its emancipatory purpose (in Chapter Six). This makes a further contribution to the practical literature, in which many studies that claim to be critical instead offer descriptive accounts of HRE (Coysh, 2017). By using a problem-posing approach, this study holds true to the critical component within CHRE, engaging directly with the critiques of CHRE projects that fall into “*declarationist*” patterns (Keet, 2007).

In addition, this study makes a contribution to the literature on Community Development. Given that the case has been made for a stronger relationship with human rights and HRE (Androff, 2018; Ife et al, 2022), I suggest that the learning from this study about CHRE is relevant to either context. In arguing for the conceptual compatibility of human rights and Community Development (in Chapter Three), I aim to show the ways in which theory from one field may apply to the other and strengthen mutual learning between the two.

## **1.6 Approaching Participatory Research**

Participatory research is underpinned by several ethical and practical considerations. In this study, I acknowledge that there is no ‘right’ approach but that it is important to keep at the forefront the key principles that underpin a participatory approach. I chose a CPAR methodology due to the nature of my research questions and the theoretical framework I use to analyse these, both of which focus on interrogating the power dynamics in traditional research contexts. During this project, we approached ethical and practical considerations in several ways. First, I began by discussing with the CSO how to ensure that discussions about ethical issues would remain ‘live’ throughout the project, understanding that this would not be a straightforward process. We discussed different ways in which we could facilitate participation, such as providing mental health support, flexibility in scheduling and gender sensitive budgeting (discussed further in Chapter Four). We also considered the importance of ensuring that discussions about ethics were not restricted to conversations outside the learning space and instead formed part of the check-in and reflection exercises within each online workshop.

Our next consideration was how we would build relationships of trust between the co-researchers in this study. This involved several introductory exercises using storytelling and other forms of dialogue to get to know one another as individuals, activists and practitioners (which I explore in Chapter Five). On reflection, I recognise that some of the most important conversations we had as co-researchers about the dynamics of participatory learning were when we were explicit in naming privilege and acknowledging the inherent power imbalances in any learning environment. These pointed to the importance of transparency in dealing with ethical issues both within and outside the learning space and for the need for self-reflection by the CSO (and myself) on our wider approach to participatory projects. This resulted in additional outcomes to the project focused on enhancing practice within the CSO and wider sector (which I discuss further in Chapter Six).

Finally, as the project progressed, I grew to recognise the importance of valuing our differences as co-researchers, both in terms of our contributions to the learning process and the distinct value the project may add to our future work. Considering my own position as a practitioner-researcher approaching this project with a pre-defined research interest, I understood that any discussions around power dynamics took place in this context. As it was clear from the outset what my gains would be (through the submission of this thesis and associated qualification), and that of the CSO (through the general expansion of their work) it was important to define the ways in which the Community Researchers felt the project could add to their work.

Through a series of facilitated discussions after the first research cycle, they decided to focus the remaining sessions on designing a human rights board game for use as a social change tool in their communities (discussed further in Chapter Six). This highlighted the value of diverse learning journeys within participatory projects. For example, while the project initially focused on the learning of the Community Researchers about human rights, as co-researchers we began to recognise over the course of the project the importance of learning at multiple levels and the different ways in which we could each reflect on and improve our practice (which I discuss in Chapter Six).

Overall, I learnt that it is not possible to fully ‘neutralise’ imbalances in power in participatory research. However, by embedding live discussions about ethics and embracing difference, I saw that it is possible to create more productive learning spaces; ones that acknowledge that co-researchers do not all bring the same perspectives, enjoy the same benefits or face the same challenges, but that this can be a powerful driver of participatory research and the validity of its claims.

## **1.7 Structure of this thesis**

In this Chapter, I have introduced the key aims and justification for the study. Chapter Two presents a summary of the literature that informs my research questions. This includes an overview of the different orientations within the human rights discourse, which I separate into four distinct categories following Coysh’s (2017) delineation between the: *technical*, *interpretative*, *counter-hegemonic*, and *critical* orientations. This is followed by an outline of the key arguments put forward within the *critical* orientation and the key elements of CHRE. I go on to contextualise Ledwith’s theories on Community Development within the tradition of radical adult education and explore the wider ways in which the Community Development literature engages with ideas about human rights. Chapter Three sets out Ledwith’s theoretical framework for Community Development. This includes a summary of her key influences, building particularly on the ideas of Freire and Gramsci, and the seven stages in her framework for critical praxis. It concludes with an overview of the limitations of the “*declarationist*” model and identifies key areas of potential compatibility between Ledwith’s theory and a critical conception of human rights. Chapter Four outlines the CPAR methodology used in this study, my research design process, data collection methods and ethical framework.

I begin my data analysis in Chapter Five, which answers the first part of my research question, exploring the extent to which a Community Development approach contributed to meaningful processes of critical enquiry within HRE. This focuses on the first stages of Ledwith’s framework for social change, looking initially at how the learning space was formed and moving on to analyse the evolution of critical consciousness through the learning process itself. The final section explores the

counternarratives that emerged from this process, which I present as three key themes focused on ideas about 'Power', 'Agency', and 'Rights'.

Chapter Six answers the second part of my research question, examining the ways in which this process of critical enquiry contributed to transformative action. I do so by identifying three distinct modalities of transformative action. The first looks at the process of designing a human rights board game, which formed the focus of the second half of the project and which I explore through the lens of the three themes identified in Chapter Five. The second examines the ways in which the Community Researchers engaged with the principles that underpin a human rights-based approach and re-formulated these to align with its emancipatory vision. The third reviews my own learning journey and that of the CSO, examining the ways in which we engaged in self-reflexive enquiry and the learning we have taken forward from this project. In Chapter Seven, I present my concluding arguments and summarise the learning from this study.

## **Chapter Two – Literature review: The context for human rights and Human Rights Education (HRE)**

### **2. Introduction**

In this chapter, I contextualise this study within the literature on human rights and HRE. I divide the chapter into five sections. In the first section (2.1), I outline the evolution of HRE and introduce examples of some key typologies. In the second section (2.2), I summarise four theoretical orientations that inform different ontological positions on the value of HRE. I use Coysh's (2017) categorisation of the *technical*, *interpretative*, *counter-hegemonic* and *critical* orientations and align this study with the critical position. I use the third section (2.3) to provide an outline of CHRE and identify some theoretical openings that point to avenues for “*renewal*”. In the fourth section (2.4), I position this study within the literature on Community Development as it relates to adult education in communities and contextualise Ledwith's theories within the radical tradition. In the fifth and final section (2.5), I provide an overview of how the wider literature on Community Development engages with ideas about human rights as a precursor to arguing for a stronger relationship between the two fields.

### **2.1 Evolution of Human Rights Education (HRE)**

To illustrate how HRE has evolved as a field of study, Keet (2007; 2015) draws a distinction between four key phases in its development. The first leads up to the ratification of the UDHR 1948, when theories of rights built broadly on Greco-Roman ideas about civic participation. The second phase, lasting from 1948 to 1994, sees the *formalisation* of human rights within international law and the beginning of what some have described as the overproduction of mechanisms to implement them (Baxi, 2001; Keet, 2007, Zembylas, 2018). The third phase characterises the *proliferation* of HRE, beginning with the 1995 announcement of the United Nations Decade for Human Rights Education (UNDHRE) and subsequent investment in democratic and civic initiatives designed to promote a universal culture of human rights. The fourth period, which Keet (2015) dates from 2011 to the present day,

describes an era of *counter-hegemonic distrust*, which underpins the growing number of critical accounts questioning the validity of HRE in its “*declarationist*” form and the theoretical debates that inform this study.

### **2.1.1 Typologies in Human Rights Education (HRE)**

Since the proliferation of HRE, several accounts have sought to classify its main objectives. The first is widely recognised to be Tibbitts’ (2002) *Emerging Models of Human Rights Education*, which identifies three distinct approaches: the *Values and Awareness Model*, the *Accountability Model*, and the *Transformational Model*. In this typology, the *Values and Awareness Model* aims to, “[...] transmit basic knowledge of human rights issues and to foster its integration into public values.” (2002, p. 163). While this shares similarities with the “*declarationist*” model, it focuses on active rather than passive learning to foster a deeper understanding of human rights amongst learners (Robinson et al, 2020).

The *Accountability Model* focuses instead on the role of the teacher, who is assumed to be involved with the implementation of rights in a professional capacity and highlights their responsibilities to monitor and report violations. The *Transformational Model*, which Tibbitts (2017) has subsequently also termed the *Activism Model* due to its commitment to social change, presumes learners to have lived experience of rights violations and provides a forum in which to challenge these, using the UDHR as a benchmark. By doing so, Tibbitts limits the transformational change that can be achieved through HRE to human rights as they are currently defined by international legal frameworks.

Valen-Sendstad (2010) offers an alternative approach, which also sets out three categories. The first, *Normative Dialogue*, aims to enhance learners’ understanding of human rights, sharing similarities with Tibbitts’ *Values and Awareness Model*. The second, *Empowerment Education*, instead encourages learners to make sense of lived experiences as rights violations and challenge these by making claims to rights, correlating with Tibbitts’ *Transformational/Activism Model*. The third approach, which he terms *Double-responsibility*, deviates from Tibbitts’ typology to show the value

both of human rights and their constructive critique, recognising the possibility for ambiguity and challenging the idea that human rights offer a set of “*finished norms*” (Valen-Sendstand, 2010, p. 218).

Bajaj (2011) offers an additional typology, which proposes a revision of Tibbitts’ three categories to recognise the growing importance of HRE in international policy discussions and the work of CSOs. The first, HRE for *Global Citizenship*, is associated with a wide range of contexts and focuses on the standardisation of human rights by positioning learners as members of a connected global community. The second, HRE for *Coexistence*, is instead used primarily in post-conflict settings to resolve tensions between competing community interests. Like Tibbitts and Valen-Sendstad, Bajaj also suggests a third category of HRE for *Transformative Action*. However, Bajaj takes a more critical and radical approach by embedding within it an explicit agenda for political change.

Bajaj’s conceptualisation of HRE as an emancipatory pedagogy committed to political action is in close alignment with the vision for CHRE and it is therefore this model to which I refer when identifying opportunities for “*renewal*”. Taken together, these typologies focus on the classification of HRE and do not take a view on the value or validity of each approach. However, debates about the future development of HRE are informed by distinct theoretical positions, underpinned by different ontological and epistemological assumptions, which I outline below.

## **2.2 Orientations in human rights**

Researchers must align with a particular orientation because, “*How we plan, design and approach processes of HRE is influenced by a number of assumptions that we make about knowledge, power and change.*” (Coysh, 2017, p. 23) There have been different attempts to distinguish between theoretical positions within human rights, which overlap and are not mutually exclusive (Coysh, 2017; Dembour, 2010; Keet, 2007). I draw on Coysh’s (2017) classification of the *technical*, *interpretative*, *counter-hegemonic*, and *critical* orientations due to her clear demarcation of the critical position, which underpins my research questions.

### **2.2.1 Technical orientation**

The *technical* orientation has also been described as the “*natural school*” (Dembour, 2010, p. 2) and “*conventional approach*” (Al-Daraweesh, 2013, p. 38). This builds on two interrelated positions; one that draws on the natural rights tradition, which conceives of rights as a moral quality innate in human beings. The second positions human rights as a set of incontestable ethical standards (Donnelly, 1982, 2003). From this perspective, human rights constitute a form of objective ‘knowledge’ that represent tangible ‘truths’ independent of social interpretation or cultural context (Tasioulas, 2009; 2013). Models of HRE that build on this position consequently adopt a transmission model, in which information is passed from teacher to learner, serving the dual purpose of increasing knowledge about human rights as universals and embedding them as normative values within a given cultural context.

### **2.2.2 Interpretative orientation**

In contrast to the *technical* position, the *interpretative* orientation calls the idea of human rights as universals into question by suggesting that their meaning remains open to interpretation. This draws a distinction between absolute rights, understood as a strict set of moral standards, and the idea that they remain open to contestation and instead gain meaning through this process. This is commonly linked with debates on *cultural relativism*, the theory that cultural context informs the way people interpret and make sense of the world (Donnelly, 1984; Douzinas, 2000; Evans, 2001; Ignatieff, 2001). Coysh (2017) suggests that within this orientation, “[...] *the meaning of human rights cannot be removed from the worlds of the social actors who constitute, shape and live within its definitions.*” (p. 29)

The *interpretative* position therefore distances itself from the *technical* and absolutist one by positioning discourse as a key driver in the contestation of rights and the negotiation of power relationships. Adami (2014a; 2014b), for example, suggests that rights claims be understood through the lens of learners’ lived experience, using collective dialogue as the primary tool. This shares similarities with what Dembour (2010) calls the “*deliberative school*” (p. 3), in which human rights are validated

through civic discourse that leads to “*societal agreement*”. However, the idea that consensus building is necessary for rights to have legitimacy suggests a pragmatism that sets the *deliberative* school apart from the *interpretive* orientation, which builds on specific philosophical ideas on the process through which rights gain meaning. According to Hunt (1990), this meaning is only constructive in driving social change if it emerges as a form of “*common sense*” (p. 325) expressed through societal interaction and forming part of its culture.

Overall, while the *interpretive* orientation moves away from a positivist position to recognise that rights remain open to interpretation, the emphasis is on *reflective*, rather than *critical*, enquiry. It therefore aims to reach consensus within existing power structures and consequently “*remains trapped within the problematic of what it ignores.*” (Coysh, 2017, p. 33)

### **2.2.3 Counter-hegemonic orientation**

Theorists who do not see a future in human rights align with the *counter-hegemonic* orientation. While this resists the hegemonic nature of the mainstream human rights narrative and anticipates an alternative, Hunt (1990) points to the fact that all counter-hegemonic thought grows from the existing hegemony, building on “*that which exists*” (p. 313). The purpose of counter-hegemonic activity is consequently both to contest the existing hegemonic discourse and present alternative theories and structures to supersede it. A counter-hegemonic conception of human rights must therefore begin with “*distrust*” (Keet, 2015, p. 1) or “*suspicion*” (De Sousa Santos, 2013) of the absolutism of the existing hegemony as a foundation for societal change. This orientation includes a range of approaches that challenge the dominant human rights narrative.

Mutua (2002), for example, is overt about the need for a more radical emancipatory project to replace the Eurocentrism and colonialism of the “*declarationist*” model. Posner (2014), by contrast, points to the failures of human rights law to achieve its emancipatory objectives and consequently its value as a moral framework. Hopgood (2013) adopts a similarly pragmatic approach, suggesting that as human rights

become increasingly contested in a polarising world, no dominant global order will survive to uphold them. Moyn (2012), offers a different perspective, suggesting that the origin story of human rights has been misconstrued. Rather than an emancipatory project linked with the aftermath of the Holocaust, he suggests the human rights vision simply filled a gap in utopian thinking at the time of its conception and that another utopian vision in the future may emerge to replace it.

It is important to note that critics of human rights do not necessarily identify with a particular 'orientation' and there is an overlap between the *critical* and *counter-hegemonic* positions. They share, for example, a belief that human rights are socially constructed and historically specific. Both conceive of HRE in its *technical* and "*declarationist*" form as ineffective. Where they diverge is in the *counter-hegemonic* categorical pursuit of a new project, in contrast to the *critical* commitment to the "*renewal*" of HRE. I therefore choose to draw a distinction between the *critical* and *counter-hegemonic* positions to differentiate between the way that critics of human rights frame discussions about its future. From my experience as a practitioner, I have seen the flaws in the "*declarationist*" model, which I associate with the 'Know Your Rights' approach to community-based HRE. I nonetheless have hope that HRE can have value if these can be critically addressed, positioning this study within the *critical* orientation. Below, I summarise the key shortcomings of HRE from a *critical* perspective, before considering the avenues for its "*renewal*".

#### **2.2.4 Critical orientation**

As its starting point, the *critical* orientation challenges the perceived consensus on human rights as universals, aligning closely with what Dembour (2010) terms the "*protest school*" (p. 3). This stems from concerns about the entanglement of human rights with processes of globalisation, fuelling the subjugation of already marginalised communities, rather than creating the conditions for their liberation. Those who align with this position identify several key problems with the "*declarationist*" model (Adami, 2014a; 2014b; Bajaj, 2011; Bajaj et al, 2016; Baxi, 2002; Douzinas, 2000; Keet, 2007; 2010; 2012; 2015; Martinez Sainz 2018; Osler, 2015; Zembylas, 2016a; 2016b; Zembylas & Keet, 2019).

First, those critical of human rights highlight the dangers of its interdependence with hegemonic power structures, interlinking with the concerns of postcolonial theorists, who criticise the dominance of a homogenised Western conception of human rights over indigenous cultural codes (Baxi, 1998; Ely-Yamin, 1993; Keet, 2017; Osler, 2015). Okafor & Agbakwa (2001) distinguish three orthodoxies that characterise this dynamic. First, they describe the “*heaven-hell*” binary (p. 565), in which ‘heavenly’ (usually Western) societies are considered to show respect for human rights and ‘hell-like’ (usually non-Western) societies are not, paralleling with Mutua’s (2001) critique of the savages-victim-saviour metaphor commonly used to frame HRE. Second, the “*one way traffic paradigm*”, focused on the non-reciprocal transfer of knowledge from teacher to learner and akin to Freire’s (1970) concept of *banking* education. Third, Okafor & Agbakwa consider the “*abolitionist paradigm*”, through which local cultures that conflict with the UNDHR’s conception of human rights are eradicated or displaced. In these contexts, indigenous knowledge is seen as an obstacle to Western development and the purpose of HRE is consequently to displace it.

This connects with a second key criticism of the “*declarationist*” model. Namely, that by ignoring its inherently political character it fails to recognise its transformative potential. This has resulted in what Baxi (1998; 2002) sees as a hijacking of human rights by dominant groups, diminishing their ultimate political promise, contributing to what Keet (2007) describes as the human rights “*mantra*” (p. 74), focused on issues of compliance over those of political power and participation. The critical position instead draws on Freire’s (1970; 1994) view that all education is inherently political and has the potential either to oppress or to liberate. To liberate, Hoover (2013) suggests that HRE must recognise the fundamental contestability of rights and provide forums for dialogue and debate. Evans (2001) emphasises, in particular, the responsibility of practitioners to examine relationships of power to unlock the transformative potential of HRE and move away from the “*declarationist*” norm.

A third criticism of the “*declarationist*” model relates to what Keet (2012) describes as its tendency towards conservatism, resulting in practice that is neither “*dynamic*” nor “*self-renewing*” (p. 8). This stems in part from its historicism, re-enforcing the idea of human rights as a static set of standards detached from their changing cultural

context (Hamilton, 2003). Where the “*declarationist*” model fails, therefore, is to recognise the need for what Bajaj (2011) describes as a “*radical approach to the analysis of historical and present conditions.*” (p. 493) This stems in part from the legal underpinning of the “*declarationist*” model, focused on raising awareness about human rights standards rather than examining the different perspectives that shape their interpretation. This has been described as a “*juridical*” interpretation of human rights (Keet, 2010, p. 1), to illustrate how they have become synonymous with existing legislative frameworks and contribute to practices that validate institutional knowledge over other forms of knowing (Douzinas, 2007).

### **2.3 A critical framework for HRE (CHRE)**

A critical framework for HRE is underpinned by what Coysh (2017) describes as a willingness to, “[...] *criticise that which is restrictive and oppressive, while at the same time supporting action for individual freedom and well-being.*” (p. 34) This is captured in the Freirean idea of *critical hope* (Keet, 2014; Zembylas & Keet, 2019) and spearheads calls for the “*renewal*” of HRE towards an alternative that is neither caught up with “*idolatry*” nor “*conservative*” or “*uncritical*” (Keet, 2012, p. 9). With this aim, Keet and others build on the critiques above to put the case for a pedagogy of CHRE. This requires an approach that:

*“First, stands in a critical relationship with human rights universals; second, perpetually revisits the receivable categories of human rights praxes, third, advances a social justice oriented human rights practice; and fourth, emphasises human rights critiques to enrich human rights understanding”* (Keet, 2012, p. 58)

Martinez Sainz (2020) interprets this to mean that CHRE must first acknowledge its limitations, including the flaws in its claims to universalism and blindness to questions of cultural relativism. To do this, it requires tools to enable both learners and educators to identify hegemonic ideologies, the power dynamics that lead to the dominance of some ideas over others and the systemic nature of these inequalities. This requires a critical examination of the historical, cultural and contextual factors that re-enforce these inequalities and, finally, a forum in which to engage practically

with the means to address these. This interlinks with Ely-Yamin's (1993) suggestion that HRE must be equipped both to address its own power imbalances and, in doing so, transition from a singular ideology to a collective one, informed by the distinct perspectives of learners in different contexts.

This critical framework therefore calls for a new model of HRE that resolves its current contradictions. As such, CHRE is both *radical* in its critique of existing power structures (Bajaj, 2011; Bajaj et al, 2016; Zembylas & Keet, 2019) and change-driven in its transformational ambitions. Given the relatively recent interest in this field, there is greater consensus on the need to move away from the "*declarationist*" model and towards a critical one, than the means of doing so. Below, I consider some theoretical openings for CHRE and highlight the gap in the literature that I aim to fill.

### **2.3.1 Theoretical openings for CHRE**

The avenues for CHRE to evolve are multiple, both conceptually and practically. Within the existing literature, there have been several attempts to develop a theoretical model of CHRE that is anti-oppressive, recognises its political nature, and promotes a dynamic and evolving practice. Zembylas (2016a; 2017a), for example, uses Foucault, Arendt and Rancière to construct a model of HRE that accommodates complexity and pluralism. Foucault's rejection of the essentialism of human rights, he suggests, coupled with proposals for a new form of anti-disciplinarian rights that challenges rather than protects ideas around sovereignty, presents a middle way between the *technical* and *counter-hegemonic* orientations that compliments the *critical* perspective (Zembylas, 2016a). This is significant in advancing the argument that human rights are contestable and HRE an important forum for political struggle. By departing from a juridical perspective, Foucault re-conceptualises rights as negotiated relationships, which Zembylas suggests could pave the way for the "*renewal*" of HRE.

Elsewhere, Zembylas (2017a) draws on Arendt's *aporetic* approach to human rights and Rancière's critique of it to put the case for an *agonistic* model of HRE, embracing conflict and rupture as necessary components of the pedagogical

process. Taking Arendt and Rancière together, he suggests that the paradoxes in human rights offer important points of departure for dialogue that recognises the complexities of the world as it is and seeks to address them, rejecting the linear vision of the “*declarationist*” model. The idea of an *agonistic* approach to human rights has been explored by others.

Honig (2008), for example, suggests that claims to rights do not necessarily indicate a desire to be included by existing political structures and may instead seek to challenge and re-negotiate their meaning. Hoover (2013) similarly suggests that an *agonistic* approach enables dialogue that responds to the criticisms of human rights and recognises their political and contestable nature. This is achieved, he suggests, by first paying attention to who is visible in HRE spaces (pointing to the need to include a wider diversity of voices to challenge the human rights mantra) and second, removing the obstacles posed by established power structures to enable this critical dialogue. This requires what he describes as “*critical responsiveness*” (2013, p. 948), whereby those in positions of power reflect on their blind spots to ensure that offers of solidarity to those in less privileged positions can be genuinely inclusive and socially constructive.

To illustrate the range of approaches that have been proposed to develop a model of CHRE, Simmons (2019) suggests that using *joy* as an analytical framework, “[...] recasts the philosophical and historical origins of human rights and provides a new lens for articulating a more affirmative and robust notion of human rights” (p. 3). Martinez Sainz (2020) similarly suggests using *joy* as a way of re-thinking common assumptions and challenging existing practices in HRE. This invites a move away from an emphasis on abuses and violations to develop a more empowering practice.

Zembylas (2016b; 2017b) takes a similar approach, exploring the role of emotions in HRE and arguing that by taking emotional responses seriously, HRE may offer productive steps towards critical practice. Drawing on Arendt’s (1994) ideas on *cheap sentimentality* and Kaplan’s (2005) conception of *empty empathy*, he criticises the superficial solidarity expressed through the “*declarationist*” model, which in practice fails to deliver on its emancipatory purpose. He advocates instead for a

model of CHRE based on “*action-oriented empathy*” (2016b, p. 2) to foster the self-empowerment of learners as part of a genuinely transformative practice.

Attempts to align HRE with ideas from critical pedagogy are particularly relevant to this study. Magendzo (2005) provides one of the earliest attempts to do so, suggesting that HRE offers a concrete expression of critical pedagogy due to its emancipatory aims. Keet (2007) suggests that this coupling falls short if Magendzo is making comparisons to the “*declarationist*” model and has elsewhere (2017) voiced reticence about the successful reconciliation of critical pedagogy with CHRE.<sup>4</sup> This connects with contentions that critical pedagogy itself, in so far as it can be defined, places greater emphasis on critique than social change (McArthur, 2010). Elsewhere, Lohrenscheit (2006) draws on Freire to bring ideas about empowerment and participation to the forefront in HRE. She nonetheless points out that that:

*“Not many authors (e.g. in Europe or the United States of America) currently involved in the development of human rights education rely on Paulo Freire's work as their main source of inspiration.”* (p. 126)

To these ends, contributions are exploratory in nature, examining theoretical frameworks and posing questions for new directions of study. What is evident from these accounts, is the need for a model of CHRE that is anti-oppressive, incorporates conflict as an important site of political struggle, and is capable of evolution. To do so, this must embrace a wider diversity of voices in the process to create what Zembylas & Keet (2019) describe as a “*critical and pluriversal HRE*” (p. 152), recognising the complex nature of power relationships in HRE and seeking actively to address them. Of particular importance is the need to connect the critical theoretical position with practice-based studies, exploring different strategies that may help to achieve this.

Those that exist vary both geographically and in terms of pedagogical context. Some

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<sup>4</sup> Keet refers here to HRE models in higher education, further stating, ‘*I would certainly not want my arguments to be read as cynical, but as the opening up of possibilities as is the real function of critique. That is, HRE does not exist insofar as it is modelled on an uncritical relationship with human rights universals. But it would be downright erroneous to argue that all practices in the name of HRE have this orientation.*’ (2017, p. 12)

examples include an investigation into the value of critical pedagogy in HRE to promote active citizenship amongst immigrant communities in the United States (Bajaj et al, 2018), decolonise the higher education curriculum in Australia (Woldeyes & Offord, 2018) and extend practice in Icelandic secondary education (Gollifer, 2022). While there have been some attempts to gather together examples of practice-based HRE studies (Bajaj, 2017; Bajaj et al, 2016; Coysh, 2017; Palaiologou & Zembylas, 2018) these include few examples of participatory practice or enquiry into the transformative potential of HRE in the context of community activism. This points to the need to bridge the gap between the wealth of theoretical accounts within the *critical* orientation and relative lack of practical studies examining the viability of this vision.

### **2.3.2 Routes forward for CHRE**

It is this gap between theory and practice that has led at times to criticisms of the *critical* position. Bajaj's (2012) emphasis on the importance of understanding unequal power relations as a step to creating the conditions for transformative action, for example, has been criticised for the implicit assumption that student awareness is a sufficient driver of structural change without concrete empirical evidence to back this up (Keet, 2015; Monaghan et al, 2017). This connects with Coysh's (2017) critique of the cyclical logic of HRE models that claim to be transformative while failing simultaneously to critique their own moral authority, pointing to the ease with which 'critical' models of HRE fail to deliver in practice.

I therefore build on the theoretical debates within the *critical* orientation to explore the value of Community Development to establishing CHRE in a practice-based context. Taking together what has been put forward as a critical framework for HRE and the ways in which this may be achieved, the key priority for practitioners is to explore the following key questions. First, the extent to which Community Development may help to develop a model of HRE that is self-critical, recognising and addressing its own power imbalances. Second, the degree to which the process for doing this can accommodate conflict, struggle and negotiation as a necessary part of the pedagogical process. And finally, how HRE can be developed as an

evolving and integrated praxis that embraces a wider diversity of voices. I suggest that by combining theory with action, Community Development offers an opportunity to move away from a “*declarationist*” model, focused on the transmission of legal knowledge, and towards one that uses the subjective experiences of learners as its starting point.

In conclusion, I contextualise this study within the *critical* orientation in human rights and focus on the opportunities for the “*renewal*” of HRE through developing a critical alternative with transformative potential. To do so, I engage with the critiques of the “*declarationist*” model and examine the value of Community Development to achieving this aim. I identify a gap in the practical literature, examining these questions in a practice-based context. In particular, in community education settings, which I argue offer fertile ground for the development of radical alternatives to the “*declarationist*” model. In the following section, I situate this study within the literature on Community Development and outline the contribution I hope to make to this field.

## **2.4 Community Development and radical adult education**

As I draw on Ledwith’s (2020) framework for Community Development, I also aim to make a contribution to this literature. Ledwith connects her ideas with the emerging trend in 1960s Britain to describe the community work carried out in localities, which encompasses a range of literature engaging with themes including *social work*, *community participation* and *community organising*. Each of these have distinct narratives and interlink with the wider literature on *adult education*, which Mayo (2009) notes is itself impossible to define. For the purposes of this study, I contextualise Ledwith within the broad approaches taken to adult education in community work and align her work with the radical tradition.

While there are many contributors to this literature using different and sometimes interchangeable terminology, two theoretical perspectives frame the debates within this field. On one hand, the *technicist* approach, which builds on a positivist world view, aims to equip learners with the skills and knowledge necessary to adapt to an observable and objective reality. Mayo (1998) describes this a “*competency-based*

*approach*" (p. 70) to highlight the key outcomes this aims to deliver, enhancing learners' capacity to meet a set of objective standards (Alexander & Martin, 1995; Shaw & Crowther, 1995). While Twelvetrees (1991) has also termed this a *professional* approach due to its emphasis on skills-focused learning, Mayo (1998) highlights the problematic implication that alternative approaches are by default *unprofessional*. Elsewhere, Mayo (1997) also describes this as a "*market-led*" (p.17) approach to describe its assumptions about the role of the market in delivering economic growth and fostering social development through a trickle-down effect. Taken together, these accounts describe an approach focused on, "[...] *the application of community work techniques, regardless of wider debates about values and underlying social relations.*" (Mayo, 1998, p. 70).

This sits in contrast to the radical approach, advanced by Ledwith and others. While the term 'radical' has different meanings in different contexts, it is broadly associated within the field of adult education with a critical perspective, influenced by the Marxist tradition, which seeks to identify and challenge injustices in the world. The radical tradition has interchangeably been described as "*emancipatory*" (English & Mayo, 2012, p. 49) and "*transformational*" (Mayo, 1998, p. 70), due to its explicit association with ideas about empowerment and social change.<sup>5</sup> This approach builds on an epistemological position that situates learners as active participants in processes of change, rather than the passive recipients of knowledge.

While accounts of radical adult education are varied and diverse, Allman & Wallis (1995) provide an overview of the radical position. It involves first, a foundational commitment to principles of social justice that inform a vision of a fairer world. Second, a critical perspective that enables learners and educators to identify problems within the world around them and seek to change them. This requires radical educators to recognise the fundamentally political nature of education and the need for pedagogical sites to act as forums in which to contest unequal power relationships. Mayo (1996; 2000), in particular, points to the need for radical adult education to take place outside (as well as inside) the 'system' in order to challenge

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<sup>5</sup> I use the term 'Radical Adult Education' for consistency in this study, acknowledging this is used interchangeably with adult education for 'transformation' and 'emancipation' elsewhere.

its injustices. This necessarily requires CSOs to fulfil the role of community educators and face increasing challenges to “*fly below the radar*” to avoid being usurped by hegemonic structures (Mayo, 2009, p. 269). Finally, Mezirow (2007) adds that the intersection of radical adult education with Community Development requires a commitment to fostering collective participation in action for social change.

However, many contemporary theorists consider community-based adult education in the UK to have suffered a de-coupling from its radical roots (Brydon-Miller, 2008; Ledwith, 2020; Mayo, 2000). Despite the supposedly inherent radicalism of civil society due to its separation from government (Lovett, 1988), its relocation from the margins to the mainstream has diluted its political agenda in recent decades (Ledwith, 2020; Rogowski, 2012). In the UK context, this builds on the progressive impact of the New Right’s policies during the 1970s, the marketisation of public services through the managerialism of New Labour, and delegation of central government’s responsibilities to communities under the Conservative Coalition’s ‘Big Society’ agenda. Globally, theorists and practitioners within the radical tradition highlight the urgent need to respond to the global challenges of climate change, political polarisation, and the economic inequalities perpetuated by neoliberalism (Apple, 2009; Ledwith, 2001; 2020).

The key priority in the field of radical adult education is therefore to develop pedagogical models capable of responding to these challenges and creating, “*A sustainable world in balance, an ecosystem in which everyone and everything flourishes, a democracy based on participation and collective wellbeing*” (Ledwith, 2020, p. 243). I therefore focus on what a model of CHRE can contribute to learning about models of radical adult education and in what ways this may present opportunities to address these problems.

## **2.5 Community Development and human rights**

While I locate Ledwith’s theories within the radical tradition in Community Development and connect them with the literature on radical adult education, there is relatively little critical engagement within these accounts of human rights or HRE,

other than with the idea of promoting rights generally within movements for social change. I examine here how human rights have been critically evaluated within the wider literature on Community Development. While Ife (2009; 2016) is perhaps the key proponent of the compatibility of human rights with Community Development, which he defines as a theoretical and practical approach to community empowerment, there has been wider interest in ideas about human rights from the fields of social work and community work, exploring how HRE may enhance practice in these settings.

As a starting point, Ife (2009) draws a helpful distinction between *deductive* practice, which accepts the definition of human rights set out in the UDHR and related conventions and treaties, and *inductive* practice, which sits within the constructed rights tradition and acknowledges that learners make sense of their rights through their own experiences. From a *deductive* perspective, human rights have value as a moral framework to improve standards of practice with the strength of legal redress mechanisms to back them up (Reichert, 2011). While in theory this enhances the agency of rights holders (those who seek to realise their rights) in struggles with duty bearers (those responsible for upholding them), in reality, this puts community members in a reactive position, left to challenge injustices after they have occurred using formal redress mechanisms (Beck & Purcell, 2023). The value of a *deductive* approach is therefore arguably best suited to the delivery of professional services, in which a human rights vocabulary may enhance dialogue about issues such as consent and human dignity, providing a clear set of benchmarks to improve the overall standards of practice (Wronka, 2016).

By contrast, *inductive* practice avoids talking about human rights in abstract terms but follows an exploratory process, rooting conversations in learners' personal experiences (Ife et al, 2022). Through this approach, learners and educators identify the challenges of applying human rights through the *deductive* model and seek to address these. The challenges identified within this literature correlate closely with critiques of the "*declarationist*" model and include their conservatism, Eurocentrism and the gap between human rights ideals and their realisation. Elsewhere, Ife (2016) also examines the specific pitfalls of taking a legalistic approach to human rights,

highlighting the tendency to focus on sanctions and redress mechanisms rather than individual and collective empowerment. Taken together, these form a critique within the field of Community Development of models of HRE that risk perpetuating oppression rather than creating the conditions for liberation (Beck & Purcell, 2023).

Those who put the case for an alternative approach capable of enhancing standards in Community Development practice set out some useful parameters. Firstly, Friedman (2018) suggests that in order for HRE to align with the principle of human dignity that underpins social justice initiatives, it must recognise and seek to change unequal power relationships. This requires a model of HRE that engages in critical practice, using human rights as a starting point for critical reflection on the problems that exist in the world (Beck & Purcell, 2023; Ife, 2009; Ife et al, 2022). This involves a re-adjustment of the dynamic between teacher and learner, recognising the importance of participation and agency in models of HRE compatible with social and community work (Androff, 2018). In doing so, HRE may provide important forums for what Kayum Ahmed (2017) describes as “*disruption*” (p. 3) and has elsewhere been framed as the need for a “*discursive*” and “*contested*” discourse (Ife et al, 2022, p. 151). These accounts suggest a model that has much in common with an *agonistic* approach to CHRE and in doing so points to its compatibility with Community Development.

The question for Community Development theorists in this debate is therefore two-fold. First, what value CHRE can contribute to the field of Community Development (if it can be developed as a genuinely transformative practice) (Androff, 2018; Ife et al, 2022). Second, whether in building bridges between the fields of human rights and Community Development, this may in turn strengthen the contribution of Community Development and social work to the field of human rights, which is currently dominated by the legal profession (Ife, 2016).

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have provided an overview of the literature that informs the rationale for this study. This includes an analysis of the different ways in which current models

of HRE have been categorised and the ontological positions of different theoretical orientations that inform the debates about its future. I contextualise this study within the *critical* orientation, focusing on the potential to develop a model of CHRE with transformative potential to replace the “*declarationist*” model. I argue that this requires a model that is anti-oppressive, recognises its explicitly political nature and incorporates a diversity of voices as part of an evolving and dynamic practice. I situate this study where I identify a gap in the practical literature, examining the feasibility of this vision and use this project to explore the value of Community Development to developing a model of CHRE in a community context. In the next section, I set out the key theories from the field of Community Development that inform Ledwith’s (2020) framework for critical and radical practice and explore their compatibility with human rights.

## Chapter Three – Theorising Community Development for Human Rights and HRE

### 3. Introduction

In this chapter, I address the question of how, if CHRE suffers from a disconnect between theory and practice, this may be resolved by looking to the field of Community Development. I use Margaret Ledwith's (2020) framework for a *Critical and Radical Approach* as one that connects directly to a contemporary setting and engages with the role of CSOs delivering community-based adult education in the UK context. Ledwith draws on the ideas of Freire and Gramsci to present a seven-stage roadmap for Community Development that aims to drive collective action for social change. I organise the chapter into three parts. First (3.1), I outline Ledwith's key influences, highlighting three important themes within the work of Freire and Gramsci and how these have informed her thinking. Second (3.2), I explore how Ledwith translates these ideas into practice, outlining the key principles that underpin her seven-stage framework for critical enquiry. I use the third section (3.3) to summarise the theoretical limitations of the "declarationist" model and the key areas in which I argue Community Development can help to resolve these.

#### 3.1 Key influences

Ledwith's framework for Community Development builds on a re-imagining of key concepts from Freire and Gramsci to offer a contemporary approach to critical enquiry. She draws on Freire's (1970) concept of a *culture of silence* (a form of collective social paralysis that prevents people from challenging the circumstances of their oppression) and Gramsci's (1971) ideas on *cultural hegemony* (the tacit acceptance by the oppressed of the ideologies and practices of the dominant group) to develop her own understanding of critical practice. Below, I examine how Ledwith draws on three key themes within the Freirean-Gramscian tradition. The first focuses on *oppression and liberation*, exploring the power dynamics that exist in pedagogical contexts and why these need to be challenged. The second considers the different conceptualisations of *power* that inform Ledwith's framework. The third focuses on

the value of *critical enquiry* to re-shaping these power relationships within transformative practice. Overall, Ledwith accommodates several critiques of the theories of Freire and Gramsci and seeks to recontextualise them in a contemporary context. In doing so, she presents Community Development as a work in progress, pointing both to its enduring blind spots and scope for development.

### **3.1.1 Oppression and liberation**

In his seminal work, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970), Freire examines the traditional model of *banking* education as an instrument of oppression. In this pedagogy, knowledge is passed from teacher to learner with the aim to change the consciousness of the oppressed, rather than the circumstances of their oppression. Freire takes the position that education is by its nature political and can therefore never be neutral, only *domesticating* or *liberating*. In its domesticating form, education functions as a form of coercion, which results in the *dehumanisation* of the oppressed as they remain trapped in their experiences of subjugation.

This forms part of a cyclical dynamic in which those in positions of privilege in turn become dehumanised through the dehumanisation of others (Darder, 2018). When left unchallenged, this dynamic becomes internalised, fostering a *culture of silence* that prevents people from recognising the domesticating effects of the *banking* model. Ledwith's approach to Community Development mirrors Freire's critique, recognising how, "*The structures of society reach into people's lives privileging some social groups and discriminating against others.*" (Ledwith, 2020, p. 82)

To make sense of how this permeates at a societal level, Ledwith draws on Gramsci's (1971) idea of *cultural hegemony*. This captures the ways in which the ideas and practices of the dominant culture become internalised by those they oppress and integrated with the institutions of society. This results in the normalisation of unjust hierarchies and further subjugation of oppressed communities. While traditional Marxism assumed this would be achieved through coercion, the Gramscian notion of *hegemony* implies the tacit acceptance of these hierarchies as they become embedded as social norms. According to Gramsci (1971), these are further entrenched by the institutions of civil society, which act as

a proxy for state structures, forming a network of hegemonic relationships that serve the interests of those in power. Ledwith (2020) locates this in the context of twenty-first century neoliberalism, in which commodities are made of both people and planet to perpetuate “*a multiplicity of hegemonies, reproducing a multiplicity of oppressions.*” (p. 217)

Yet equally important to Freire and Gramsci’s ideas about oppression are their corresponding visions for liberation. Peter Mayo (2000) frames this as an important juxtaposition in the Gramscian-Freirean tradition of the “*language of critique*” with the “*language of possibility*” (p. 249). Using Gramsci’s conception of *hegemony* as an example, he points to its dynamic nature and vulnerability to moments of crisis to highlight the possibility for counter-hegemonic activity. Similarly, Ledwith emphasises how Freire’s conceptualisation of oppression underpins his vision for, “[...] *the transformation of humanity to a state of mutual and cooperative participatory democracy through a process of liberating education.*” (2020, p. 93)

Yet while Ledwith roots her ideas in the pedagogical hope of Freire and Gramsci, she simultaneously acknowledges that they remain open to critique. Her central criticism of Freire relates to his binary depiction of the oppressor and oppressed, treating each as a single homogenous group and ignoring the complexity of power relationships. Freire’s universal theory of oppression, she suggests, ignores the diversity in human experience and the different levels at which people experience subjugation. Feminist and critical race scholars have put forward similar arguments, suggesting that by ignoring the dimensions of gender, race, ethnicity, disability, sexuality, and age, Freire’s critical pedagogy risks further embedding the dynamics of the oppression it seeks to challenge (Leonardo, 2005; Luke & Gore, 1992).

Yet Ledwith attempts to move past these theoretical limitations and recontextualise Freire’s ideas in a contemporary context. As she puts it, it is only through interrogating binaries and “*tracing the limitations of dichotomous thought*” (2020, p. 191) that we can move it forward. Using bell hooks (1993) as an example of someone who both recognised Freire’s blind spots about questions of gender and race but nonetheless embraced his critical pedagogy to make sense of the oppression she experienced as a Black woman, Ledwith points to the possibility of

integrating Freire's ideas with intersectional perspectives on oppression and emerging narratives on difference. To do so, she points to the need for practitioners to explore "*the complex interactions of race, class and gender and other aspects of difference*" (2020, p. 191) to embed anti-racist praxis and feminism within her theory of Community Development. She nonetheless points to the enduring blind spots within the field, such as an overall lack of engagement with theories on *critical whiteness*, which help to examine the structural nature of white supremacy and address these through collective practice.

While Ledwith therefore builds on the Freirean-Gramscian tradition, she endorses an iterative process of critical reflection that enables these ideas to evolve over time. Where she sees enduring value is in the recognition of the structural nature of oppression and the need to challenge dominant ways of knowing. To do so involves an understanding of *power* that recognises its complex nature and changing context.

### **3.1.2 Conceptions of power**

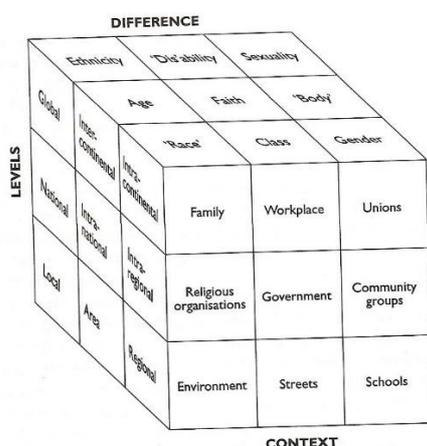
Having identified oppression as a structural problem that needs to be addressed, Ledwith attempts to conceptualise *power* in a way that makes sense of these hierarchies and seeks to change them. To do so, she draws on a range of theories that examine its multidimensional form. As a starting point, she sees *power*, not as a single hegemonic force, but as multi-dimensional. This draws in part on Gramsci's (1971) conceptualisation of *power* to include not solely the coercive structures of the state, but also the institutions of civil society and the dominant ideologies that become accepted as a form of *cultural hegemony*.

To expand on this, Ledwith draws on Thompson's (2016) Political Cultural Social (PCS) model of *power*, which identifies three levels at which empowerment (or dis-empowerment) may occur. At the 'personal' level, power is fostered through self-belief and self-esteem, at the 'cultural' level, through everyday conversations, and at a 'structural' level, through critical consciousness to challenge embedded hierarchies. In her approach, Ledwith recognises the interdependence of each level, which, "[...] *negates any action that fails to address the whole as a mutually*

reinforcing unit.” (Ledwith, 2020, p. 180)

Ledwith intersects these layers with Thompson’s (2007) categorisation of four distinct types of *power* to further explore its multidimensional form. These include the power ‘to’ (personal power linked to personal autonomy), power ‘over’ (involving interacting relations of dominance at each of the personal, cultural and structural levels), power ‘with’ (solidarity expressed through alliances between groups with a mutual commitment to change) and power ‘within’ (resilience connecting the individual to the collective). While Ledwith uses Thompson’s models to challenge the idea that *power* can be understood as a single expression of force, she expands on these, proposing an alternative approach that emphasises the intersectional nature of experiences of oppression.

She presents this as a three-dimensional model, which she describes as a “*loci of oppressions*” (2020, p. 233) (Fig. 1). This includes three axes which represent a distinct set of factors that inform experiences of oppression. One axis relates to characteristics of *difference* (age, ‘race’, class, gender, sexual preference, ability, ethnicity), another, the *context* in which power hierarchies exist (economic, cultural, intellectual, physical, environmental historical, emotional, spiritual) and the third, the different *levels* at which this takes places (local, regional, national, continental, and global).



**Fig. 1** Ledwith’s “Loci of Oppressions” Matrix (Ledwith, 2020, p. 233).

Using this model to demonstrate the multiplicity of oppressions that people experience on a day-to-day basis, Ledwith emphasises the complexity of the interrelationships that may intersect on and between any given axis. In an effort to bridge the gap between theory and practice, she presents the matrix not only as a visual aid, but a tool for critical thought, pointing to the different questions that may be asked and re-asked as the faces move on each axis like a Rubik's cube. Through this, she attempts to make sense of the multidimensional nature of *power* operating at different levels and in different contexts.

This forms the foundation for Ledwith's (2001; 2016; 2018; 2020) argument that power relationships are not static but complex and dynamic. Here she builds on Foucault's (1998) suggestion that the power invested in governments and legal frameworks is not intrinsic but instead an expression of relationships of force. From this perspective, power relationships are open to negotiation by paying attention to the ways in which they become stable or disrupted. Ledwith embraces Foucault's conception of *power* as both a *constructive* and a *destructive* force to inform her ideas on how pedagogical spaces can both enable participants to recognise the circumstances of oppression and identify self-empowering strategies to change them. As such, she encourages a psychological transition from a mindset of *powerlessness* towards one of "*powerfulness*" (2020, p. 217), promoting a pedagogy in which 'co-educator' and 'co-learner' build reciprocal relationships of trust to co-construct counternarratives for social change through critical enquiry.

### **3.1.3 Critical enquiry**

Critical enquiry is an analytical process through which experiences of oppression can be articulated and challenged. Ledwith's approach draws on Freire's (1973) delineation of three distinct levels of consciousness. These include *magical consciousness* (representing a passive acceptance of the inequalities of life), *naïve consciousness* (acknowledging some of the inequalities in personal experience but falling short of connecting these with processes of structural oppression), and *critical consciousness* (the point at which people connect discrimination in lived experience with the structures of societal oppression). Ledwith positions *critical consciousness*

as a counterbalance to the notion of *hegemony* to demonstrate how alternative ways of seeing the world become an integral part of movements for social change. For Ledwith, *critical consciousness* is achieved through methods of enquiry founded on trust in people as capable subjects to observe the world around them and question its injustices.

This builds on Freire's concept of *problematizing* – or problem-posing – through which people begin to reflect critically on their everyday experiences and connect these with wider structural injustice. Through this, learners engage in what Freire describes as a process of *conscientisation*, a model of critical self-inquiry through which learners empower themselves through their construction of knowledge about the world and the injustices in it (Rahman, 2008). This requires the pedagogical inclusion of lived experiences in processes of critical enquiry. To explore this further, Ledwith (2020) draws on Hall & Tandon's (2020) theory of *knowledge democracy*.

In its simplest form, *knowledge democracy* is about intentionally connecting social justice values with processes of knowledge production. In acknowledging how marginalised voices have been excluded in favour of Western dominant ideologies in traditional research, Ledwith (2020) emphasises the importance of capturing knowledge in diverse forms to acknowledge, "*the right for many ways of knowing to be accepted as legitimate knowledge*" (p. 87). To do so, she embraces the different 'types' of knowledge that contribute to democratic enquiry.

Drawing on Heron's (1996) categorisation of four ways of knowing, she explores: *experiential knowing* (which builds on direct encounters), *presentational knowing* (which finds expression through storytelling forms), *propositional knowing* (expressed as theory), and *practical knowing* (demonstrated through skills and capabilities), arguing that these form a logical order within critical enquiry. In this sequence, personal experiences lead to stories that inform theories and in turn generate action. By recognising the different forms that knowledge takes, Ledwith (2005; 2007) aims next to build a more holistic view of the world in which they form part of an interconnected whole. To do so, she considers Belenky et al's (1986) distinction between *separated* and *connected* knowing, as part of their wider model

of epistemological empowerment. Where *separated* knowing focuses on critical and rational reasoning, *connected* knowing arises from interpersonal relationships and requires empathy and understanding. Ledwith emphasises the importance of nurturing *connected* knowing through critical enquiry to contextualise and connect the different ways in which people experience oppression.

She positions dialogue as a central pedagogical tool to build the trust and empathy necessary to enable an imaginative extension of one person's perspective to another's. It is in these interactions that Ledwith conceives of the possibility for counter-hegemonic activity, "[...] where power relationships are deconstructed in order to imagine counternarratives based on human and environmental flourishing" (2020, p. 136). These counter-narratives, she suggests, connect the reality of people's lived experiences with the new ideologies necessary to change the conditions that shape them. In the next section, I set out how these ideas and influences inform Ledwith's framework for critical *praxis*, integrating theory with action to achieve social change.

### **3.2 Key Principles of Community Development**

Drawing on the ideas above, Ledwith (2020) conceptualises Community Development using a seven-stage framework that aims to achieve the liberation of marginalised communities. The first three stages describe the process of becoming critical. This starts with *voicing values* that will inform the learning process, through which participants begin to make *critical connections* that enable *critiquing and dissenting* to show the beginnings of counter-hegemonic thought. The final four stages focus on preparing to take action for social change. This starts with *imagining alternatives* to the dominant ideology and *co-creating counternarratives* to challenge it. These in turn lead to *connecting and acting* and building alliances that enable *cooperation for a common good*. Using this framework, Ledwith (2020) aims to reclaim the radical agenda with a transformative model for change and "*bridge the persistent gaps in community development praxis*" (p. 245). I set out each of these stages below.

### **3.2.1 Voicing values**

A values-led approach is fundamental to ensuring that Community Development projects achieve their transformational aims. While Community Development practitioners have explored different ways of approaching this, they broadly come together around a core set of values encompassing social justice and participation (Gilchrist & Taylor, 2016). For Ledwith, solidarity and reciprocity are key to challenging the individualism and market competitiveness of neoliberalism that results in increasingly unequal societies. To embed values-led practice, Ledwith grounds her theories for action on the principles of “*trust, mutuality, reciprocity, respect, dignity, and empathy*” (2005, p. 259). In this study, as a group we used these as a set of guiding principles to create our own values framework to determine how we would work together as co-researchers over the course of the project. We did this through a series of introductory exercises in the early sessions, which gave us the opportunity to explore and discuss our values from the outset. I discuss the process of embedding values in this study in Chapter Five.

### **3.2.2 Making critical connections**

To encourage critical questioning, Ledwith proposes using *provocations* – statements that encourage dialogue, debate, and stimulate further questions. These aim to expose the contradictions in the status quo that manifest as inequalities. In this study, the Project Coordinator encouraged the use of *provocations* within the group space from the outset as a tool both to stimulate open discussion and within facilitated exercises to examine the different components of a human rights-based approach. Participants were also encouraged to use *provocations* outside the sessions to prompt reflections on their learning. This is central to the wider process of becoming critical, which involves first naming the contradictions in society in order to challenge them. Once a contradiction has been identified, the next step is to capture it in a form relevant to the person and community. This may take the form of a piece of poetry, film, song, drama or other means to engage and communicate the contradiction to the group. In this project, the Community Researchers each gave presentations on their projects in the early sessions, using different creative forms to

demonstrate their *experiential* knowledge of the perceived need in their communities, which I explore further in Chapter Five.

### **3.2.3 Critiquing and dissenting**

Critiquing and dissenting builds on the capacity to make critical connections to challenge dominant practices. This involves first creating a space for dialogue in which to adopt a Freirean problem-posing approach, starting with people's lived experiences and taking an example from day-to-day life relevant to the challenges faced in the community. This may be identified through issues repeated in conversations or community meetings, the results of local listening campaigns, or the focus of creative projects and cultural spaces. Through this process of questioning, *generative themes* begin to develop. These highlight issues 'generated' from participants' experiences that begin to make sense of the circumstances that can lead to feelings of apathy and hopelessness (Ledwith, 2020).

This sense of individual autonomy underpins Ledwith's (2016) emphasis on *agency* as a key driver of social change, which she interlinks with her ideas about solidarity and movement building. In this study, the process of critiquing and dissenting was facilitated through dialogue with a range of Visiting Activists using human rights at a community level, which I explore further in Chapter Five.

### **3.2.4 Imagining alternatives**

In realising that there is a problem with the existing system, participants next need to imagine that an alternative is possible. Ledwith points to various examples where effective messaging by those in power creates a *culture of silence*, in which people internalise the values and meanings of the dominant hegemony. To strengthen the capacity of individuals and communities to articulate alternatives, Ledwith (2020) recommends Dorling's (2018) exercise to free people's imaginations by asking the question, "*What could society look like 100 years in the future?*" In this study, we created this imaginative space through an early exercise where we cast participants away to a hypothetical desert island and introduced them to the idea of human rights

by asking the question, “*What are our basic needs if we are all stranded on a desert island?*” I explore the different strategies we used to encourage participants to imagine alternatives in Chapter Five.

### **3.2.5 Creating counternarratives**

Counternarratives that challenge the dominant hegemony begin to evolve organically through the previous stages. As Ledwith (2020) puts it:

*“Starting in dialogues of trust and operating from a kind heart, we put new values into place that open new ways of relating to each other, and this is the basis of seeing new possibilities for a new story.”* (p. 249)

A key step to progressing the ‘radical’ agenda in Community Development (and moving past Freire’s initial blind spots) involves framing these narratives with an intersectional lens. In the evolving literature on *intersectionality*, Hill Collins & Bilge (2020) highlight the importance of integrating ideas about intersectionality with global human rights frameworks to challenge the dominance of Western neo-liberal philosophies and evolve the narrative through dialogue rather than binaries. In order to connect personal experiences with political issues to inform counternarratives for change, Ledwith draws on a range of theorists, including Griffiths’ (2003) use of “*little stories*” (p. 29) as a means of restoring human dignity and building connections between people’s everyday experiences. By using similar strategies, I observed that three key counternarratives evolved over the course of the project relating to participants’ ideas about ‘Power’, ‘Agency’ and ‘Rights’, which I examine in Chapter Five.

### **3.2.6 Connecting and acting**

The final two stages in Ledwith’s framework focus on taking informed action to deliver social change. This involves reflecting on the felt needs understood through a critical and intersectional lens to present possible alternatives. This stage builds on the critical connections that help to form alliances of solidarity to effect change at a local and global level. The value of alliance building between social movements to

sustain counter-hegemonic struggle is one shared widely amongst Community Development theorists (English & Mayo, 2012; Mayo, 1997; Mayo, 2013). It is therefore significant that the Community Researchers focused on the importance of *solidarity* within a human rights-based approach, which I discuss in Chapter Six.

### **3.2.7 Cooperating for a common good**

The final stage of Ledwith's framework focuses on articulating the change participants want to see in the world. For Ledwith (2018; 2020), this involves a vision that embraces collective needs and builds institutions, laws and educational spaces that reflect these values. Using climate change as an example, she demonstrates how an interconnected praxis, as opposed to a disconnected process of competing interests, can work in favour of the planet and everyone in it to reduce the interlinked risks of climate migration, widening inequality, financial instability, and global conflict (Ledwith, 2020). An important part of this stage involves connecting with wider movements for change, leading Ledwith to conceive of all Community Development work as located on a "*local-global continuum*" (Ledwith, 2005, p. 256). This is significant for the future integration of Community Development strategies within HRE given criticisms of the failures of international human rights frameworks to respond adequately to local need and cultural context.

### **3.2.8 Critiques of Ledwith's approach**

While Ledwith is recognised as a key proponent of a model for Community Development that builds on the ideas of Freire and Gramsci to take it back to its radical roots, Popple (1999) questions the overall validity of her approach, suggesting that while she raises important questions about structural change, she falls short of offering constructive answers for practitioners. Butcher (2006) similarly points to Ledwith's reliance on case studies from her early years in practice and consequently a disconnect between her theory and the practical strategies that may lead to radical and transformative action. Turner (2021) offers an alternative perspective, suggesting that the lack of practice-based examples of radical community in contemporary Britain points to its ineffectiveness as an antidote to

neoliberalism, suggesting that Ledwith's work offers a retrospective of Freirean practice rather than a call to action. Taken together, these critiques inform my overarching aim to explore the value of Ledwith's framework for radical Community Development in a contemporary context and its potential to enhance the transformational potential of HRE.

Through analysing my data, I have developed my own perspective on the limitations of Ledwith's ideas in this research context. I question, for example, whether Ledwith's overall approach offers a realistic antidote to the scale of the problems she seeks to address given her critiques of globalisation, systemic inequality and neoliberalism. While her framework presents theoretical and practical strategies to improve on the "*declarationist*" model, I therefore suggest a need for further research on the scalability of this approach in the context of developing a model of CHRE capable of transformative action on a global scale. Furthermore, in applying Ledwith's ideas in the context of HRE and contextualising these within the critical literature on human rights, her lack of direct critical engagement with ideas about rights themselves and their realisation through Community Development presented a challenge in this study.

This led at times to a disconnect between Ledwith's broad engagement with concepts including power, oppression and social justice and the clarity of the theoretical vision for CHRE articulated within the *critical* orientation, making difficult to fully align them. Finally, the practical focus of her approach (committed to stimulating action for social change) at times takes priority over her theoretical consistency, drawing on a diverse range of ideas and influences to engage with her key overall themes of oppression and liberation. For this reason, I have focused on Freire and Gramsci as key influences throughout her work and Ledwith's (2020) most recent articulation of her theoretical framework to guide this study. Overall, I argue that Ledwith's approach offers value as one that may help to resolve some of the tensions within the "*declarationist*" model, though I do not suggest that this is the only way of doing so and welcome further research on the value of alternative approaches.

### 3.3 Rationale for integrating Community Development with HRE

In the previous chapter, I set out some key criticisms of the “*declarationist*” model from a critical perspective. These include, first, its potential to oppress due to the enmeshment of human rights with market-driven infrastructures and a legacy of colonialism. Second, the failure of the “*declarationist*” model to recognise its inherently political nature and therefore its importance as a site of struggle. Finally, its inherent conservatism, leading to predictions that human rights will inevitably be replaced by something new (Hopgood, 2013). To move past this requires a critical model of HRE that, first, recognises its potential both to liberate or oppress and adopt strategies that create the conditions for liberation. Second, acknowledges the function of HRE as a site of political struggle to facilitate the self-empowerment of marginalised communities. Third, embraces a wider diversity of voices within the discourse to make sense of rights as a series of dynamic and contextual relationships which may be challenged and re-negotiated.

**Table 1.** My comparison of Ledwith’s approach and the “*declarationist*” HRE model

|                         | <b>Community Development</b>   | <b>“<i>declarationist</i>” Model</b>   |
|-------------------------|--|--|
| Ontology & Epistemology | Knowledge is created through dialogue in public space  | Rights are static and universal, not impacted by context   |
| Participation           | Integral to change processes   | A principle upheld by human rights but absent from HRE   |
| Accountability          | A principle that applies to everyone   | A mechanism to hold state bodies to account  |
| Non-discrimination      | Understood in terms of the intersectionality of overlapping factors                          | A principle upheld by human rights   |
| Empowerment             | A collective experience with horizontal relationships of solidarity                          | An individual experience with hierarchical relationships between rights holders and duty bearers |
| Legality                | Rights are understood as derived from human dignity, a principle which applies to all people | The law both protects and provides the enforcement mechanism for human rights                    |

In this section, I explore how Ledwith's approach to Community Development may help to develop a critical model of HRE with these characteristics. Table 1 compares the "*declarationist*" model with Ledwith's approach to Community Development, outlining the tensions that need to be resolved for a model of CHRE to take shape. Below I outline why Community Development is theoretically well positioned to do this.

### **3.3.1 Potential for emancipation**

A key question for human rights practitioners who align with the *critical* orientation is whether Community Development is theoretically well positioned to help HRE realise its emancipatory potential. As a starting point, Community Development and human rights each build on a common vision for liberation. Where HRE sets out a basic set of rights to prevent individuals from subjugation by the state, Community Development focuses on democratising knowledge production to make sense of oppression and challenge its manifestations, which Ledwith (2020) explores through the idea of *knowledge democracy*. At the outset, the preamble to the UDHR recognises, "*The inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world*" (UDHR, 1948, p.1).

On the surface, this language resonates with the transformational discourse from which Community Development has evolved and, in particular, Ledwith's (2005, 2007) principles for Emancipatory Action Research (EAR), which are underpinned by the social justice values: *respect, dignity, mutuality* and *reciprocity*. However, where Community Development focuses broadly on the self-empowerment of marginalised groups to free themselves from hegemonic domination, the "*declarationist*" model, underpinned by the wording of the UDHR, focuses instead on dictating, and often restricting, the parameters of state power in order to protect individuals from discrimination or oppression. Moreover, the institutionalisation of human rights through international instruments and legal frameworks sits directly counter to the Freirean-Gramscian commitment to the need for a radical re-education of society to challenge the hegemonic domination of established institutions. The tensions

between the “*declarationist*” model and Community Development’s emancipatory aims consequently lie in the top-down nature of the former compared to the grassroots-led ethos of the latter.

I argue, however, that Ledwith’s theory of Community Development provides a valuable set of principles to help re-frame human rights to accommodate a wider vision for human emancipation and HRE as a tool to achieve it. By framing human emancipation as a collective goal and conceptualising inequality through an intersectional lens that recognises the multi-layered nature of oppression (Hill Collins & Bilge, 2020; Ledwith, 2020), Community Development offers opportunities to make sense of complexities in experiences of marginalisation that give rise to rights claims. In doing so, it may contribute to a model of CHRE in which rights acquire meaning when conceived of through the lens of people’s lived experience, rather than a set of incontestable standards imposed from above.

Moreover, Community Development has much to offer perspectives that see the possibility for HRE to disrupt oppressive power structures through social justice movements (Kayum Ahmed, 2017). In these contexts, human rights have a valuable role in articulating both the injustices of oppression and a vision for liberation. This positions CHRE as a positive force in movements for social change, particularly when aligned with the work of CSOs and wider initiatives outside formal political forums and the institutional spaces that advocate the “*declarationist*” model. I therefore argue that the vision for emancipation as articulated by Ledwith; one that centres on the democratisation of knowledge and recognises diversity in experiences of marginalisation, aligns with a conceptualisation of human rights capable of delivering on their emancipatory aims.

### **3.3.2 Creating sites of political struggle**

A second question for human rights practitioners who align with the *critical* orientation centres on the strategies that may help to develop a politically constructive model of CHRE; one that recognises the inherently political nature of education and the distinct challenges in different pedagogical contexts. This hinges on the tension between the claims to universalism within the “*declarationist*” model,

which conceives of human rights as a set of normative standards and calls for a critical alternative capable of self-reflection and renewal. Specifically, critical human rights theorists advocate for a shift away from the “*positivistic, uncritical, compliance-driven*” approach and towards, “[...] *counter-hegemonic constructions of HRE that are exciting, innovative and truly aligned to a non-declarationist Freirean Pedagogy of Hope.*” (Keet 2007, p. 217)

This requires a move away from conceptions of human rights standards as cultural norms to instead engage learners as active participants in movements for change. I suggest that Ledwith’s emphasis on the value of *experiential knowing* (derived from lived experience) in shaping theory and action in critical enquiry positions learners as active co-researchers in pedagogical spaces. This may help to deliver what Coysh (2017) describes as a, “[...] *radical authorship of human rights, situated in the struggles of the most vulnerable, marginalised and poor to be the primary authors, rather than bureaucratic institutions and states.*” (p. 37)

I argue that in helping to recognise the fundamentally political nature of community education (and HRE carried out in this setting), Ledwith’s framework offers strategies to address the power imbalances in the “*declarationist*” model and position learners as active agents in the re-negotiation of these relationships. If HRE can be therefore conceptualised as a site for political struggle, I use this study to explore the value of Ledwith’s approach to embedding this in practice. This starts with forging a connection between the social justice foundations of Community Development and a critical conception of HRE, creating the space for counter-hegemonic thought and fostering dialectical processes of critique and dissent.

### **3.3.3 Multi-dimensional and evolving practice**

A third key question for those within the *critical* orientation is how Community Development may help to conceptually realign binary juridical conceptions of rights to recognise their adaptability within an evolving cultural context. As a starting point, while in the “*declarationist*” model, the teacher/learner dynamic is characterised by the transmission of knowledge, the vision for CHRE aims to move towards a dynamic model built on critical thought with a social justice orientation (Keet, 2012).

I suggest that the integration of the social justice values of *mutuality* and *reciprocity* within HRE may help to facilitate a shift from a static juridical practice to a collective and dynamic one. By adopting a Freirean problem-posing methodology, rooted in learners' experiences of the world, a critical model of HRE may allow for a decoupling of the human rights narrative from standardised juridical interpretations of rights, opening up the discourse to recognise the realities and complexities of the human experience (Adami, 2014a; Bajaj et al, 2016; Martínez Sainz, 2018). Moreover, recognition of the intersectional factors that contribute to experiences of oppression may help to address the problem of how "*the layered human subject is being standardised by standards*" (Keet, 2012, p. 20) within the "*declarationist*" model.

This signals a first step away from a juridical orientation towards a critical one; one with a wider epistemological positioning that acknowledges the diversity in human experience as integral to the human rights narrative. To translate this into practice, Ledwith's seven-stage framework for action provides the steppingstones to use learners' distinct perspectives to begin to question the dominant hegemony and articulate critical counter-narratives to challenge it. In this way, rights cease to be an abstract idea without connection to human experience and are instead conceived of as existing through the lens of these experiences. A critical model of HRE may therefore provide a productive forum to progress a new narrative of human rights, one that welcomes a diversity of knowledge and seeks to adapt and evolve.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have introduced the theories that underpin this study, introducing Ledwith's seven-stage framework for Community Development and outlining key themes in the work of Freire and Gramsci that have influenced her ideas. I summarised the key theoretical limitations of the "*declarationist*" model from a critical perspective and where I suggest Community Development is theoretically well positioned to help resolve these. These centre on developing a critical model of HRE that re-connects with its emancipatory aims, recognises its inherently political nature and contributes to a dynamic and evolving practice. In the next chapter, I set out the

Critical Participatory Action Research (CPAR) methodology used in this study, my rationale for choosing this, and how the study was designed.

## Chapter Four – Research methodology and design

### 4. Introduction

In the previous chapter, I introduced Ledwith's framework for Community Development and outlined how it is theoretically well positioned to develop a critical model of HRE. In this chapter, I set out my methodology and describe the research design process. My choice to do a CPAR study is informed by my experiences as a practitioner. Through my work in UK CSOs, I have become critical of the 'Know Your Rights' approach to HRE that transmits knowledge from 'teacher' to 'learner' and replicates the "*declarationist*" model. I felt it was therefore important to choose a methodology in which the power relationships in traditional research are challenged.

I divide the chapter into four sections. First (4.1), I outline the key characteristics of Participatory Action Research (PAR), the 'critical' component of CPAR and my reasons for choosing this methodology. In the second section (4.2), I describe the research design process, including the preliminary planning stages and selection of project participants. In the third (4.3), I introduce the human rights-based approach used in this study, based on the 'PANEL' principles of *Participation, Accountability, Non-discrimination, Empowerment, and Legality* and summarise the process of gathering and interpreting the data. In the final section (4.4), I outline the key ethical considerations and the steps taken to mitigate risk.

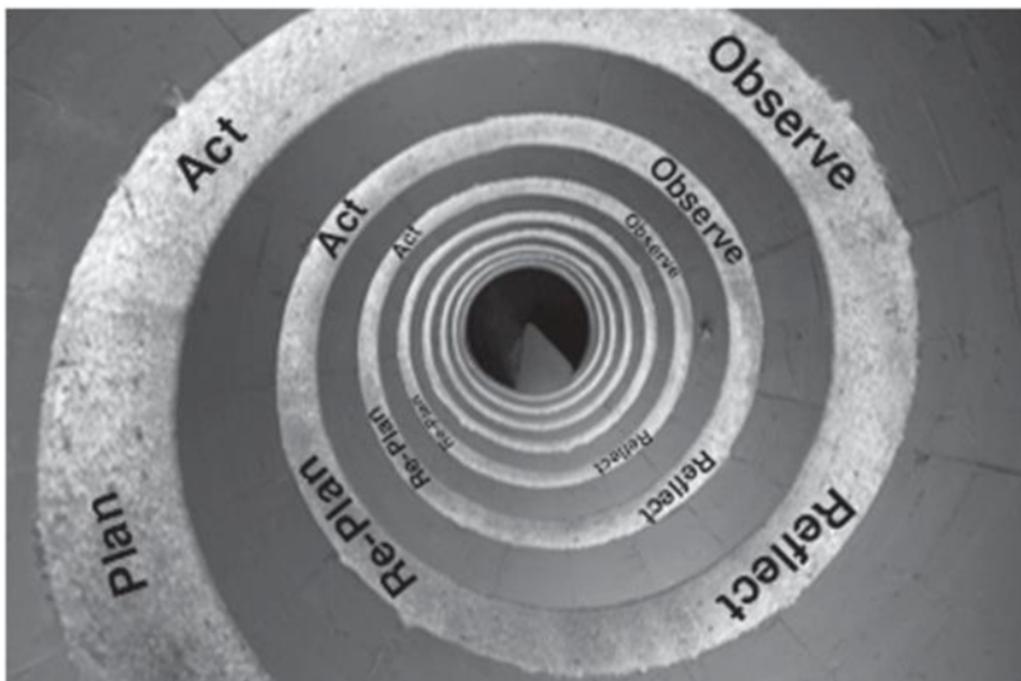
#### 4.1 Participatory Action Research (PAR)

Participatory Action Research (PAR) is a collective practice in which "*no one perspective can claim authority or authenticity*" (Swantz, 2008, p. 31). Although PAR can take different forms, it engages broadly with questions about what knowledge is, whose knowledge counts and investigates processes of knowledge creation within an action-oriented framework designed to democratise methods of social enquiry.

The *participatory* element of PAR aims to address the power imbalances in traditional research through the co-design of the research process, intended to remove the implied authority of the researcher over their research 'subjects'

(Kemmis et al, 2013). This means that each join as ‘co-researchers’ and contribute to the way the research is conceptualised, practiced, and interpreted (McTaggart, 1997). The process itself centres on a multidisciplinary practice using, “[...] *theories, methods and information from whatever source the participants jointly believe to be relevant*” (Greenwood et al, 1993, p. 178).

The *research* element of PAR refers to a form of social enquiry motivated by the mutual aims of improving education *practice* and making sense of the *context* in which it occurs (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1981). The role of PAR researchers is therefore a dual one; both to reveal knowledge about the subject(s) of enquiry and provide insights into the process of knowledge creation (Reason & Bradbury, 2008). The *action* component of PAR expresses its explicit commitment to bringing about change, characterised by an iterative process that integrates theory and practice through cyclical phases of reflection and action (Fig. 2).



**Fig. 2** Source: Kemmis et al (2013), *The Action Research Planner: Doing Critical Participatory Action Research* (p. 19).

Yet despite its commitment to social change, Ledwith (2020) suggests that, “*Participatory action research has become diluted over time, not always remaining conscious of its radical, emancipatory intention*” (p. 136). I outline below why I have chosen a CPAR approach to position this intention at the centre of my enquiry.

#### **4.1.1 Critical Participatory Action Research (CPAR)**

While I use the term ‘Critical Participatory Action Research’, I draw interchangeably on practitioners that describe this form of PAR either as *critical* (Fine, 2018; Kemmis, 2008) or *emancipatory* (Hall, 2003; Kemmis et al, 2013; Ledwith, 2020). Broadly, the *critical* element of CPAR puts emphasis on its transformational aims, challenging the inequities produced by existing societal structures rather than improving outcomes within them. Fine et al (2021) summarise this as a methodology where, “*Designs are developed around questions of power and inequity, in collaboration and dialogue with those most affected by injustice*” (p. 6).

Kemmis et al (2013) describe this as a “*practice changing practice*” (p. 26). This requires critical reflection both on *practice* (“*sayings, doings, relatings*”) and *practice architectures* (“*arrangements that enable or constrain their practices*”). Through cycles of reflection and action, participants create *communicative space* to inform *communicative action*, “[...] *clarifying their concerns and situations and informing changes in their practices*” (p. 179). For this to be effective, CPAR needs to be specific rather than generalised, looking critically at what happens in a single case. They describe the steps involved as:

*“First, to understand how things work here, how things have come to be...second, we adopt a critical stance towards what happens...third, our conversation becomes more practical and focused”* (pp. 67-68).

This context-specific reflection introduces new levels of accountability that allow CPAR projects to offer possibilities for wider claims to truth (Sandwick et al, 2018).

#### **4.1.2 Rationale for CPAR approach**

I chose to use a CPAR approach to align this study with the principles that underpin Ledwith's framework for Community Development. As a starting point, Ledwith (2008) critiques the "power-based approaches of traditional research" (p. 72) and challenges the conventional separation of the researcher and research subject(s). Instead, she proposes a methodology built on the principles of *mutuality* and *reciprocity* to realign CPAR with its transformational vision. This supports the aims of this study for several reasons. First, I aim to address the power dynamics in the "declarationist" model and explore ways to democratise HRE forums. Second, I seek to examine both my own practice and wider practice in the sector, which aligns with CPAR's purpose as a "practice changing practice". Third, this study focuses on a specific context, examining what is happening *here*, engaging those affected by both *practice* and *practice architectures* in cycles of reflection and action to transform them.

#### **4.1.3 Ontology and epistemology**

Each researcher approaches their projects with a particular world view that builds on ontological assumptions (about the nature of reality), which give rise to epistemological assumptions (about the nature of knowledge and knowledge creation) (McNiff, 2013). In this study, I adopt a critical realist perspective. The ontological position of the critical realist paradigm views reality as shaped by social, cultural, and political values (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). As such, realities are multiple, socially constructed, and subject to constant influence. The epistemological position of the critical realist view is one of subjectivism, recognising that observations about the world are not neutral and are influenced by power structures and social relationships.

I apply a critical realist perspective in this study because I interpret HRE initiatives as involving an inherent teacher-learner power dynamic and conceive of human rights, as framed within the *critical orientation*, as going beyond a static juridical framing. Research on these initiatives consequently requires an approach that goes beyond

a positivist perspective of the world to one that recognises the complex interactions that underpin processes of social change. By examining the transformational potential of HRE from a critical realist perspective, I acknowledge that the interpretation of rights and desire for social transformation are interconnected with the political and cultural context in which they take place. For this reason, I felt it was important to use a participatory methodology and qualitative data collection methods to gather the subjective perspectives of participants and gain an understanding of the distinct cultural contexts in which they take shape.

Critical realism is particularly relevant to action research in the fields of Community Development and social work due to its emancipatory aims (Houston, 2010). I used a CPAR methodology in this study to align with the transformational vision of the critical realist perspective by positioning co-researchers as equal (if distinct) contributors to the development of theory and action that inform social change. By aligning with the critical realist perspective, I also acknowledge that my role as a researcher is not value free and that, where I see mechanisms that lead to oppression or exclusion, it is my responsibility to expose and seek to change these (Bhaksar, 1998). This introduces an ethical dimension to the critical realist perspective as well as an ontological and epistemological one. For this reason, I worked with the CSO to embed a dynamic process of ethics to ensure our commitment to changing any circumstances leading to oppression or exclusion as they arose within the project context.

## **4.2 Research design**

The early stages of this study were delayed due to the constraints of the Covid-19 pandemic. In total, the study took two and a half years. This included the preliminary research and planning prior to the project launch (one year), project delivery (six months), and the data analysis and thesis writing following its completion (one year). The project itself involved two research cycles over the six-month project delivery period between September 2021 and February 2022. The first research cycle introduced the different principles of the PANEL approach and the second focused on translating this learning into action, which in this case took the form of designing a human rights board game to use as a social change tool.

To approach the design of the study, I drew on Kemmis et al's (2013) Critical Participatory Action Research planner. This starts with a *reconnaissance* phase, to establish areas of common felt concern amongst individuals and groups affected, followed by a *planning* phase to agree the first steps to transforming practice, an *observation* phase in which to examine practice, a period to *enact* the plan, and an opportunity to *reflect* on what has happened in order to enter into a *re-planning* stage to prepare for a new cycle of inquiry. I broadly followed this approach and outline the stages of the research design process in Table 2.

#### **4.2.1 Planning phase**

After choosing my research questions, I entered a preliminary planning phase which included a continuation of desk-based research, outreach to identify a suitable CSO partner, and consideration of the scope and scale of the project.

##### **4.2.1.1 Choosing a CSO partner**

To identify a suitable research partner, I compiled a list of CSOs that satisfied the criteria of:

- i. Delivering community-based HRE
- ii. Using a Community Development approach or adapting Community Development strategies, and
- iii. Located and delivering activities in the UK.

In compiling the list, I included organisations known to me through my work as a practitioner and carried out additional desk-based research to identify new organisations that satisfied these criteria. I initially approached a CSO that carried out work I was familiar with, promoting the realisation of Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (ESCR) through a combination of advocacy, campaigning, and movement building. I saw scope for collaboration due to the overlap of my research interest with the CSO's mission to, "*bring together communities to campaign against injustices through a rights-based approach*" (CSO Website).

**Table 2. Stages of the Research Process**

| <b>Research Cycle</b>      | <b>Event</b>                                 | <b>Activities</b>  | <b>Date</b>          |
|----------------------------|--|--|----------------------|
| <b>Research Design</b>     | <b>Desk-based research &amp; Preparation</b> | Confirmation document submitted, partner organisation identified, Ethics Forms submitted | <i>Month 1-2</i>     |
|                            | <b>Meetings with Programme Coordinator</b>   | Discussion of project remit and scope  | <i>Month 1-10</i>    |
|                            | <b>Advisory Group Meetings</b>               | Discussion of ethics and participant selection criteria                                  | <i>Month 10-12</i>   |
|                            | <b>Baseline Session</b>                      | Discussion of project aims and objectives, accessibility needs                           | <i>Month 12</i>      |
| <b>Research Cycle 1</b>    | <b>Sessions 1-6</b>                          | Introduction to a human rights-based approach via the PANEL principles                   | <i>Month 13 – 16</i> |
| <b>Critical Reflection</b> | <b>Session 7</b>                             | Critical reflection and project review   | <i>Month 16</i>      |
|                            | <b>One-to-One Interviews</b>                 | Semi-structured interviews with Community Researchers and CSO staff                      | <i>Month 16-17</i>   |
| <b>Research Cycle 2</b>    | <b>Sessions 8 - 12</b>                       | Moving from theory to action (designing a Human Rights board game)                       | <i>Month 17 - 19</i> |
| <b>Critical Reflection</b> | <b>Session 12 (Part 2)</b>                   | Critical reflection with lived experience co-researchers                                 | <i>Month 19</i>      |
|                            | <b>Exit Interviews</b>                       | Semi-structured interviews with Community Researchers and CSO staff                      | <i>Month 19 - 20</i> |
|                            | <b>Data Analysis</b>                         | Organising and interpreting data   | <i>Month 20 +</i>    |
| <b>End of Project</b>      | <b>Thesis Writing</b>                        | Continuing data analysis and writing up  | <i>Month 20 +</i>    |

At the initial point of contact, I had hoped to engage with the CSO's network of community advocates in the Northeast of England to talk to them about their experiences integrating human rights with Community Development. For ethical reasons we agreed that it would be the choice of the activists whether or not to participate, without wider incentives from the organisation. This caused initial challenges as I did not have established links with network members and the project funding was coming to an end. The combination of these factors meant that there was insufficient engagement to merit a research study.

The CSO was at this stage preparing to pilot a new project bringing a group of activists from across England together as 'Community Researchers' to explore a human rights-based approach through a 6-month supported learning journey. I discussed my research interest with the Project Coordinator, and we reviewed the ways in which my research could contribute to learning about the CSO's approach and approaches in the sector more broadly. We agreed that I would join the project as a practitioner-participant, feeding into its planning and design and continuing my involvement pending the consent of the Community Researchers once they had been selected.

#### 4.2.1.2 Forming a project Advisory Group

One of the first steps in a CPAR project is to open *communicative space* by bringing together an initial group of participants (Kemmis et al, 2013). In this study, this started with the convening of an Advisory Group to help define the project's aims and set some initial parameters. The CSO invited five practitioners, including me, based around the UK to join the group. Each had experience across the fields of community development, community organising, adult education, safeguarding, and facilitation. The Advisory Group members were identified through pre-existing relationships with the CSO or Project Coordinator. The Project Coordinator indicated that she was hesitant to appoint any Advisory Group members with lived experience of marginalisation due her awareness of the demand on people's time and the CSO's overall lack of resourcing to support participation. The group met three times during the planning stages of the project to discuss its possible risks and limitations, how to

manage participants' expectations and the ethical challenges involved. These included discussions about boundaries, ownership, and participation, which are critical in PAR studies (Wicks et al, 2009).

#### 4.2.1.3 Participant selection criteria

In total, the project involved a core group of four 'Community Researchers' (CRs), ten 'Visiting Activists' (VAs) with experience using a human rights-based approach and three 'Practitioner Researchers' (PRs), who included me, Cath (the Project Coordinator) and Ellen (the Head of Policy and Campaigns). The Community Researchers and Visiting Activists were selected using a combination of purposive and convenience sampling. Purposive sampling is a non-random technique commonly used in qualitative research in which participants are selected based on particular characteristics that make them valuable to the area of research interest, while convenience sampling is a similar non-random technique that builds on additional practical criteria such as accessibility, proximity and availability (Etikan et al, 2016).

The purposive element of the sampling process involved the consideration of issues such as the prospective participants' contribution to their communities and experience of activism or campaigning at a local level. The convenience element of the sampling process related to the recruitment of participants through channels easily available to the CSO. It is important to note that given the convenience element of the sampling process, the analysis of data from this project has higher internal than external validity (Andrade, 2021). This is due to the difficulty of applying the findings from a specific group that was conveniently accessible to the wider population. Given the primary aims of the project to enhance and evaluate HRE learning for the core participant group rather than draw conclusions in relation to a wider population, this was considered a limited risk to the value of its initial outcomes and the validity of its claims.

In this study, Cath (PR) drafted a role description to publicise the opportunity, outlining the CSO's criteria for selecting the Community Researchers, which they

defined as:

- i. A 'leader' within their community (though they may not recognise this in themselves),
- ii. Experienced in collective action and/or campaigning,
- iii. Part of a community or organisation that wants to drive change around social justice,
- iv. Able to commit to a 6-month group learning journey with regular online sessions, and
- v. Over 18 years old, living in England.

The CSO initially hoped to recruit six Community Researchers based in different regions in England. The opportunity was publicised through a combination of Cath (PR) and the CSO's existing contacts. The CSO also promoted the opportunity via its social media channels and those of its partners. As the initial promotional phase did not generate enough applications that fitted the criteria, the CSO decided to select five Community Researchers instead of six. One of these decided to drop out during the early stages of the project due to competing pressures on their time, leaving a core group of four Community Researchers. While necessary given the resource restrictions and project time frames, this represents some of the limitations of convenience sampling in this project.

The CSO also invited 'Visiting Activists' to share their perspectives on using a human rights-based approach with the Community Researchers over the course of the project. To select the Visiting Activists, the CSO used its established networks to identify individuals, networks or organisations that satisfied a broad criterion of using a human rights-based approach in grassroots movement building with insights relevant to one of the PANEL principles. While the Advisory Group provided some initial recommendations, this conversation remained fluid, giving the Community Researchers the opportunity to participate in these discussions as the project progressed.

## **4.2.2 Research participants**

### **4.2.2.1. Community Researchers (CRs)**

The CSO selected the following participants as Community Researchers based on the criteria above:

**Gerry** identifies as a disabled person and is part of an organisation based in the North-East of England that campaigns for equality for disabled people and to end disability discrimination. The organisation is led by people with lived experience of disability and focuses on using people's experiences of disability to drive social change and increase the representation of disabled people in public forums. She brings to her work a range of life experiences that have influenced her ideas around care and equality.

**Leah** identifies as a transgender woman and leads a regional citizens' action network that aims to facilitate conversations about building an inclusive community in her local area, which is indexed as one of the most deprived in the UK. She described health inequality and unemployment as key problems facing people in her community. During the project, she also shared her experiences of discrimination due to her transgender identity and her struggles with mental health.

**Paul** is a community organiser and mental health advocate, leading a men's mental health support network in a deprived part of the UK. He described having prior experience of mental health difficulties and expressed a strong belief in the connection between poverty, exclusion and mental health. He is also connected with a number of wider social change initiatives in his region.

**Seema** leads a CSO that promotes the need for culturally appropriate mental health services for minority communities in her area. She has lived experience of the UK asylum system and feels that members in her own and other refugee communities are routinely ignored by public services. She also has a number of years of experience in youth and community work using participatory approaches.

#### 4.2.2.2 Visiting Activists (VAs)

The Visiting Activists (VAs) that attended sessions included:

Three activists (**Jane, Sarah, Niamh**) from a CSO using international human rights standards as grassroots tools for economic, social and environmental change based in Northern Ireland and collaborating with organisations internationally. They joined the session on *accountability* during research cycle one.

Five activists (**Lorna, Debra, Ali, Vicky, Jen**) from an international movement working in solidarity with and for people in poverty. The movement focuses on using a human rights approach to bring an end to poverty discrimination. They joined the session on *non-discrimination* during research cycle one and the final focus group.

Two activists (**Kirsty, Susan**) from a tenants' federation in Scotland with a track record of improving housing outcomes for residents through human rights listening campaigns. They joined the session on *participation* in research cycle one.

#### 4.2.2.3 Practitioner Researchers (PRs)

There were three Practitioner Researchers (PRs) in this study, who included me and two members of CSO staff. Each of our roles involved a combination of active involvement in the sessions as well as responsibility for aspects of project planning and coordination. Our responsibilities can be broadly summarised as follows:

**Cath** was a CSO staff member and the Project Coordinator, responsible for project management, convening the Advisory Group, advocating for the project internally within the CSO, facilitating sessions and logistical organising.

**Ellen** was a CSO staff member and the Head of Policy and Campaigns within the organisation, responsible for introducing and demystifying the principle of *legality* and feeding the learning from the project back into the policy and campaigns work of the CSO.

I (**Emma**) joined the project as an external learning partner and volunteer responsible for designing and facilitating activities focused on critical reflection and coordinating the learning cycles.

**Table 3.** *List of Participants*

| <b>Participant</b> | <b>Role</b>                                     | <b>Code</b> |
|--------------------|---|-------------|
| Member 1           | Advisory Group                                  | AG          |
| Member 2           | Advisory Group                                  | AG          |
| Member 3           | Advisory Group                                  | AG          |
| Member 4           | Advisory Group                                  | AG          |
| Gerry              | Community Researcher                            | CR          |
| Leah               | Community Researcher                            | CR          |
| Paul               | Community Researcher                            | CR          |
| Seema              | Community Researcher                            | CR          |
| Cath               | Practitioner Researcher                         | PR          |
| Ellen              | Practitioner Researcher                         | PR          |
| Emma (Me)          | Practitioner Researcher/Advisory Group Member 5 | PR/AG       |
| Jane               | Visiting Activist (Accountability Session)      | VA          |
| Sarah              | Visiting Activist (Accountability Session)      | VA          |
| Niamh              | Visiting Activist (Accountability Session)      | VA          |
| Lorna              | Visiting Activist (Non-discrimination Session)  | VA          |
| Debra              | Visiting Activist (Non-discrimination Session)  | VA          |
| Ali                | Visiting Activist (Non-discrimination Session)  | VA          |
| Vicky              | Visiting Activist (Non-discrimination Session)  | VA          |
| Jen                | Visiting Activist (Non-discrimination Session)  | VA          |
| Kirsty             | Visiting Activist (Participation Session)       | VA          |
| Susan              | Visiting Activist (Participation Session)       | VA          |

#### **4.3 Introducing a human rights-based approach (PANEL)**

The PANEL approach is a way of breaking down what a human rights-based approach means in practice. It is underpinned by five key principles: *Participation*, *Accountability*, *Non-discrimination*, *Empowerment* and *Legality*. These principles are used in a range of contexts to inform the planning and delivery of activities designed

to empower ‘rights-holders’ (those entitled to claim their rights) and strengthen the capacity of ‘duty-bearers’ (those responsible for upholding them).

The CSO structured the project using this approach, exploring each of the PANEL principles through a series of online sessions over a six-month period. In total, the CSO ran twelve 90-minute sessions and a full day in-person workshop at the end of the project (See Table 4). Research cycle one incorporated a pre-engagement meeting, during which participants met one another and agreed goals and ground rules for the project, and a further six sessions introducing each of the PANEL principles. Three of these were also attended by Visiting Activists to talk about their experiences using a human rights-based approach. The second research cycle comprised a further six sessions focused on translating participants’ learning into practice. I facilitated reflection exercises on the PANEL principles at the end of both research cycles.

As this was a CPAR study, the practical outcomes were not agreed at the start but were developed through an iterative process of action and reflection as theory was developed over the course of the project (Coghlan & Brydon-Miller, 2014). At the end of research cycle one, the Community Researchers decided to dedicate the second half of the project to designing a board game around the theme, ‘*Claiming the Right to Talk About Rights*’, which Seema (CR) described as:

*“[...] a good way to engage everybody and to start conversations about human rights. It can be complicated to wrap your head around at the beginning so there needs to be an access point for people who wouldn’t otherwise think about it.”*  
(Session 7)

**Table 4.** Project content and structure

| Session                       | Content   | Who        | Format | Date         |
|-------------------------------|---|------------|--------|--------------|
| <b>Pre-engagement Meeting</b> | Introductions, goal setting, agree ground rules | PRs<br>CRs | Online | Aug<br>2021  |
| <b>Session 1</b>              | <b>Values and Influences</b>                    | PRs<br>CRs | Online | Sept<br>2021 |

|                           |  |                   |        |              |
|---------------------------|--|-------------------|--------|--------------|
|                           | Introduction to project, reflection on values  |                   |        |              |
| <b>Session 2</b>          | <b>PANEL (Legality)</b><br>Introduction to human rights law by the CSO   | PRs<br>CRs        | Online | Sept<br>2021 |
| <b>Session 3</b>          | <b>PANEL (Empowerment)</b><br><b>Community Researchers' Presentations</b>  | PRs<br>CRs        | Online | Oct<br>2021  |
| <b>Session 4</b>          | <b>PANEL (Accountability)</b><br><b>Dialogue with three 'Visiting Activists' using human rights in local campaigns</b>                     | PRs<br>CRs<br>VAs | Online | Oct<br>2021  |
| <b>Session 5</b>          | <b>PANEL (Non-discrimination)</b><br><b>Dialogue with five 'Visiting Activists' using human rights to challenge poverty discrimination</b> | PRs<br>CRs<br>VAs | Online | Nov<br>2021  |
| <b>Session 6</b>          | <b>PANEL (Participation)</b><br><b>Dialogue with three 'Visiting Activists' using human rights to improve standards of living</b>          | PRs<br>CRs<br>VAs | Online | Nov<br>2021  |
| <b>Mid-way Interviews</b> | <b>Individual Reflection</b><br><b>Semi-structured interviews</b>  | CRs               | Online | Dec<br>2021  |
| <b>Session 7</b>          | <b>Critical Reflection</b><br><b>Reflection on PANEL principles</b>  | PRs<br>CRs        | Online | Dec<br>2021  |
| <b>Session 8</b>          | <b>Agenda-setting</b><br><b>Agenda setting for Research Cycle 2: 'How do we claim the right to talk about rights?'</b>                     | PRs<br>CRs        | Online | Dec<br>2021  |
| <b>Session 9</b>          | <b>Project Development</b><br><b>Decision to create a board game about 'Claiming the Right to Talk About Rights'</b>                       | PRs<br>CRs        | Online | Jan<br>2022  |
| <b>Session 10</b>         | <b>Project Development</b><br><b>Board game design (aims, objectives, format)</b>  | PRs<br>CRs        | Online | Jan<br>2022  |
| <b>Session 11</b>         | <b>Project Development</b><br><b>Board game design (aims, objectives, format)</b>  | PRs<br>CRs        | Online | Feb<br>2022  |

|                        |  |                   |                      |          |
|------------------------|--|-------------------|----------------------|----------|
| <b>Session 12</b>      | <b>Part I: Focus Group</b><br><b>Playing prototype of game with Visiting Activists</b><br><b>Part II: Critical Reflection</b><br><b>Reflection on PANEL principles</b> | PRs<br>CRs<br>VAs | In person            | Feb 2022 |
| <b>Exit Interviews</b> | <b>Semi-structured interviews</b>  | CRs<br>PRs        | In person/<br>Online | Feb 2022 |

#### **4.3.1 Data collection**

I used a combination of qualitative methods to collect data in this study. As a starting point, I kept a personal research journal to ensure I reflected on my own practice. I then chose methods of data collection best suited to my methodology and research questions. These included participant observation during the sessions and semi-structured interviews with the Community Researchers and Practitioner Researchers at the end of each research cycle. I also remained open to new sources of data as the project evolved. These included a dedicated project blog, on which the CSO published reflective pieces by the Community Researchers and Practitioner Researchers and a focus group at the end of the project with five of the Visiting Activists to test a prototype of the human rights board game designed by the Community Researchers. These methods generated a range of data that could be triangulated, allowing for comparisons to be made and different aspects of the research issue to be explored to answer the research question (Fossey et al, 2002).

##### **4.3.1.1 Reflective Journal**

I kept a reflective journal to challenge my assumptions and interpretations as a researcher. Ledwith describes this as a *reflexive* journal to distinguish the self-critical component of CPAR studies from broader reflective practice, in which researchers simply review their learning (Bassot, 2016). I organised my journal entries according to the four categories suggested by Whitehead & McNiff (2005), recording what I *did*,

what I *learned*, the *significance* of my learning, and plans to *modify* my practice. I adopted a partially structured approach, recording journal entries before and after project activities, while simultaneously using it to record my reflections on themes and topics as they arose. I used it to record both descriptive data (such as 'who', 'where' and 'when') and reflections on my role in the process and emotional responses to events (Cohen et al, 2011).

I kept a reflective journal for several reasons. First, it is a key method of data collection in CPAR studies, which requires researchers to reflect critically on their own practice as well as the social phenomena they seek to examine (Whitehead & McNiff, 2005). Second, I used my reflective journal to document what happened at different stages in the research process, which helped when triangulating the data to identify emerging themes. Finally, it provided a valuable place to make note of emerging priorities and ethical concerns that may suggest the need to adjust project interventions (Brydon-Miller et al, 2006).

#### 4.3.1.2 Participant observation

I undertook participant observation during the group sessions. These consisted of a 60 minute online pre-engagement meeting, eleven 90-minute online sessions and a one-day in person workshop at the end of the project. I joined each of these as a participant-observer, participating in and facilitating group activities, while also disclosing my role as an 'observer' for the purposes of this study (Cohen et al, 2011). To record my observations, I created a participant observation sheet (Appendix 2), using Ledwith's seven stage framework as a structure. Given the qualitative nature of this study, I captured the data using open-ended narrative descriptions (Lewis-Beck et al, 2004). This was key in helping me to elicit *meanings* from these interactions to triangulate with other sources of data (Bryman, 2016).

Participant observation was a valuable data collection method for several reasons. First, it provided opportunities to reflect on the research process as well as its outcomes, making sense of the dynamics within the space which relate directly to the phenomena being explored. Second, it enabled me to record occurrences as

they happened, providing a rich source of data to triangulate with other data collection methods. Finally, by immersing myself as a participant-observer, I had the flexibility to explore new avenues of enquiry and remain open about the focus of the study.

#### 4.3.1.3 Session transcripts and recordings

Each of the online sessions were recorded and I transcribed the discussions verbatim. The transcripts were useful for the purpose of analysing the process through which meaning is collectively constructed (Bryman, 2016), which was significant given the collaborative nature of the project. I used these in conjunction with participant observation to analyse the data between each of the sessions and start to identify emerging themes. Reflecting on the transcripts from these sessions enabled me to monitor data about participants' thinking and practice, how they were influencing one another, and how they developed new insights and practices through these interactions (McNiff, 2013).

#### 4.3.1.4 Semi-structured interviews

I conducted a total of twelve individual semi-structured interviews, one with each of the Community Researchers and one with Cath (PR) and Ellen (PR) at the end of each research cycle. I discussed with Cath (PR) the possibility of conducting baseline interviews with the Community Researchers prior to the start of the project, but we decided not to given that this may place unnecessary demands on their time. We instead agreed to capture baseline data through a group pre-engagement meeting and voluntary questionnaire included with the consent form (Appendix 1). The mid-way interviews were carried out online and lasted approximately 40 minutes. The exit interviews were carried out in person with the Community Researchers and online with Cath (PR) and Ellen (PR), each of which lasted 30-40 minutes.

For each interview, I prepared a series of open questions beforehand and a list of prompts to stimulate discussion (Appendix 3) so that the basic structure was set out

in advance (Olsen, 2011). With interviewees' permission, I made a recording of the interviews, which I later transcribed. I also took brief notes during the interviews themselves to inform my questions as the dialogue progressed. There were several advantages to using interviews as a method of data collection. First, they provided an opportunity to speak with participants on a one-to-one basis, offering them time to express their views at greater length and expand on observations during the sessions, which I could triangulate with the data generated through participant observation and the session transcripts. Second, the format created opportunities to identify new avenues of enquiry while focusing on the research question (Brinkman, 2014; Gomez et al, 2011).

#### 4.3.1.5 Documents

Several key documents informed this research. I use Brymans' (2016) definition of data that falls within this category as including: materials that can be read (in a broad sense), were not produced specifically for the purposes of the research, have been preserved and are of relevance to the research focus. These included project planning and strategy documents, email correspondence, workshop materials, slides from presentations, and templates for the design of the human rights board game.

The documents I rely on particularly include the twelve-page project report, entitled '*Whose Rights Are They Anyway?*', which was co-written by the Community Researchers and Practitioner Researchers, drawing together the reflections from the final workshop. The process of co-authorship involved Cath (PR) first distilling the Community Researchers' conversations during the PANEL reflection exercises and drawing together emerging themes using direct quotes. This document was then edited and added to by the Community Researchers to produce the final copy.

I also draw on the two-page '*Human Rights Manifesto*' published by the Community Researchers as an outcome of the project, a thirty-nine-page internal audit of organisational practice completed by the CSO's Human Rights Officer, who was recruited after the project had finished to implement its learning, and the CSO's blog, which provided a platform for 19 reflective blog pieces by the Community Researchers and Practitioner Researchers. I found document analysis a particularly useful way of gaining insights into the learning by the CSO, given my position as an

outside learning partner, pointing to its value as a data source to gain insights into perspectives otherwise inaccessible to the researcher (Cohen et al, 2011).

#### 4.3.1.6 Focus group

This study included one two-hour focus group carried out in-person during the final workshop. Focus group methods involve multiple participants and typically explore a specific theme or topic in depth (Bryman, 2016). In this case, the Community Researchers invited five of the previous Visiting Activists to test a prototype of the human rights board game they designed during research cycle two. Gerry (CR) acted as a facilitator and Cath (PR) kept a record of the conversation. The focus group discussion generated a series of questions to help the Community Researchers finalise the design of the board game and reflect on its aims and objectives. It ultimately served a dual purpose, both to test the game as a social change tool and to help initiate new thinking, which informed the game's subsequent development (Buckles & Chevalier, 2009).

#### **4.3.2 Data analysis**

The data collected was subject to content analysis. This involved the sequential steps of sorting, analysing and criteria setting to convert the data into evidence (Whitehead & McNiff, 2006). To begin, I created a master document in which to collate the session transcripts, participant observation sheets and my own reflections on the research process. I allocated time between each session to reflect on the data and treated data analysis as an on-going process, remaining open to new questions and avenues of enquiry. I left the process of criteria setting until after the completion of the project, when I began to code the data.

Coding involves reviewing the data and giving labels to aspects and themes that appear to have significance for the purposes of the study (Bryman, 2016). I used a combination of *open coding* (which involves breaking down the data to begin to identify recurring themes and start to categorise them) and *axial coding* (putting the data back together in new ways as connections can be made between the categories). To begin, I allocated colour and letter codes to each of the seven stages

**Table 5. Summary of data collection methods**

| <b>Method</b>           | <b>Description</b>   | <b>Record</b>  |
|-------------------------|--|--|
| Reflective Journal      | Personal journal reflecting on what I 'did', 'learnt', its 'significance' and my plans to 'modify' practice.   | Researcher's personal notes  |
| Participant Observation | 1 pre-engagement meeting (60 minutes)<br><br>11 online sessions (90 minutes)<br><br>1 workshop (full day)  | Recorded, transcribed<br><br>Recorded, transcribed<br><br>Recorded, transcribed  |
| Interviews              | 4 semi-structured one-on-one mid-way interviews with the Community Researchers<br><br>2 semi-structured one-on-one mid-way interviews with CSO's Practitioner Researchers<br><br>4 semi-structured one-on-one exit interviews with the Community Researchers<br><br>2 semi-structured one-on-one exit interviews with CSO's Practitioner Researchers                     | Recorded, transcribed<br><br>Recorded, transcribed<br><br>Recorded, transcribed<br><br>Recorded, transcribed   |
| Documents               | ' <i>Whose Rights Are They Anyway?</i> ' Final Project Report (12 pages)<br><br>The Community Researchers' ' <i>Human Rights Manifesto</i> ' (1 page)<br><br>19 reflective blog pieces<br><br>CSO internal audit of organisational practice (39 pages)<br><br>Additional documents including: email communications, session plans, human rights board game instructions. | Published on CSO website<br><br>Published on CSO website<br><br>Published on CSO website<br><br>Published on CSO website<br><br>Email, word doc, pdf, Published on CSO website |
| Focus Group             | 1 focus group with the Community Researchers, Practitioner Researchers and five Visiting Activists (120 minutes)   | Recorded, contemporaneous note taken by Cath (PR)  |

in Ledwith's framework and used these to code each of my data sources. I created separate spreadsheets for each category to triangulate the data and begin to identify patterns. This formed the basis of a matrix I created to analyse new themes as they began to develop (Appendix 4).

Due to the participatory nature of this study, I approached this using what Altheide (2004) describes as *ethnographic content analysis*, in which the researcher is constantly revising themes and categories as new knowledge is identified. I also looked for trends across different data collection methods (interviews, documents, participant observation) and different stages in the research process (planning, research cycle one, reflection, research cycle two) within each of the categories. I found that, while there were not significant variations in themes across methods of data collection, by triangulating these sources, the emerging themes gained more validity. Overall, this involved multiple reviews of the data and the creation of new data codes to identify patterns and decide criteria to narrow these to formulate a claim to knowledge. Through these iterative stages, I identified three central themes relating to ideas about 'Power', 'Agency', and 'Rights', which I use to structure my analysis in Chapters Five and Six.

#### **4.4 Ethical framework**

CPAR presents specific ethical concerns as a values-based practice. These include ensuring that participants' expectations are heard and understood, managing how personal stories are shared and negotiating the roles and responsibilities of those involved (Manzo & Brightbill, 2007). In this study, I adopt Brydon-Miller's (2009) ethical framework, which aims to move away from the contractual relationship between 'researcher' and 'research subject' and towards an iterative process through which consent is constantly reviewed and re-confirmed throughout the research process. This was to ensure that ethics remained a live discussion throughout the project, rather than a single transactional process at the outset. My university ethics forms were approved on this basis, and I agreed with my supervisor to raise any ethical concerns as the project progressed.

At the outset, this involved discussions with the Advisory Group and Cath (PR) about ethical concerns. These included recognition of the challenging environments in which the Community Researchers already work and the need for measures to support their physical and mental wellbeing. This included CSO reimbursement for any financial expenses and their time to attend the sessions. Cath (PR) indicated that while the CSO felt it would be inappropriate to appear to be offering a financial incentive in exchange for participation, it was ethically important to recognise the time this took from their work and compensate them for this.

The CSO also organised access to free and confidential therapy through an independent organisation, a preliminary needs assessment and further one-to-one check-ins with Cath (PR) to discuss any accessibility, mental health or other concerns. While the CSO created consent forms in advance of the project regarding the recording of the sessions (Appendix 1), discussions about the right of withdrawal, confidentiality, and the use of data remained live conversations with the Community Researchers. At the pre-engagement meeting, we also discussed our roles and responsibilities as a group so that everyone was clear what was expected of them and could raise any questions or concerns (Coghlan & Brydon-Miller, 2014).

#### ***4.4.1 Dynamic ethics in practice***

I present the ethical context for my findings in an overall positive light due to my impression of the ways in which, as co-researchers, we embedded dynamic methods of ethical practice within the project. I suggest that this built on two key factors. The first was the consideration of how to ensure that ethical issues were included in iterative discussions throughout the project from the start (Brydon-Miller, 2009). This involved the formation of the Advisory Group with skills that included safeguarding, participatory research and ethical evaluation practice. The group's preliminary discussions raised key ethical questions, such as the possible burdens of participation and how to mitigate these, ways of supporting diverse learning needs and managing power dynamics between co-researchers.

The second factor was the consideration the CSO and I gave to creating an accessible online environment, which required us to think differently about our usual approach to participation in physical contexts. While the CSO initially envisaged a project driven primarily through online engagement in order to bring together a group of activists from across the UK, the restrictions of the Covid-19 pandemic required all activities to take place in an online environment (with the exception of the final workshop and focus group). This meant that participants did not get a chance to meet in person until the end of the project. It was therefore important to give careful thought to the formation of the learning space as this would be critical to building the relationships of trust needed to have meaningful ethical discussions as the project progressed. The Advisory Group similarly informed these discussions, pointing to the importance of transparency, managing safeguarding concerns and acknowledging barriers to participation.

I acknowledge that in participatory research, there is the risk of a disconnect between what is said and what is done (McNiff, 2013). A practical example of the way in which the CSO took steps to embed this ethical approach related to ensuring that participants were in a physically secure environment. Given the principles that underpin HRE, the CSO and I acknowledged at the start of the project that the sessions were likely to prompt group discussions drawing on personal experiences that participants would need to feel physically and psychologically safe to express. A 'physically secure environment' means different things in different research contexts. In the context of this project, Cath (PR) completed an initial needs assessment, speaking individually with the Community Researchers prior to the start of the online workshops to discuss general accessibility issues.

These discussions addressed practical factors, such as whether participants had internet and computer access and were digitally literate. They also considered ethical considerations such as their feelings of safety within their home environment, identifying any vulnerabilities within their household and whether they required additional resourcing to participate (such as support with childcare or mental health). The needs assessment also considered wider factors such as establishing sufficient privacy to ensure the anonymity and confidentiality of all members of the group was

maintained and that participants were comfortable with the levels of privacy of their co-researchers.

To demonstrate how dynamic ethics worked in practice, I provide two examples of how ethical issues were addressed during the project. First, towards the end of the second research cycle, one of the Community Researchers queried what discussions about the project and its participants were taking place outside of the learning space (in this case, in the form of a funding application to extend the project grant).

Concerns were raised, both about the fact that they had not been made aware that it was taking place, and about their exclusion from the discussion itself. Although there were early conversations about how information from the project may be used, this provided a reminder that the nature and context of these discussions evolve over the course of a project. In order to achieve the “*unforced consensus*” (Reason & Bradbury, 2008, p. 136) that is necessary for participatory research to hold true to its principles, the CSO adapted its approach to bring information about discussions that were taking place about the future development of the project into the learning space to increase transparency and maintain relationships of trust.

A second example of how ethical practice was continually re-evaluated related to how the dynamic between the Practitioner Researchers (who drew primarily on professional experience) and the Community Researchers/Visiting Activists (who drew primarily on lived experience) was managed over the course of the project. From the outset, this created an imbalance in the degree of vulnerability demanded from different co-researchers during the online sessions. To address this, Cath (PR) raised the issue during an early check-in session to establish if the Community Researchers were happy with the existing approach involving the Practitioner Researchers or would prefer to continue discussions either without the Practitioner Researchers or with a reduced number. The Community Researchers opted to continue with the existing approach citing the established feelings of trust within the group and wider feelings of resilience. I suggest that this demonstrates the importance of building trust from the start of participatory projects and points to the value of a preliminary needs assessment to enhance understanding of participant needs.

#### **4.4.2 Mitigation**

Although using a CPAR methodology can be ethically complex, Kemmis et al (2013) outline three broad ethical commitments for researchers to keep in mind. These involve respecting persons, justice, and benefice (which aims to maximise the possible benefits and minimise likely harm). Various factors reduced the ethical risks involved in this project. These included the fact that the participants were adults, the workshops were carried out online in what the CSO has assessed as physically secure environments, language barriers were not an obstacle amongst the participant group, and the workshop topics were framed broadly, allowing for general discussion and enabling participants to avoid topics likely to cause distress. My primary ethical considerations therefore related to my positionality as a researcher.

Positionality refers to the wider contextual factors that impact interpersonal dynamics in a qualitative research process (Merriam et al, 2001). As a practitioner-participant in this study, I recognise that my role in the design and implementation of the project differentiated my position to that of the Community Researchers and that this necessarily impacted the power dynamics in the learning space. In this sense, the project did not involve the universal participation that Anderson (2012) describes as “*epistemic democracy*” (p. 172) but was a truer reflection of real-world contexts in which PAR projects can offer enabling conditions that go some way towards enhancing justice (Walker & Boni, 2020). From the outset, I was aware that I came to the research group as an outsider, exploring theories about rights and oppression from an academic perspective, and a position of privilege as a cis-gendered and able-bodied middle class white woman. I therefore used my reflective journal to reflect on my biases (such as my initial inclination not to question the institutions that perpetuate the “*declarationist*” model given my familiarity with this narrative in a Western cultural context). In the group setting, I was careful to be transparent about my privilege and positionality and found the CPAR methodology valuable in nurturing relationships of trust within the group.

Over the course of the project, the CSO staff and I worked to balance our ethical responsibilities to the Community Researchers (one the one hand, remaining mindful

of the demands on their time to avoid involving them with unnecessary administration and feedback processes, while on the other, being careful not to exclude them from decisions that affected them). This was not always successful. For example, the resistance described above to the way the Community Researchers had been excluded from discussions about project funding. There were also several grey areas, such as the CSOs wider reporting responsibilities to funders and requirements to evaluate social impact. This involves collecting data about beneficiary engagement and reporting on project outcomes, which raise several ethical concerns relating to competing interests, informed consent and managing expectations (Paterson-Young & Hazenberg, 2021). However, we aimed to mitigate these risks through a dynamic ethical practice focused on maintaining open dialogue about power dynamics and speaking frequently about the challenges of addressing issues of power in pedagogical spaces.

#### **4.4.3 Online engagement**

This research took place during the Covid-19 pandemic, causing many of the activities to be moved online. Understanding the role of digital technology in social research is an epistemological and methodological need for researchers (Deslandes & Coutinho, 2020). While there is a wide literature on digital equity and inclusion, the use of technology did not present a barrier for the participants in this project as all participants were digitally literate and had access to digital tools and the internet. The online format was in fact cited by several participants as a benefit, allowing for flexibility and minimising the time cost of participation. They also cited the value of the sessions in offering points of connection at a time when some expressed feelings of isolation due to the Covid-19 lockdown measures (Lupton, 2020). From a research perspective, the online format offered flexibility in the location of data collection and enabled the CSO to bring together Community Researchers based in different regions in the UK (Ferlatte et al, 2022).

The CSO nonetheless took steps to ensure that the online format did not impact the participatory nature of the study, using a range of digital platforms, such as Jamboard, Slack, and Google Drive, to ensure that activities could take place in a

collaborative way (Marzi, 2020; Rapsey & Curam, 2020). Where we did face challenges, was in initially building interpersonal relationships within an online environment (Greeff, 2020). Cath (PR), for example, had initially planned to bring the group together in person for the pre-engagement meeting and organise other opportunities for the group to meet during the project. We mitigated this by including more introductory exercises in the early sessions to share our personal stories as well as our motivations to engage with the project. We nonetheless acknowledged that the online format would impact the ways that stories would be told, witnessed and produced (Lee & Hollister, 2020).

Similarly, the online format made it more difficult to pick up on non-verbal cues such as body language, which can change the meaning of dialogue (Robson, 2002). This was mitigated in part by the structured format of the reflection exercises in each session, which offered additional time and space for participants to make their communications clear. Likewise, the decision to carry out the final workshop and exit interviews with the Community Researchers in person ensured that the data collection in this project was not limited exclusively to online interactions. While the Community Researchers and CSO staff acknowledged in exit interviews that the online format was “*different*”, they saw pros and cons to each approach and cited the benefits of bringing together different perspectives from around the UK.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter, I introduced the principles of Participatory Action Research (PAR), the ‘critical’ component of CPAR and my rationale for choosing to use a CPAR study. I outlined the research design process for the project, which included two research cycles over a six-month period, and the data collection methods used in this study. I concluded by outlining the ethical considerations and challenges of online engagement, including the steps that were taken to mitigate these risks. In the next two chapters, I present my analysis of the data. In Chapter Five, I apply the first stages of Ledwith’s framework to examine how Community Development helped to nurture processes of critical enquiry within HRE. In Chapter Six, I explore the ways in which this translated into action for social change.

## Chapter Five – Creating Spaces for Critical Learning in HRE

### 5. Introduction

The purpose of this study is to explore how a Community Development approach may help to develop a ‘critical’ model of HRE. The main research question that guides the study is:

*In what ways can an approach to HRE modelled on Community Development enhance its potential to create spaces for critical learning and transformative action?*

In this chapter, I address the first part of this question, to explore how a Community Development approach contributed to critical learning within HRE. In the next chapter, I examine the ways in which this led to transformative action. These questions build on my own experience as a practitioner, observing the limitations of the ‘Know Your Rights’ model, and the wider concerns articulated by the *critical* orientation about the inadequacies of the “*declarationist*” model. At the forefront of calls for the “*renewal*” of HRE, Keet (2012) pinpoints the absence of a “*systemic interplay*” (p. 12) between human rights endorsements and human rights critiques. This interplay forms the foundation for critical enquiry and points to the value of Ledwith’s framework for embedding this practice within HRE.

I divide the chapter into three sections. First (5.1), I outline Ledwith’s (2020) key criteria for creating critical learning spaces and use these to analyse the formation of the space, diversification of perspectives within it, and the critical evaluation of values- frameworks at the start of the project. In the second section (5.2), I consider the idea of *conscientisation* and how this evolved over the course of the project. This begins with posing *provocations* (statements that encourage critical dialogue), naming *contradictions* in the world, strengthening bonds of trust and empathy through *connected knowing*, and making *critical connections* to begin to challenge the dominant hegemonic order. In the final section (5.3), I examine the counter-narratives that evolved through this process, focusing on three primary themes relating to ‘Power’, ‘Agency’, and ‘Rights’. In analysing the first theme, I illustrate how

the Community Researchers shifted from a hegemonic to a contested conception of *power*. In the second, I examine how they transitioned from passive to active agents within HRE spaces. Finally, I explore the ways in which they began to re-frame rights claims through the lens of human experience rather than juridical frameworks.

## **5.1 Creating a ‘critical’ learning space**

The term ‘critical’ is used widely in both the literature on human rights and Community Development and means different things in different contexts. Ledwith (2020) sets out her criteria for what makes practice ‘critical’:

- i.* A grounding in the social justice values of *mutuality, reciprocity, human dignity, respect and trust*.
- ii.* A methodology that is collaborative and not controlling in order to change power relations.
- iii.* The use of non-coercive methods to diversify the way knowledge is created and shared.
- iv.* That this results in action for social change.

I outline below how these principles were applied in the formation of the learning space, the diversification of perspectives within it and decisions about the values framework that would guide the study. I argue that by establishing the space in this way, the CSO created an HRE forum that welcomed a wider diversity of voices and built on social justice principles, showing how these may be integrated within a critical model of HRE.

### **5.1.1 Forming the Learning Space**

The process of creating a learning space is important because the way that research is carried out determines the validity of its claims (McNiff, 2013). For Ledwith (2008; 2020), a learning approach that claims to make value-free judgements about objective ‘truths’ cannot provide critical forums to engage meaningfully with the realities of power relationships in pedagogical spaces. Instead, she advocates for a

participatory approach that matches the social justice values base of Community Development and engages directly with the complexities of the teacher-learner dynamic. As she describes it:

*“Community groups form the initial collective stage of the process where trust and cooperation create the context for reflection. The group is the basis of cultural belonging where a collective identity is formed, and from which a commitment to the process of change is much more likely to be sustained.”* (Ledwith, 2008, p. 94)

In this study, the learning space (in the form of the workshops as the main project activities) was developed through an initial period of consultation with an Advisory Group (outlined in Chapter Four). The purpose of the Advisory Group was to share *“advice, ideas, and critiques”* (Advisory Group Briefing Note) to help guide the selection process of the Community Researchers. The CSO justified its decision not to include lived experience perspectives in these initial conversations because it *“could not be adequately resourced and supported”* (Cath, PR, Exit Interview). This has some significance in the context of Fricker’s (2015) contention that institutions, including community organisations, can play a role in reproducing epistemic injustices as well as preventing them. By ‘epistemic injustice’, Fricker refers broadly to the dehumanising practices that exclude or silence marginalised voices in the process of creating and sharing knowledge. Despite certain limitations in the CSO’s approach, I reflected in my journal entries on the value of its commitment to engaging with ideas around *power* at this early stage:

*“I learnt that having discussions about power, even in spaces that are not fully representative, can be constructive and may contribute to a more diverse and supported space once the Community Researchers are selected.”* (Reflective Journal, Advisory Group Meeting 1)

I further remarked:

*“This is significant because in handling matters like representation and participation, CSOs need to ensure that their approach is carefully thought through and does not*

*perpetuate existing inequalities.”*

The recommendations of Advisory Group members during subsequent conversations re-enforced this approach. These included their encouragement of the CSO to reflect on the dynamics of power relationships and consider its responsibility to:

*“Take the tokensim out of diversity.”* (Member 1, AG)

*“Have awareness of the structural barriers that people face in communities that may affect participation.”* (Member 2, AG)

These informed the practical measures the CSO put in place to make participation more manageable for the Community Researchers. The provisional measures included gender sensitive budgeting and access to free counselling services. Cath (PR) also took the time to speak to each of the Community Researchers individually before the start of the project to identify any factors likely to limit their engagement or impact on personal wellbeing. Taken together, these measures show a recognition of the *“complexities of participation”* (Packham, 2008, p. 69) that impact members of a community in different ways and can result in exclusion when participants’ needs are ignored. Cath (PR) nonetheless acknowledged the wider challenges of creating a diverse learning space, pointing to her dependence on existing personal and professional relationships to identify project participants and describing the outreach as a relatively *“random”* process. Furthermore, she reflected on the CSO’s inability to support Community Researchers with complex learning needs due to lack of resourcing, explaining:

*“We simply didn’t have the time to work out how to do this in a genuinely empowering way.”* (Cath, PR, Exit Interview)

Despite these limitations, her reflections show a degree of *“critical responsiveness”* in the CSO’s approach, reflecting on the realities of power relationships in HRE spaces to ensure that offers of solidarity are genuine and inclusive (Hoover, 2013).

This highlights how the principle of *mutuality* can be adopted to deliver more equal outcomes while recognising that not every role is equal. Whereas the “*declarationist*” model is characterised by an imbalance in the teacher-learner dynamic, Community Development spaces embrace reciprocal learning and a diversity of roles. Ledwith (2020) conceives of community workers as *critical educators*, who have distinct responsibilities in pedagogical spaces. I recorded in my reflective journal how I saw this dynamic begin to take shape:

*“Through the conversations within the Advisory Group, I learnt that people may be involved in different capacities, in different roles and at different times and that this is fluid.”* (Reflective Journal, Advisory Group Meeting 2)

In this respect, the CSO’s emphasis on supporting diversity within the learning space itself goes some way towards democratising the process of knowledge production and contributing to a “*pluriversal*” epistemology in HRE (Zembylas, 2017c; Zembylas & Keet, 2019). Furthermore, the CSO’s explicit engagement with issues of power and the idea of addressing these inequalities through building mutual and reciprocal relationships suggests the value of Ledwith’s approach to developing an anti-oppressive model of CHRE. While the CSO acknowledged that there were certain limitations to its approach, the decision not to re-convene the Advisory Group once the Community Researchers had been selected suggests that its preliminary function was largely effective, helping to create a supported space that on longer required its strategic support.

### **5.1.2 Diversifying perspectives in HRE**

Once the Community Researchers had been selected, we used a series of facilitated exercises in the early sessions to explore how our individual experiences shaped our perspectives on human rights. The aim of these exercises was to use storytelling as a non-coercive method to “*encourage participation through listening and understanding*” (Ledwith, 2020, p. 100). We started in the first session by each responding to a series of prompt questions from Cath (PR), including:

*“What questions do you seek answers for?”*

*“What from your past experiences feel significant for your current project?”*

*“Whose voices are heard and not heard?”*

*“What does a fair society look like?”*

*“Does your project feel personal/professional/political?”*

As we took turns to share our stories, I heard the different ways in which members of the group experienced or witnessed discrimination. For the Community Researchers, this was drawn mainly from personal experiences. Seema (CR), for example, talked about what it is like being a refugee in the UK, Leah (CR) her experiences of discrimination as a transgender woman, Gerry (CR) her feelings of exclusion as a disabled person, and Paul (CR) his role as a community organiser challenging issues around economic inequality and mental health. This reflects a transition from Heron’s (1996) *experiential* knowing (which builds on direct experience) to forms of *presentational* knowing (that finds expression through storytelling forms). The perspectives of the Practitioner Researchers, on the other hand, were shaped primarily by our work with CSOs and outsider perspectives on discrimination. This illustrates a typical feature of CPAR projects, which, “[...] *generally and intentionally bring together people who are quite differently positioned in relation to the issue or dynamic they are studying.*” (Fine & Torre, 2006, p. 21)

This exercise in collective storytelling offered a way to welcome different perspectives within conversations about human rights and formed part of the process of creating *communicative space* to inform *communicative action* (Kemmis et al, 2013). To further explore the different perspectives within the group, Cath (PR) asked each of the Community Researchers to give presentations about their projects, encouraging them to be “*as creative or classic as you wish*” (Session 2). In response, they used a range of ways to communicate their perspectives, despite the limitations of using an online forum. These included power point presentations, photographs, videos, artwork, statistics and spoken word poetry. In a verse from Paul (CR)’s poem, in which he described the injustices in his neighbourhood, he wrote:

*“A right to live in safety without damage to their health,*

*A right to feel wanted, not just an addition to their landlord's wealth.*

*A right to have a voice, a right to use expression.*

*A right to stand up for what they believe in without fear of oppression.” (Session 2)*

All the participants commented on the illustrative power of spoken word poetry as a method that was highly communicative of the injustices experienced. As Seema (CR) put it:

*“I was hooked, I could see it and I could visualise it. I could see how so much is interlinked. Mental health, food security, the right to education and the intersectionality of all those different issues.” (Session 2)*

While this doesn't mean that creative methods are directly linked to critical reflection, it points to the value of using a range of methods *“beyond the written word”* (Ledwith, 2020, p. 138). These methods can help to re-define the power structures in pedagogical spaces by encouraging greater reflection on the lived experience of those involved. This is particularly effective when applied within a values framework that addresses the power dynamics of research in communities (Beebeejaun et al, 2014).

To bring a wider diversity of perspectives into the space, Cath (PR) invited ten Visiting Activists using human rights at a grassroots level to join selected sessions in research cycle one to talk about putting the PANEL principles into practice. She explained that the purpose of inviting the participation of Visiting Activists was to ensure, *“that we're really learning from each other”*, reflecting how the approach *“was really powerful with all of the diversity that brought”* (Exit Interview). This suggests that paying attention to *who* is included in these spaces is a first step to removing the obstacles posed by established power structures (Hoover, 2013). This was similarly illustrated through the process of co-creating a set of guiding principles for the project.

### **5.1.3 Critical analysis of values frameworks**

In the *“declarationist”* model, education is focused on increasing understanding of the law as it is, rather than inspiring action for social change. Keet (2010) associates

this with a “*crisis of values*” (p. 24) in HRE, contributing to calls for its “*renewal*”. Ledwith’s framework, by contrast, builds on a social justice values base of *mutuality* and *reciprocity*. These offer a set of guiding principles, rather than a static definition, which may be adapted and re-interpreted to progress theories on social justice appropriate to cultural context (McArthur, 2023). I argue that by moving away from a set of fixed legal principles and towards a process through which values are co-created, HRE can evolve from a “*declarationist*” model towards a more critical practice.

Once the Community Researchers had been selected, we used one of the early sessions to reflect on a set of core values to guide the project. We did this through a facilitated exercise in which we each gave a short presentation on the things in our lives that have influenced us and motivate our work. We then used a Jamboard (an online whiteboard) to record the values we each felt had emerged through the exercise in response to the following questions:

“*What do I need from my co-researchers?*”

“*How should we work?*”

Through this process, the project provided a forum in which to explore the idea that the cultural codes – or *signifiers* – of the dominant hegemony “*are open to re-articulation and contestation*” (Zembylas & Keet, 2019, p. 24). This was significant on a practical level, to avoid the unrealistic expectations that can materialise when communities and voluntary groups work collaboratively (Craig et al, 2011). Similarly, on a pedagogical one, rooting the values that guided the project in the lived experience of its participants rather than the mantra of human rights suggests a shift from a juridical conception of rights to a human-centred one.

Through this exercise, the Community Researchers discussed the key values that would guide how we would work together as a group, describing a learning space that they hoped would be, ‘supportive’, ‘honest’, ‘collective’, ‘creative’ and ‘committed’. The close alignment of these values with Ledwith’s principles of *respect*, *dignity*, *mutuality* and *reciprocity* points to the importance of a bottom-up approach to replace the hierarchies

in the “*declarationist*” model and the value of Community Development to embedding this within HRE. However, over the course of the project, I observed the distinct and often competing values systems in HRE spaces. In this case, between the CSO, the project funders, Community Researchers, and their wider communities. Cath (PR), for example, reflected at the end of the project (Session 12):

*“I feel this space that we’ve created together has been participatory along the lines of the principles that we’ve agreed.”*

But questioned:

*“Whether that translates into the work of the organisation and wider sector.”*

Seema (CR) responded by outlining some of the discrepancies she had started to identify between the values embedded within the learning space and those underpinning the CSO’s wider organisational culture. As an example, she talked about an application for funding that had been submitted by the CSO to extend the project:

*“I have not seen the application form that been written about us... What have you written about us and the process of [doing] this project? And how can we actually challenge who makes the decisions about where the information goes and how we describe our communities?”* (Session 12)

This points to the challenges of addressing the hierarchies in HRE spaces and the problems that can occur when programme evaluation becomes focused on monetising specific outcomes rather than the ethical protection of those involved (Hazenbergh & Paterson-Young, 2021). I acknowledge that this concern about being written about applies similarly to this thesis and I aimed to mitigate this through transparency about my role as a research partner and the reasons for my involvement with the project. It was made clear that my participation was subject to the permission of the Community Researchers, who could request that my involvement stop at any time and would have access to the final document. I

nonetheless suggest that the fact that this dialogue itself took place within an HRE forum shows a shared recognition of the existence of power relationships and the need for these dynamics to shift. Moreover, the delineation of the distinct and sometimes competing interests within HRE spaces is an important precondition to making sense of these imbalances in order to change them (Campbell, 2003). This was illustrated in reflective blog articles by Cath (PR) and Ellen (PR) at the end of the project, addressing what the CSO and the wider sector can learn about principles like *participation* and *empowerment*. Cath (PR), for example, described her perspective on the CSO's approach to *participation*:

*"It is not simply enough that our work aims to create greater participation for marginalised voices. It needs to be in all we do, participation is the method of getting there, the process we create together, the means through which we meet that aim."*  
(Blog, 28<sup>th</sup> March 2022)

This suggests a stronger conviction about the need to change organisational practice than she expressed during the discussions with the Advisory Group at the start of the project. I was similarly struck by how Ellen (PR) described her initial expectations about the project and how these evolved. She explained, for example, how at the start of the project, she anticipated:

*"The usual set up, a one-way process where I would give them my time, knowledge and expertise as they were called on."* (Blog, 13<sup>th</sup> April 2022)

But then reflecting on her learning as a co-researcher, shared:

*"I now find myself looking at where the power lies, what different characteristics or situations change power and how we can unlock power."*

Taken together, these reflections demonstrate self-reflexive critique by the Practitioner Researchers of both their own practice and the practice *architectures* of the CSO, pointing to the value of CPAR as a "*practice changing practice*" (Kemmis et al, 2013). This has significance considering Ledwith's overall critique of PAR for

losing sight of its emancipatory aims and suggests CPAR offers a useful approach in developing an anti-oppressive model of CHRE.

Overall, the co-creation and critical analysis of values frameworks allowed for recognition of the distinct and at times conflicting interests in HRE forums. This suggests that an *agonistic* process, through which discussions can evolve and accommodate conflict, can be incorporated into HRE as part of a dynamic practice (Honig, 2008; Hoover, 2013; Zembylas, 2017a; Zembylas & Keet, 2019). While this does not fully address the power dynamics in the “*declarationist*” model, critical enquiry into the contested nature of these relationships and their potential to evolve is significant for developing a critical model of HRE. Having reflected here on how the first stage in Ledwith’s framework, *voicing values*, informed the formation of the learning space, I use the next section to examine the learning process itself, focusing on the next two stages in Ledwith’s framework, *making critical connections* and *critiquing and dissenting*, which I explore through the process of *conscientisation*.

## 5.2 The process of conscientisation

Calls for the renewal of HRE build on the consensus within the critical discourse on its potential to either liberate or coerce. To shift from a “*declarationist*” model to one that creates the conditions for emancipation requires a pedagogy that offers space for critical reflection and the renegotiation of power relationships (Keet & Zembylas, 2019). I focus here on the Freirean concept of *conscientisation*, through which people become critically aware of the injustices in the world and seek to challenge them. This is achieved through *problematizing*, a problem-posing approach Freire (1970) proposes as an antidote to the coercive model of *banking* education.

Ledwith breaks the process of *problematizing* down into several interrelated practices. These begin with ‘naming’ the problem by using *provocations* to stimulate debate and identify contradictions in the world that need to be challenged. This creates bonds of trust and empathy that contribute to a state of *connected knowing*, through which members of a group gain a shared understanding about the problems they face. This in turn provides the context in which participants gain the ability to

make *critical connections*, contributing to a shift in consciousness to inform action for social change. I explore each of these stages below and argue that by adapting the tools and vocabulary of Community Development, HRE spaces can provide valuable forums to make sense of and re-negotiate power relationships.

### **5.2.1 Posing ‘provocations’**

In this study, we used a series of introductory exercises to embed a problem-posing approach in HRE. These included a ‘Desert Island Exercise’, in which the Community Researchers were asked how they would create a utopian society from scratch if stranded on a desert island. They also included a ‘Bill of Rights Exercise’, in which they were asked to propose ten key rights to ensure that everybody on their imagined island would be treated with dignity and respect. They were encouraged to use *provocations*, which initially took the form of general open-ended questions, such as:

“*What if we start from scratch?*” (Gerry, CR)

“*How would we build a new society?*” (Leah, CR)

“*What does it mean to live in a caring society?*” (Seema, CR)

“*How do you get buy in from people?*” (Paul, CR)

These prompted further critical reflection within the group on issues including competing rights, systemic inequality, and the limitations of the law, leading to more challenging provocations over the course of the project. As the project progressed, this problem-posing approach was more widely embedded within the format of the workshops themselves, which incorporated provocations into ice breaker exercises and reflection activities. These each encouraged the use questions to challenge everything from the approach taken by the CSO to human rights themselves. I saw how our collective appreciation of these discussions and the trust that we built encouraged us all to become more critical and adopt *provocations* regularly to stimulate debate. Examples of these included:

*“White people need to give us a seat at the table.”* (Seema, CR, Session 3)

*“We need to value relationships over money.”* (Jen, VA, Session 5)

*“People shouldn’t be limited to human rights as they exist.”* (Ellen, PR, Session 8)

This helped both to normalise critique and address the political context in which HRE takes place as a precondition to challenging dominant ideologies and the patterns of oppression they perpetuate (Bajaj, 2011).

### **5.2.2 Naming contradictions**

In addition to posing *provocations*, a second component to the process of *problematizing* involves *naming contradictions* in the world in order to transform it. I saw how adopting a problem-posing approach, rather than what Mayo (2013) describes as a “*problem-solving*” one (p. 11), enabled the Community Researchers to begin to question the circumstances that contribute to inequality to inform action to change them. This practice was embedded early in the project, when the group explored the PANEL principle of *legality* through a facilitated discussion about the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR). As Seema (CR) pointed out:

*“The black and white around the right to work, as if everyone has the right to work in the UK, doesn’t make sense. It’s not true.”* (Session 2)

Similarly, Gerry (CR) noted:

*“You have all these factors that siphon you off into poverty. Just because these rights are there, it doesn’t mean you’re going to be lifted out of it.”*

These were characteristic of multiple discrepancies identified by the Community Researchers when thinking about *legality*. They included concerns from Leah (CR) that legislation that could discriminate against transgender people could pass into UK law, Paul’s (CR) reflections on the ways that people in his community were

blocked by government policies from accessing employment and Gerry's (CR) description of the routine failures to recognise disabled people's rights in law and practice. These observations suggest an innate recognition of the contradiction O'Neill (2005) highlights between the promise of human rights as a set of normative entitlements, and people's lived experiences of marginalisation.

Through this process, the Community Researchers began to look past the day-to-day issues faced by people in their communities to critically evaluate their root cause (Mayo, 1997), which they saw as a fundamental contradiction between the oppression of marginalised communities by the systems set up to protect them. In this case, a human rights regime capable of exclusion and subjugation. As this dialogue evolved, the Community Researchers started to point to human rights' "*negative connotations*" (Paul, CR), "*bureaucratic barriers*" (Gerry, CR) and "*potential to disempower*" (Seema, CR). During the PANEL reflection exercise mid-way through the project, the discussion focused heavily on these contradictions. The Community Researchers questioned, for example, the value of *empowerment*:

*"There's still a problematic dynamic if one person is giving the power."* (Paul, CR, Session 7)

Where *accountability* lies:

*"I can see the accountability we have to our communities, but what about the systems that oppress the people we work with?"* (Seema, CR)

And the value of *legality*:

*"Just because something is legal, that doesn't mean it's moral and vice versa."* (Gerry, CR)

I also saw how the Community Researchers drew on the perspectives of the Visiting Activists to contextualise these contradictions as part of a wider series of systemic rights violations. In one example, Visiting Activists who joined the group to explore the PANEL principle of *accountability* shared their experiences of the failures in

government accountability mechanisms to protect themselves and family members. Rather than accepting these failures, the activists talked about how they used human rights principles as a starting point to challenge the systems that currently exist, explaining:

*“We’re finding increasingly that the accountability mechanisms of government are ignored, so we’re finding ways of creating our own accountability mechanisms.”*

(Lorna, VA, Session 4)

The activists went on to share examples of human rights media campaigns, community organising movements and social media strategies that had been successful in securing remedies for rights violations and influenced changes in institutional practices. In doing so, they illustrated how naming a contradiction could be the starting point to inform action to change it. I saw how this reflected a typical pattern during these sessions, whereby the Community Researchers would hear stories from Visiting Activists about the problems with human rights as they exist now, critically reflect on the validity of systems shaped by dominant ideologies and examine action-based strategies to change them. This suggests the value both of the *“language of critique”* and the *“language of possibility”* that characterises the Gramscian-Freirean tradition (Mayo, 2000). This is significant as a means of both recognising the tensions within the human rights discourse and offering a route forward, showing human rights as a dynamic narrative that remains open to interpretation.

### **5.2.3 Connected Knowing**

Ledwith’s theory on *connected knowing* uses dialogue to build bonds of trust and empathy between members of a group. In this project, we did this primarily through sharing personal stories and identifying the *generative themes* that developed from these narratives. I observed how common experiences within the group, particularly around poverty, exclusion, and mental health, made it easy for participants to empathise with one another’s perspectives and relate to these experiences. This in turn led to deeper expressions of empathy, building connections between different

experiences within the group. Seema (CR), for example, responded to Leah (CR)'s description of being excluded as a transgender woman by comparing it to her experience as a refugee in the UK:

*"I don't get it because it's different. But I do get it's about not wanting to hide because you shouldn't hide but still that feeling of wanting to hide to keep yourself safe."* (Session 6)

I observed how, over the course of the project, building bonds of empathy and making connections between one another's experiences enabled the Community Researchers to explore new ways of knowing as part of a holistic process of making sense of the world. This was highlighted particularly during the session on *participation*, during which the Community Researchers heard from Visiting Activists about how their experiences of social exclusion and bereavement led them to start human rights campaigns in their communities. Gerry (CR) reflected at the end of the session:

*"I feel more connected to those campaigns that inevitably arise from people's lived experience. I'm grateful to have this forum where we could explore those deep feelings in a safe space."* (Session 6)

This captures how moments of personal connection can help contextualise rights violations within a wider context. This is significant given Ledwith's (2020) suggestion that *critical consciousness* develops as people begin to see local experiences as part of a bigger political picture, rather than "*disconnected, random acts*" (p. 83). By using personal narratives as a starting point, I saw how this enabled the Community Researchers to make sense of human rights and formulate their own interpretation of the PANEL principles. In doing so, they transferred their *experiential knowledge* of the need in their communities to a *propositional* re-framing of these needs as rights within Heron's (1996) rubric. This illustrates how they began to re-define rights from both a collective and human-centred perspective, moving away from the juridical framing of the "*declarationist*" model.

#### 5.2.4 *Critical connections*

As participants build bonds of empathy and begin to understand one another's experiences, they gain the capacity to make *critical connections* and connect these experiences with the structural causes of oppression. In Ledwith's (2020) words:

*"[...] people make critical connections when they link cultural, political, social and economic issues with their everyday life experiences."* (p. 94)

The Visiting Activists created opportunities to draw these parallels by illustrating how their personal stories connected with wider forms of structural discrimination. This was well illustrated through a presentation about poverty discrimination, in which Visiting Activists shared first-hand accounts of how the stigma of poverty is re-enforced by social biases and cultural norms. One activist used the following analogy, which resonated strongly within the group:

*"It is like a ladder. Imagine all your dreams at the top and you're standing at the bottom holding too many things. Try climbing that ladder to the top. Then you see all these people with their hands free and they climb the ladder and they reach their hopes and their dreams. And then they look down at you as if [to say], what's wrong with you? Sometimes that's what being in poverty feels like."* (Ali, VA, Session 5)

This expresses the relational nature of *power*, residing not in the individual or in a static form but in the shifting dynamic between entities (Foucault, 1977). The Visiting Activists went on to illustrate how these dynamics, which inform subjective experiences of oppression, are shaped by cultural context, and expressed through the dominant *hegemony* (Gramsci, 1971). To do so, they pointed to examples in the media, television, public policy and cultural norms that perpetuate negative stereotypes of people in poverty and contribute to experiences of marginalisation. In one example, the Visiting Activists described the negative messaging in the 2014 Channel Four documentary series *Benefits Street*, which documented the lives of residents in an area of the UK where newspapers at one time reported ninety percent of residents were dependent on welfare benefits. As Lorna (VA) described it,

the focus in the documentaries on residents' criminality and lack of motivation to find work "*make it seem like the poor are a blight on society*". Another example given was the national campaign run by the UK government targeted directly at benefit 'cheats' in nearly fifty towns and cities across the UK. As well as using discriminatory language, the campaign was also fronted by what Debra (VA) described as "*pictures that dehumanise us.*"<sup>6</sup>

The Visiting Activists connected these dominant narratives with their personal experiences of poverty discrimination. They shared a range of contexts in which this occurs, including interactions with neighbours, landlords, teachers, and public bodies. One gave an example of how this prejudice has become embedded within the institutional cultures of the services designed to support them:

*"An NSPCC report came out that said no birthday party or no holidays for the child can be classed as low-level neglect. But you can't do that if you don't have the means to. As a parent in poverty, it is seen as symptomatic that I am unable to care for my children."* (Jen, VA, Session 5)

Another described the prejudice her child experienced in the classroom:

*"Teachers are still asking children to write about what they did on their summer vacation. My daughter wrote about what she would have liked to do. The teacher got cross with her. But there is only so much you can write about the park around the corner."* (Lorna, VA, Session 5)

Throughout these accounts, I observed the confidence with which the Visiting Activists described their experiences as forms of discrimination and violations of rights. Some of the ways in which they described this in the session include:

*"Your rights are violated."* (Ali, VA)

*"Your humanity is stripped away."* (Debra, VA)

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<sup>6</sup> [Campaign says no compromise in crackdown on benefit fraud - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/news/campaign-says-no-compromise-in-crackdown-on-benefit-fraud)

*“It’s discrimination against you as a family.”* (Lorna, VA)

*“You end up enslaved.”* (Vicky, VA)

I saw that as the Community Researchers heard these perspectives, they responded to being “*seen and validated*” (Gerry, CR), and how this helped “*connect up the dots*” (Leah, CR). In particular, I saw how this prompted them to contextualise their own experiences within a wider political context and make sense of them as rights violations. Paul (CR), for example, reflected on how seeing national news reports of NHS failures to support bereaved families made him start to see the personal stories he hears day to day as a grief counsellor as part of a more systemic violation of rights. Seema (CR) similarly articulated her frustrations at feeling ignored in community consultation meetings and how she was now starting to connect this with the systemic exclusion of marginalised communities from decision-making processes that affect them. As Gerry (CR) put it:

*“This very much connects with my own lived experience especially listening to [Vicky, VA] – that was very raw. In terms of my organisation and campaigns, it’s about poverty, but also discrimination.”* (Session 5)

She concluded:

*“[It’s about] making sure that we share these stories of lived experience [and] changing how they inform policy, so people’s rights are recognised.”*

This demonstrates the value of using dialogue as a tool within a problem-posing approach to develop *critical consciousness*. Through these interactions, the *experiential* and *presentational* knowledge of the Visiting Activists and Community Researchers, rooted in personal narratives and communicated in storytelling forms, evolved into forms of *propositional* and *practical* knowledge, as they explored new theoretical and practical ways of approaching human rights through the lens of the PANEL principles (O’Brien & O’Shea, 2011). This shows the need for a discursive dialogue about human rights (Ife et al, 2022); one that recognises the paradoxes in them and the complexities of the world in which they take shape (Zembylas; 2017a).

In this section, I have used the second and third stages in Ledwith's framework to explore how the Community Researchers used *provocations* to identify the *contradictions* in the world around them, connect these with wider experiences of oppression through *connected knowing*, and start to make *critical connections* to drive action for social change. This points to the possibility of moving away from a "declarationist" model, focused on the passive acceptance of human rights standards, and towards a more dynamic practice that embraces self-reflection and critique. In the next section, I explore how this contributed to three emerging counter-narratives, drawing on the next two stages in Ledwith's framework, *imagining alternatives* and *creating counter-narratives*.

### **5.3 Emerging counternarratives**

In Ledwith's (2020) model for critical praxis, she states, "once we begin to question, we see things differently" (p. 247). In the final part of this chapter, I focus on how the Community Researchers started to "see things differently" as the process of *problematizing* contributed to the development of *critical consciousness*. I focus here on changes in relation to three key themes, connected to the concept of 'Power', their ideas about 'Agency', and the theory of 'Rights'. I look in particular at the ways in which they re-conceptualised power relationships to recognise their dynamic nature and the potential for re-negotiation, re-positioned themselves as active agents in HRE spaces, and re-theorised human rights from a juridical framework to a human-centred practice.

#### **5.3.1 Re-imagining 'power': From 'hegemonic' to 'negotiated'**

Over the course of this study, the Community Researchers re-conceptualised *power* from a hegemonic force, expressed through static juridical rights frameworks, to a series of negotiated relationships, recognising a wider diversity of voices. As they connected their *experiential knowledge* of marginalisation with new forms of *propositional knowledge* about its root causes, I saw how they began to acknowledge the hegemonic power structures that sustain the international human rights regime. This is significant as it is only by engaging with the structures and

relationships of power that communities can confront and challenge the oppression they experience (Butcher, 2016).

During the early sessions, the Community Researchers explored identities of difference based on factors such as gender, ethnicity, age, class and disability and expressed the ways in which these negatively informed their experiences through illustrations of prejudice, ableism, sexism, racism and transphobia in their day to day lives. I saw that as they started to make critical connections between these experiences and wider political issues of discrimination and marginalisation, they began to make sense of the multi-dimensional nature of *power* and the intersectional way in which this informs experiences of oppression. I further saw that while the Community Researchers used *intersectionality* as an analytical tool to make sense of their differences, they simultaneously embraced it as a foundation to build alliances of solidarity. As Paul (CR) put it:

*“It is really interesting to identify where there is intersectionality and where there are opportunities for allyship.”* (Session 6)

This encapsulates what Hill Collins & Bilge (2020) describe as the fundamentally *relational* nature of intersectional enquiry. The suggestion that intersectional analysis helps to nurture relationships of solidarity is significant in challenging the binary notion of the ‘oppressor’ and ‘oppressed’ and moving instead towards a collective epistemology that recognises the diversity in human experience. This provides a critical foundation to challenge the dominant narrative, focused on the *powerlessness* of marginalised communities, and replace it with a counternarrative of *“powerfulness”*, driven by bonds of solidarity within collective movements for change (Ledwith, 2020). Gerry (CR), for example, described in her exit interview how she had experienced this shift:

*“This project makes us very powerful in this space... it’s more powerful that a minority of people at the top.”*

The Community Researchers’ overall approach to the PANEL principle of *empowerment* provides a good illustration of the way in which they inverted the

hierarchical nature of power relationships in HRE to recognise different sources of power. Paul (CR), for example, summarised why he initially found the idea challenging when thinking about human rights:

*“Empowerment implies you can take it away... it implies that you are above everyone else and we should be on a level playing field.”* (Session 7)

This recognises the implicit imbalance in power relationships in HRE and captured a collective sentiment within the group that human beings cannot be empowered by others when the power dynamic is unequal and non-reciprocal. However, as they began to conceptualise *power* as a dynamic relationship, open to re-negotiation and strengthened through bonds of solidarity, the Community Researchers simultaneously re-defined what they considered to be ‘legitimate’ sources of power. This included challenging the “*hierarchies*” (Gerry, CR), “*negative power structures*” (Leah, CR) and “*physical and cultural barriers*” (Seema, CR) they had started to associate with the dominant human rights narrative. This echoes the critiques of the “*declarationist*” model and routine institutionalisation of hierarchical power relationships within HRE (Kayum Ahmed, 2017). When we discussed the concepts of *power* and *empowerment* during the PANEL reflection exercise at the end of the project, we began with a series of provocations including:

*“Is the power actually at Westminster?”* (Cath, PR, Session 12)

*“What power do we hold in our communities?”* (Gerry, CR, Session 12)

*“Is our problem with ‘empowerment’ more about what it means to others than what it means to us?”* (Seema, CR, Session 12)

These prompted reflections on different sites and sources of power and recognition of the Community Researchers’ intrinsic power as individuals and in their communities. Gerry (CR), for example, described how she felt they had each discovered their “*inherent power*” as individuals and allies. Leah (CR) similarly emphasised the positive experience of “*being empowered by your peers*”. This suggests an overall resistance to a conception of *power* as a coercive relationship,

implying force 'over' others, and a closer alignment with Thompson's (2007) conception of *power* as a feeling of personal agency derived from a power 'within'. The Community Researchers consequently used a problem-posing approach to critique the restrictive and oppressive effects of hegemonic power relationships within the "*declarationist*" model to move closer towards a critical alternative (Coysh, 2017). Furthermore, by conceptualising the relational nature of *power* and recognising the power 'within' themselves and their communities, they open the possibility for the re-negotiation of power relationships within HRE forums to develop an anti-oppressive model of CHRE.

### **5.3.2 Re-imagining 'agency': From 'passive' to 'active' agents**

During the early sessions, I saw how the Community Researchers broadly positioned themselves as outsiders both to HRE spaces and the systems they seek to change. They described, for example, how they did not see their activism as "*human rights work*" (Leah, CR), considered human rights to be a "*new vocabulary*" (Paul, CR) and expressed hopes of learning the "*right*" (Gerry, CR) way to have conversations about human rights. To me, this showed an instinctive predisposition to accept the dominant narrative, in which HRE exists to promote the acceptance of human rights as universals, rather than to challenge and re-shape them. However, as the Community Researchers began to critique the PANEL approach, a resistance to this narrative emerged, forming what Keet & Zembylas (2019) describe as the basis for a new model of CHRE to evolve.

Through processes of critical enquiry, I saw how the Community Researchers started to re-evaluate their positions as passive recipients of knowledge and re-position themselves as critics, observers, and contributors to a new narrative on human rights. Hearing the accounts from Visiting Activists about the tactics they used to subvert the power dynamics in human rights forums contributed to this transition. These included, for example, the description of a rights campaign led with *provocations* such as:

*"What happens if you tell the other side of the story and ask the people actually affected?"* (Niamh, VA, Session 4)

*“What if we looked at the contributions of people in poverty?”* (Debra, VA, Session 5)

This points to the opportunities to adjust the roles of ‘teacher’ and ‘learner’ within HRE and becomes significant considering Leah’s (CR) observation that, when evaluating claims to knowledge, *“it depends on who is doing the talking”* (Session 12). I saw how, through embedding the Community Development principles of *mutuality* and *reciprocity* and adopting a collaborative methodology *“in order to change power relations”* (Ledwith, 2020, p. 138), the Community Researchers started to use the learning space to do the *“talking”*. This new sense of ownership informed the Community Researchers’ decision to use the second half of the project to design a human rights board game centred on the theme of *‘Claiming the Right to Talk About Rights’* (which I examine in Chapter Six.)

The Community Researchers gave a range of reasons for choosing this theme. Seema (CR) and Paul (CR), for example, expressed how making sense of human rights helped them to identify rights violations in their communities and expressed a desire to create community HRE spaces to support others to do the same. Gerry (CR) reflected on how the vocabulary of human rights helped to validate the innate understanding disabled people have of their rights and could strengthen their position as ‘rights holders’ in negotiations with ‘duty bearers’ and policy makers. This reflects a significant shift from their initial feelings as outsiders in HRE spaces, instead giving rights meaning through the lens of lived experience. In doing so, the Community Researchers demonstrated the power of people to liberate themselves as they transitioned from passive listeners to active learners and co-investigators.

While each of the participants engaged with ideas about ‘agency’ and ‘ownership’ in different ways, Seema (CR)’s reflections on her learning journey provides a good example of the transition from passive to active agents in human rights forums, initially indicating:

*“I have never used the term human rights”* (Session 1)

Later in the project, she reflected:

*“My confidence in using human rights has improved but I would still like to gain some more knowledge.”* (Session 8)

By the end of the project, she expressed her perception of who contributes knowledge in HRE as follows:

*“What does [the CSO] learn from this process? It’ll be really interesting to see what it takes forward in terms of working with communities like ours and very powerful individuals like ourselves.”* (Session 12)

This overt commitment to claiming agency is significant because it raises important questions about whose voices are heard within the human rights narrative and the pedagogical obstacles to inverting the conservatism of the “*declarationist*” model. This speaks to Keet & Zembylas’s (2019) argument for the need for a “*translation*” of the different ways in which people experience oppression in order to show that there is no “*universal epistemology of human rights but rather plural epistemologies of human rights practices that are interdependent*” (p. 152). As such, the Community Researchers’ shift in *critical consciousness* in relation to *agency* aligns with the pluralisation of epistemologies necessary to move from a “*declarationist*” practice towards a critical and productive one.

### **5.3.3 Re-imagining ‘rights’: From ‘juridical’ to ‘human-centred’**

The dominant human rights narrative, which underpins the “*declarationist*” model, derives its legitimacy from international institutions and juridical frameworks. By adopting the PANEL approach, in which *legality* forms one of the five core principles, the CSO initially replicated a narrative centred on human rights as a law-based practice (and HRE as a forum in which to gain legal knowledge.) As the project progressed, I saw how the Community Researchers began to critique the principle of *legality* and move instead towards a model capable of recognising the intersectional experiences of oppression and the ways in which these shape and legitimise claims to rights.

This was illustrated by the Community Researchers' early opposition to the centrality of *legality* within the PANEL approach, resisting its association with ideas like “*enforcement*”, “*control*” and “*coercion*”. Seema (CR), however, summarised both its strengths and weaknesses from the perspective of her own experience:

*“I can understand why it is so important to have a law, because the law that this country has – even though it is outdated and needs to be rewritten and changed – it allowed me to seek asylum in the UK, so that law was so important.”* (Session 7)

This illustrates why, instead of rejecting the principle of *legality* outright, the Community Researchers instead identified opportunities for law reform, dialogue with law-makers and wider community education, paralleling with Freire's calls to work *within* as well as *outside* the system (Mayo, 2000). From this perspective, the group coalesced around the idea that the law could be a tool for social change but that forums to engage with and address its shortcomings are integral to the creation of counter-narratives that build on a contextualised understanding of human suffering rooted in lived experience (Baxi, 2007). This was a key motivation in the decision to dedicate the second half of the project to designing a board game to use as a social change tool to use in their communities. Cath (PR) described the purpose of the game to:

*“Make human rights sound like it's people talking about life and not the law being read to people.”* (Mid-way Interview)

This reflects the deliberate inversion of the juridical framing of the “*declarationist*” model to build a new counternarrative based on people's lived experience. By the end of the project, Ellen (PR) described how she observed this shift in a reflective blog article:

*“I have seen the limitations of human rights law debated, illustrated in practice and a refusal to be curtailed by the letter of the law in its current form.”* (13<sup>th</sup> April, 2022)

This illustrates how a shift from a juridical perspective on rights to one informed by

human experiences enables HRE to create spaces within which these standards can be critiqued and evolve (Keet & Zembylas, 2019).

#### **5.3.4 Analysis of counter-narratives ('Power', 'Agency', 'Rights')**

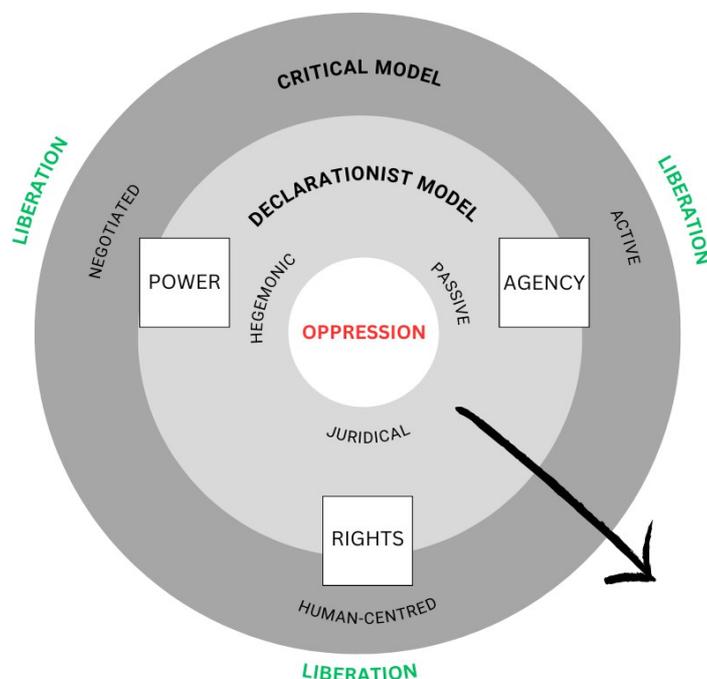
In this section, I have illustrated how the critical connections formed through collective dialogue fostered the *critical consciousness* Ledwith (2005) conceives of as vital precondition for social change and spearheaded new counternarratives in relation to ideas about 'Power', 'Agency', and 'Rights'. This is significant in developing a critical model of HRE because, as Zembylas (2017d) states:

*"A 'critical' or 'transformative' HRE, therefore, needs to offer a counter-narrative of human rights that shows the struggles of indigenous people against slavery, racial domination and the colonial enterprise."* (p. 494)

In the UK context, I have illustrated how the Community Researchers started to develop new narratives that challenge these hierarchies. This included re-positioning themselves as active agents in HRE spaces, making sense of the complex nature of power relationships and the possibilities for self-empowerment, and re-theorising human rights from a juridical framework to a human-centred practice that acknowledges the potential to challenge and shape the law within HRE. As this dialogue was on-going over the course of the project, I kept notes in my reflective journal to identify themes as they started to develop. It is worth noting that the counter-narratives presented did not evolve in parallel. For example, the Community Researchers expressed resistance to the idea of hegemonic *power* and a juridical conception of rights at relatively early stages in the project, while their ideas on *agency* and *participation* developed more gradually. There were also other themes, such as *resilience*, *mental health*, and *identity*, which I either amalgamated within these three themes or were not sufficiently developed to include.

To make sense of these narratives, I created a visual model, including the three themes and the ways in which the Community Researchers re-interpreted their meaning from a critical perspective (Fig. 3). In this image, the "*declarationist*" model is positioned in the centre along with the key terms that describe the dominant

narrative. On the outer circle, I illustrate the counter-narratives that evolved and that I argue characterise a critical model of HRE. I draw an arrow from the oppression of the “*declarationist*” model to the liberation of the critical alternative to illustrate its emancipatory vision and provide a blueprint for critical practitioners.



**Fig. 3** A digital diagram of sketches from my reflective journal on emerging counter-narratives (‘Power’, ‘Agency’, and ‘Rights’). Source: Reflective Journal.

## Conclusion

In this chapter, I have outlined Ledwith’s (2020) criteria for creating ‘critical’ learning spaces and examined how these were approached in this study. In the first section, I looked at the early stages of the project and how a values-led practice based on non-coercive methods of enquiry was established. I used the second section to analyse the different stages in the process of *conscientisation*, showing how the Community Researchers *problematized* ideas about human rights and began to formulate counter-narratives. In the final section, I outlined three core themes relating to ‘Power’, ‘Agency’, and ‘Rights’, describing how counter-narratives evolved within each. In the next chapter, I use these themes as an analytical lens to examine the ways in which this led to transformative action for social change, applying the final

two stages in Ledwith's framework, *connecting and acting* and *cooperating for a common good*.

## Chapter Six – Transformative Action Through HRE

### 6. Introduction

In this chapter, I analyse how the methods of critical enquiry outlined in Chapter Five contributed to transformative action for social change. While ‘transformation’ means different things in different contexts, I align this study with the *critical* orientation, which recognises the explicitly political agenda of HRE and sits in critical relationship with human rights universals. I connect this with Ledwith’s (2001) view that education for transformation must be rooted in the idea of *praxis*, combining theory with practice to challenge the injustices in the world. I suggest that the integrated notion of *praxis* is valuable to the critical conception of HRE given the recognised need to narrow the gap between theory and practice to develop a viable alternative to the “*declarationist*” model (Coysh, 2017).

I organise the chapter into three parts, which examine three distinct modalities of transformative action. First (6.1), I examine the process of designing a human rights board game as a learning tool to help players ‘*Claim the Right to Talk About Rights*’, using the three themes set out in Chapter Five relating to ‘Power’, ‘Agency’ and ‘Rights’ as an analytical lens. Second (6.2), I explore the ways in which the Community Researchers engaged with the PANEL principles as a pedagogical framework and re-interpreted these to make sense of human rights in a community setting. In the final section (6.3), I examine my own learning journey and that of the CSO, exploring the ways in which this project nurtured cooperative enquiry:

“...*in which relations are reciprocal rather than dominant, and where the humility of the educator enables a co-educator/co-learner relationship to flourish.*” (Ledwith, 2020, p. 110)

#### 6.1 Designing a human rights board game

During research cycle one, the Community Researchers reflected critically on a human rights-based approach by exploring each of the PANEL principles with

Visiting Activists over the course of six online sessions. Through a series of discussions, they decided to dedicate research cycle two to the design of a social change tool to start conversations about human rights in their communities. Inspired by a story from one of the Visiting Activists about how they had used a game of Snakes and Ladders to start a conversation about poverty inequality with policy makers, the Community Researchers decided to design a human rights board game to make conversations about human rights more accessible. The game's overall aim is to encourage players to '*Claim the Right to Talk About Rights*', building on Community Researchers' reflections on the barriers that often exclude people from these conversations. As Leah (CR) described it:

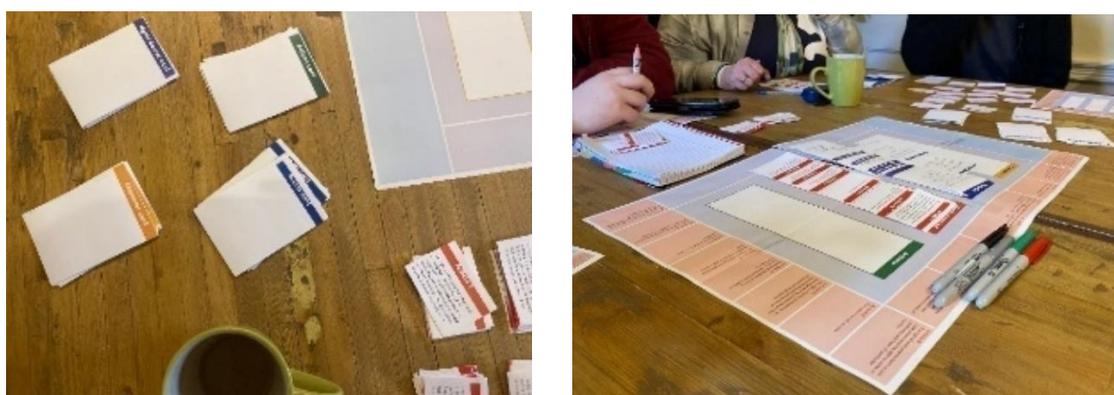
*"It's very easy with human rights to get bogged down in details and legal jargon. And the board game is essentially a way to try and subvert that, to look at human rights in a different way, in a way that is a bit more accessible, a bit more easily approachable."* (Exit Interview)

This highlights an explicit resistance to the juridical conception of rights and instead illustrates a commitment to embedding the Community Development principles of *mutuality* and *reciprocity* within the game. The design process involved five 90-minute online sessions, which formed the second research cycle, followed by a focus group with five Visiting Activists at the end of the project to play a prototype of the game (Fig. 4). Given that the Community Researchers did not have the opportunity to play it with members of their communities until after the end of the project, I do not consider this in my analysis.

To play the game itself, players create 'characters' by selecting different characteristics based on factors such as gender, age and ethnicity. They can either choose to use pre-assigned 'Character Profile Cards' or create their own. The players then take turns drawing 'Events Cards' from the deck. These describe a change in the external environment that will impact them in different ways, depending on their characteristics, such as a change to government policy or community services. The players use the International Covenant on Economic Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) to establish how they can navigate the events based

on their allocated characteristics. Through this process, players learn how different characteristics interact to inform people's life experiences, the obstacles they face in asserting their rights, the avenues that exist to promote them and the aspects of the system that need to be changed as new knowledge is created as the game is played.

In the previous chapter, I identified the evolution of counter-narratives in relation to three core themes: 'Power', 'Agency', and 'Rights' and described how the Community Researchers' views evolved over the course of the project. Below, I use these themes as an analytical lens through which to examine how these changes in perspective led to transformative action through the design of the board game. While it is important to acknowledge that there are limitations to the claims that can be made about its value in more diverse communities, I argue that it has potential to foster critical dialogue and transformative action in the context of the Community Researchers' projects and local setting.



**Fig. 4** Community Researchers' board game. Source: Focus Group (22/02/2022)

### **6.1.1 Power: From a 'hegemonic' force to a 'negotiated' relationship**

The Community Researchers' decision to create a game in which players '*Claim the Right to Talk About Rights*' shows a commitment to challenging the "*hierachical pedagogy*" associated with the "*declarationist*" model (Okafor & Agbakwa, 2001, p. 582). The instructions to players aim to do so by tasking them with the re-negotiation of power relationships as they attempt to realise their rights. These set out:

*"All players will start the game with the same power. They will have opportunities to*

*gain more power and share power with other players if necessary. However, players may also lose power as the system takes things away from them in order to tighten its control.”* (Human Rights Board Game, Instructions)

This demonstrates both the importance of naming the hegemonic nature of *power* and a recognition that it represents a relational force that may change over time and is open to re-negotiation. This negotiation takes place as the players draw ‘Events Cards’, which present scenarios through which to analyse the changing power dynamics between the players and the ‘System’. The Community Researchers chose to create four categories of ‘Event’ likely to impact the players in different ways. These included ‘Random Events’, ‘System Events’, ‘Power Events’, and ‘Legal Events’ (E.g. Fig. 5).



**Fig. 5** Example ‘Event Cards’. Source: Board Game Prototype.

A ‘Random Event’, for example, describes something outside the players’ control, such as an illness, while a ‘System Event’ relates instead to a change initiated by the ‘System’, such as the introduction of a new law or policy. Leah (CR) explained the rationale for these categories:

*“To get people’s brain in gear to think about power differently than they had before.”*  
(Session 10)

The instructions guide how *power* is negotiated using the 'Events Cards' stating:

*"Together players discuss the impact of the event, the rights that might be violated, who has responsibility to fulfil your rights (the 'duty bearers') and what actions you will take to make the situation better. Hold the system to account to win a better future for all!"* (Human Rights Board Game, Instructions)

This shows how the game can be used not only to recognise and make sense of the changing nature of power relationships but provides a forum in which to actively challenge dominant power structures. In doing so, it recognises the need for conflict in an *agonistic* process of rights negotiation to re-formulate HRE as a change-driven practice (Zembylas, 2017a, Hoover, 2013, Honig, 2008). Furthermore, the decision to centre the game on dialogue between the players creates a discursive forum based on *mutuality* and *reciprocity* in which conversations about rights may move away from the conservatism of the "*declarationist*" model and towards a more dynamic practice, integrating theory with action to lead to changes in the status quo (Keet, 2012).

When the Community Researchers played the game with five Visiting Activists in a focus group at the end of the project, I saw the ways in which the 'Events' prompted discussions about the nature of *power*, the critical connections between different players' experiences and the contradictions within the system as players gained and lost power as the game was played. If the board game can be seen a microcosm of the real-world context in which rights are negotiated, this dialogue points to its value as a forum for the beginnings of hegemonic thought. The instructions conclude that the aim of the game is to gain more power than the 'System', explaining:

*"The game is won once all the events have been played and the players have more power than the system...The game is lost if the players no longer have any power."* (Human Rights Board Game, Instructions)

This builds on the Community Researchers' recognition of the knowledge already embedded in their communities about identities of difference and experiences of

injustice. By providing a forum in which to embrace this knowledge ‘*within*’ (Thompson, 2007), the game can be used to facilitate a move from a position of *powerlessness* to “*powerfulness*” as players ‘*Claim the Right to Talk About Rights*’ (Ledwith, 2020). While the transformative effects of starting conversations about *power* in this way is likely to vary depending on the community context, I argue that the game is nonetheless explicit in its aims to encourage politically driven narratives that challenge the dominant human rights narrative.

### **6.1.2 Agency: Engaging ‘passive’ audiences as ‘active’ players**

By taking inspiration from the way in which a group of Visiting Activists used a game of Snakes and Ladders to influence policy makers, I suggest that the Community Researchers were motivated by the prospect of taking ownership of conversations about human rights and re-contextualising these within their lived experience. At the start of the design process, they described the challenges they faced in starting conversations about human rights in their communities, naming a combination of practical barriers (such as access to education, legal resources, and local partnerships) and psychological barriers (such as confidence, trust and motivation.) This informed their desire to design a game that they hoped would:

*“Explore how to talk about rights in a way that feels inclusive and accessible.”* (Gerry, CR, Exit Interview)

This aligns with Ledwith’s (2020) ideas about *knowledge democracy*, where knowledge is not guarded by elites but created collectively. Seema (CR) summarised the group’s overall hope that the board game would be:

*“For people who don’t talk about human rights because they don’t have the tools or motivation to talk about it – and who don’t have the capacity to have the conversation [to then] start a conversation about human rights irrespective of language or ability.”* (Session 9)

The Community Researchers initially explored the practical ways in which they could

make the game user-friendly, describing their hopes to make it “*light-hearted*”, “*playful*”, “*fun*”, and “*engaging*” while taking into account players’ different accessibility needs. The decision to use a discursive format was also used to stimulate inclusive dialogue. The instructions, for example, set out how:

*“Each player takes a turn to chat about how the event would impact upon their character. Players should start a discussion about what happened? Whose rights have been affected by this? Which rights exactly? Who has not been affected? What can we do? What would this look like?”* (Human Rights Board Game, Instructions)

This contains aspects of the work of Augusto Boal (2000), who used performance to capture scenes from everyday life to animate political questions and connects similarly with Freire’s concept of community educators as ‘animateurs’, “*working in a mutual way with participants to stimulate critical dialogue*” (Ledwith, 2016, p. 55). The Community Researchers encouraged this by incorporating flexibility into the ways in which the game could be played. As Gerry (CR) described it:

*“It could be used by any group. It could happen in multiple iterations with different end points and different end goals. You’re almost co-producing the game by playing it. It becomes what it is by doing it.”* (Session 11)

By imagining the players as “*co-producers*”, the game encourages a shift from the “*declarationist*” model, in which legal standards determine the content of the curriculum (Adami, 2014a) and towards a model in which the players begin to recognise their positions as active agents in shaping the meaning of rights. This was particularly evident when the Community Researchers tested a prototype of the game with Visiting Activists at the end of the project. I saw that although the Visiting Activists initially showed some reticence about contributing to conversations about human rights, as they played the game, they became active participants in the dialogue. This was illustrated by the questions that arose as the game was played, which included:

*“Can we make this an open-source resource that groups can access and then make*

*their own? Can we use it to educate local authorities about the impact of their decisions on people's access to rights? Can we take this to our own communities to develop our own campaigns for action? Can we use this a tool to help others claim the right to talk about rights?"* (Focus Group Record, Cath, PR)

While this does not show direct action for social change, it demonstrates how Martin et al's (2007) suggestion that even "small acts", such as playing a board game, can contribute wider questions "that have the potential to foster social change" (p. 79). This suggests the potential to use the game to enhance the agency of those new to HRE by making conversations more accessible and combining theory and practice so that ideas about rights become less abstract. Where this can be done, I suggest that social change tools such as these may contribute to the *pluralisation* of the human rights narrative necessary for a critical model of HRE to take shape (Keet, 2012; Zembylas, 2017c; Keet & Zembylas, 2019).

### **6.1.3 Rights: From a 'juridical' concept to a 'human-centred' perspective**

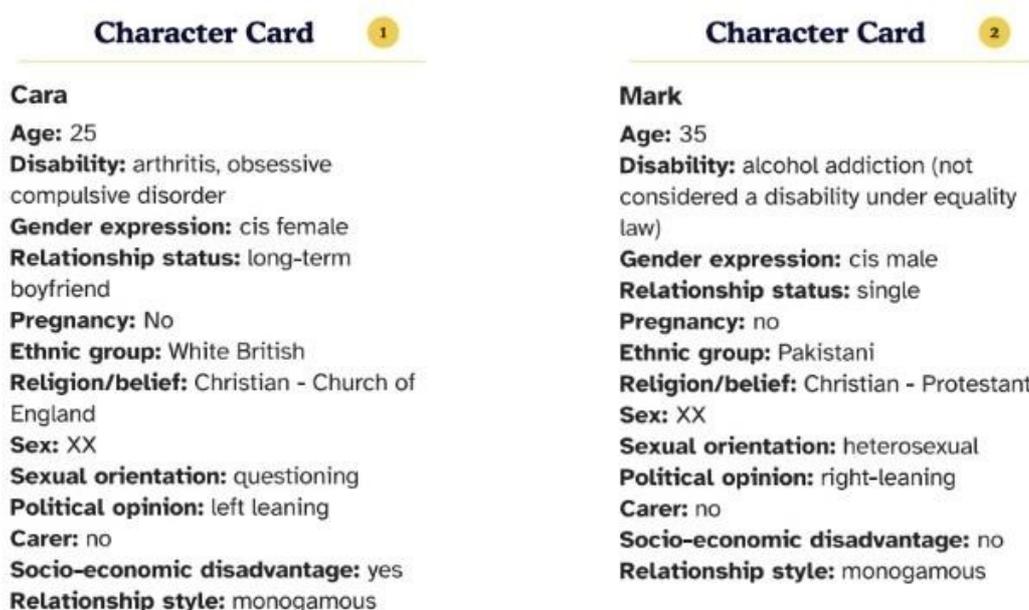
From the outset, the Community Researchers chose the theme of '*Claiming the Right to Talk About Rights*' to shift from a juridical narrative to one rooted in the personal perspectives of individual players. As these discussions developed, I saw how this signalled a deeper commitment diversifying conversations about human rights. As Gerry (CR) described it:

*"It is not just about having the 'Right to Talk About Rights' but about promoting discussion about how we experience our lives or our identities."* (Session 10)

This was facilitated by the format of the game itself. In its final prototype, it included twenty 'Character Profile Cards' combining fifteen categories of characteristics designed to intersect to inform how the player experiences the world. As a starting point, the Community Researchers used the nine protected characteristics set out in the Equality Act 2010 but moved beyond these to create a list of categories designed to be more inclusive of the different ways people experience oppression. This included new categories such as 'Carer Status', 'Socio-economic Status', and

‘Relationship Style’. This expanded list, informed by the Community Researchers’ discussions about the different elements that make up people’s identities, is significant in light of Bajaj et al’s (2016) contention that to be *transformative*, HRE must “*take into consideration the distinct social locations and forms of marginalisation faced by different groups.*” (p. 15)

The Community Researchers thought carefully about how to use the ‘Character Profiles’ to diversify conversations about human rights. They decided, for example, that players could be randomly allocated ‘Character Profile Cards’ (Fig. 6) to play the game from perspectives that were not their own.



**Fig. 6** Example ‘Character Cards’. Source: Board Game Prototype.

Gerry (CR) described the purpose of this:

*“To feed into our understanding of how different people experience rights in their different lives and think about complexities that we hadn’t thought of.”* (Session 9)

This encourages players to think outside their own lived experience and accommodate for their “*blind spots*”, a term bell hooks (1994, p. 126) uses to describe the limitations in thought when challenging systems of domination from the

narrow perspective of an individual's personal experience and ignoring that of others. This serves a dual purpose of both strengthening bonds of empathy between players to nurture *connected knowing* within a group and encouraging those in positions of privilege to question the validity of what they assume to 'know' (Zembylas, 2013). The board game encourages players to use these new perspectives re-shape how they see the world, leading to changes in how they act in the world.

In this context, the Community Researchers' decision to allow players to build their own 'Character Profiles' to bring their personal experiences to the game was significant. As Leah (CR) described it:

*"Putting it in the context of their own lives and how rights are relevant to them."*  
(Session 9)

This desire to recognise the diversity amongst players points to an epistemic shift in the typical processes of knowledge creation in HRE, recognising, as Seema (CR) put it, that:

*"Knowledge doesn't sit with anyone but can be shared."* (Exit Interview)

This recognition that knowledge has no single source and may be collectively constructed suggests the possibility of embracing diverse perspectives that connect to form of the *"plural epistemologies"* that characterise transformational practice (Keet & Zembylas, 2019, p. 152). In this way, the board game facilitates a shift from a juridical perspective of what rights are and how they are understood to a human-centred one, recognising the intersecting characteristics that inform how players make sense of the world and human rights within it.

In conclusion, through the process of designing and testing the game, the Community Researchers illustrated ways of embedding critical enquiry in a practice-based HRE context, suggesting the potential to enhance the transformational potential of HRE through an integrated *praxis*. Furthermore, by recognising the contested nature of power relationships and the power *'within'* communities to challenge them, the game offers a tool to invert the hierarchies of the *"declarationist"*

model and nurture dialogue that asks wider questions about social change and transformation. In the next section, I present a second modality for transformational action, examining the ways in which the Community Researchers re-interpreted the PANEL approach as part of their learning journey.

## **6.2 Critical re-evaluation of the PANEL principles**

While this project was initially established to explore the value of a human rights-based approach to the Community Researchers' projects and campaigns, a key part of their learning journey involved the critical re-evaluation of the PANEL approach itself. I present this as the second modality of transformative action that I focus on in this study. This built on the Community Researchers' exploration of each of the PANEL principles during research cycle one with Visiting Activists, and reflection exercises at the end of each research cycle. During the first reflection exercise, I asked the Community Researchers to reflect on and re-define each of the PANEL principles. The aim of this exercise was to reflect on the learning from research cycle one and consider how they might start to apply human rights in their community projects.

During the second reflection exercise, which we carried out when we met in person at the end of the project, we wrote each of the PANEL principles on separate pieces of paper and spread these across the floor (Fig. 7). We then wrote down all the key themes and topics that had formed the focus of discussions over the course of the project and put these in the centre. I asked the Community Researchers which words felt "*important*", "*problematic*", or "*useful*" or if any prompted thoughts or observations they wished to share with the group. The initial aim of this exercise was to update the PANEL definitions agreed at the end of research cycle one and decide on a new set of definitions in line with the Community Researchers' aims for transformative action. By the end of this exercise, however, the group had formulated a new set of principles designed to be complimentary to the PANEL approach, which form the basis for their new '*Human Rights Manifesto*'.



**Fig. 7** PANEL reflection exercise. Source: Focus Group (22/02/2022)

The Community Researchers describe this as:

*“A manifesto for action with a set of human rights focus points at its heart.”* (Blog Article, Co-authored, 12<sup>th</sup> April 2022)

This was subsequently accompanied by a co-authored project report, *‘Whose Rights Are They Anyway?’* in which the Community Researchers dug deeper into their discussions about the validity of the PANEL approach and the rationale for their areas of focus in the manifesto. This is significant given critical calls for the *“renewal”* of HRE emphasise the need for these forums to challenge and not simply re-produce human rights norms (Baxi, 2001; Coysh, 2014; Evans 2001; Keet, 2012). As Coysh (2017) suggests, *“The purpose is to rupture the ideology that limits how we see and understand life and the rationality upon which a dominant view of the world is based.”* (p. 34)

In this section, I examine each of these principles in turn, illustrating how the Community Researchers resisted the reproduction of human rights norms and examining what this means for the transformative potential of CHRE.

### **6.2.1 Re-interpreting ‘participation’ (PANEL)**

Within the PANEL approach, *participation* is defined to mean that:

*“Everyone has the right to participate in decisions which affect them. Participation must be active, free, and meaningful and give attention to issues of accessibility, including access to information in a form and a language which can be understood.”<sup>7</sup>*

In the early stages of the project, the Community Researchers engaged predominantly with *participation* as a positive value statement. When they initially shared their personal stories and motivations, for example, each group member either named *participation* as a core objective or engaged broadly with the concept by naming the related aims of “*voice*”, “*influence*”, “*interacting*”, “*democracy*”, “*engagement*”, and “*activism*”. The group subsequently explored the principle in more depth with Visiting Activists from a community housing association who described how they had used participatory methods campaigning to assert their right to an adequate standard of living to improve housing conditions for tenants locally. These conversations adopted a problem-posing approach, asking questions such as:

*“What are the cultural barriers, practical barriers and accessibility barriers to participation?”* (Kirsty, VA, Session 6)

*“How do you do participation when you don’t do digital?”* (Seema, CR, Session 6)

*“How do you help people deal with the personal push backs because of how they identify?”* (Gerry, CR, Session 6)

These point to the distinct situational, institutional and dispositional barriers that exclude people from education (Mayo, 1997). Through identifying these contradictions, I saw the group begin to reflect critically on their ideas around *participation* and formulate new perspectives. Gerry (CR), for example, posed the question:

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<sup>7</sup> PANEL Overview (used by the CSO), Scottish Government Guidance on a HRBA (2022) [Human Rights Based Approach | Scottish Human Rights Commission](#)

*“Participation itself becomes a really problematic term, what does it even mean?”*  
(Session 12)

Seema (CR) similarly suggested the negative connotations *participation* might have:

*“If it’s about participation but not talking about power, what are we actually talking about? Tokenism.”* (Session 12)

This echoes the concerns of critical human rights theorists about practices promoted as *participatory*, that in reality focus on “*relocating*” marginalised voices within the prevailing social order (Cornwall, 2002, p. 3). The Community Researchers’ reflections both on the barriers to participation and the power structures that restrict access suggest a shift away from the “*declarationist*” approach to HRE and towards a critical model that recognises their *contestability* (Zembylas, 2017a). In so far as this re-evaluation amounts to a “*renewal*” in HRE, I suggest that the shift away from the idea that learners’ experiences must fit into an “*institutionally legitimate form*” (Coysh, 2014, p. 92) to instead contextualise *participation* within the structural inequalities of hegemonic power relationships offers a different perspective that may enhance the transformative potential of HRE. Leah (CR), for example, reflected in the final workshop:

*“Participation needs to be connected with solidarity, needs to be structural and not tokenistic and needs to recognise the fundamental nature of power and oppression.”*

Ultimately, the Community Researchers decided to supplement the principle of *participation* in the PANEL approach with *access* in their new ‘*Human Rights Manifesto*’. This moves away from an approach that leads to tokenism, and instead towards a “*pluriversal*” approach with the potential to create changes in social relationships (Keet & Zembylas, 2019).

### **6.2.2 Re-interpreting ‘*accountability*’ (PANEL)**

Within the PANEL approach, *accountability* is defined as:

*“Effective monitoring of human rights standards. For accountability to be effective there must be appropriate laws, policies, administrative procedures and mechanisms of redress in order to secure human rights.”*

This reflects a juridical perspective, referring to laws, policies and mechanisms of redress, in contrast to Ledwith’s commitment to a person-centred practice. Over the course of the project, I saw how applying the principles of Community Development enabled the Community Researchers to critically re-evaluate the principle of *accountability* and move towards a more transformative model. This began as the Community Researchers explored ways of embedding *accountability* within movements for social change with Visiting Activists from a human rights network in Northern Ireland. As a starting point, the Visiting Activists summarised some of the practical shortcomings of legal, political, and administrative accountability mechanisms by identifying contradictions within the current system. One activist, for example, explained:

*“When the accountability mechanisms of government do nothing for you, you’re left with the realisation that this isn’t right and you have to do something differently to make sure everyone is accountable.”* (Lorna, VA, Session 4)

This points to the tension within HRE between its transformative potential and *“vulnerability to appropriation by the state”* (Kayum Ahmed, 2017, p. 6). When the Community Researchers agreed a new definition for *accountability* after research cycle one, they critiqued the PANEL definition for its narrow application to state bodies. While they understood the purpose of state accountability, they recognised the relational nature of rights and the need for accountability across multiple sites of struggle. As Paul (CR) suggested:

*“PANEL says ‘accountability’ is about monitoring people’s rights, but it needs to go further.”* (Session 7)

This discussion concluded with a definition for *accountability* that captures both its human and institutional dimensions:

*“An obligation on individuals and public bodies to accept responsibility for actions that may impact on the rights of others.” (Session 7)*

As these conversations evolved, the Community Researchers began to talk about *accountability* in parallel with ideas about “*empathy*”, “*personal responsibility*”, and “*kindness*”, which in turn informed new directions in thoughts. As Leah (CR) suggested:

*“We need to take accountability for others and the ways that we can help them.”*  
(Session 12)

This connects with Zembylas’ (2017b) encouragement of theorists and practitioners to consider the role of emotion in HRE to develop practice with transformative potential. The definition the Community Researchers ultimately decided to include in their manifesto re-formulated *accountability* as a commitment to:

*“Push to change the law to ensure everyone is protected, heard, and treated with respect.”* (*Human Rights Manifesto*, Co-authored)

This definition aligns with Zembylas’ (2016b) conception of “*action-oriented empathy*” and with the principles of *mutuality*, *reciprocity* and *respect* that inform Ledwith’s framework. In doing so, it suggests a shift from a juridical to a human-centred conception of rights; one which challenges the reproduction of rights norms and instead seeks their “*renewal*” via an *agonistic* process of re-interpretation (Honig, 2008; Hoover, 2013; Zembylas, 2017a; Zembylas & Keet, 2019).

### **6.2.3 Re-interpreting ‘non-discrimination’ (PANEL)**

Within the PANEL approach, *non-discrimination* is defined to mean:

*“That all forms of discrimination must be prohibited, prevented, and eliminated. It also requires the prioritisation of those in the most vulnerable situations who face the biggest barriers to realising their rights.”*

This describes a negative duty not to discriminate against marginalised groups, which ignores the complex and often invisible ways in which people experience oppression. Over the course of the project, the Community Researchers reformulated this principle to recognise the multi-dimensional nature of *power* and the intersectional way in which it shapes individual experiences. This started with an examination of the principle of *non-discrimination* with Visiting Activists from a grassroots advocacy movement working to tackle poverty discrimination. Together, they adopted Ledwith's methods of critical enquiry to problematise the idea. In doing so, they conceived of poverty as the socio-economic manifestation of oppression by dominant power structures and evidence that non-discrimination laws do not go far enough. One Visiting Activist, for example, shared:

*“When I deal with the social services disability team, my poverty is seen as a reason to offer me support services but as a parent, poverty is seen of symptomatic that I am unable to provide for my children and they threaten to take them away.”* (Debra, VA, Session 5)

By making sense of discrimination through these contradictions in lived experience, I saw how the Community Researchers began to reconceptualise *non-discrimination* from a human-centred perspective, rather than a juridical one. In doing so, they explored what Gerry (CR) described as the “*layers of intersection*” that Hill Collins & Bilge (2020) suggest offer a “*more expansive lens for addressing the complexities of educational equity*” (p. 216). This encouraged the group to re-conceptualise *non-discrimination* in a way that that recognises the intersections in people's identities and how these can be embraced. When the Community Researchers agreed a definition of *non-discrimination* at the end of research cycle one, they concluded:

*“Non-discrimination is the everyday practice of treating everyone equally and fairly as well as having the policies that ensure everybody is included regardless of their characteristics or how they perceive themselves.”* (Session 7)

This shift in emphasis from a negative duty not to discriminate, towards a positive duty of inclusion, led to their ultimate decision to replace *non-discrimination* with *solidarity* in their manifesto. However, Zembylas (2013) suggests that, while

solidarity plays an important role in reducing everyday inequalities, it does not become radicalised from one day to the next. Instead, he points to the importance of nurturing “*critical compassion*” within movements for social change to enhance their transformational potential. I argue that the Community Researchers’ commitment to challenging power hierarchies within HRE amounts to the “*interrogation*” (p. 516) of these dynamics that Zembylas considers an enabling factor in the radicalisation of solidarity and the foundation to a *critical* model of HRE.

#### **6.2.4 Re-interpreting ‘empowerment’(PANEL)**

Within the PANEL approach, *empowerment* is defined to mean:

*“People should understand their rights and be fully supported to participate in the development of policy and practices which affect their lives. People should be able to claim their rights where necessary.”*

This aligns with the juridical framing of the “*declarationist*” model through which *empowerment* is closely associated with constructive civic engagement within institutional rights frameworks. The critical literature contests this framing, suggesting that it forces learners to fit their subjective experiences into this context and exclusively address injustices through legal remedies (Coysh, 2014; Keet, 2012; Zembylas, 2016b; 2017a). Through this project, the Community Researchers problematised the concept of *empowerment* to address its complexities and the duality in its potential both to liberate and oppress. They did this by first challenging the principle itself. During the mid-way PANEL reflection exercise, for example, they found it difficult to agree on a definition they were happy with. This was largely due to the implication that ideas about empowerment are closely linked to ideas of disempowerment. As Paul (CR) described:

*“It is like you are giving people power, so then you can take it away.”*

Seema (CR) framed this from a different perspective:

*“It is like you are in a position to give someone power, but they have power already.”*

These prompted further provocations in relation to *empowerment*, including:

*“Who decides who needs empowering?”* (Gerry, CR)

*“Who’s to say we are not empowered or if it’s just the system doesn’t allow our power to be recognised?”* (Seema, CR)

This links closely to Foucault’s (2003) conception of *power*, not as something that can be possessed by one group and given to another, but as a relational dynamic that produces effects and may be harnessed as a means of resistance as much as a means of oppression. The Community Researchers agreed an interim definition at the end of research cycle one, which incorporated these observations. This described *empowerment* as:

*“A process of building solidarity, releasing knowledge, and releasing the power that we have and then growing and extending and deepening that power.”* (Session 7)

However, they recognised the political and contextual challenges of realising this vision when they came to reflect on their learning at the end of the project. In the final project report, they acknowledged:

*“We are coming to these conversations with kindness and care for each other...but the people we want to be talking about rights and understand their rights are so often oppressed to the extent that they don’t have like the capacity, the time, the resources, the energy to even engage in having a conversation or to think about that.”* (*‘Whose Rights Are They Anyway?’*, Co-authored)

This builds on Ledwith’s (2020) concerns that, *“Without a political analysis, radical concepts, like empowerment, are reduced to ameliorative rather than transformative levels”* (p. 13). Her (2005) suggestion that *“giving expression to silenced voices is the beginning of transformative practice”* (p. 257) nonetheless points to the value of small acts, such as listening and being heard, within pedagogical spaces. This contributed to the ways in which the Community Researchers began to acknowledge the power they held *‘within’* themselves and their communities as the project

progressed. During the PANEL reflection exercise at the end of the project, Gerry (CR) put it like this:

*“If we’re going to talk about empowerment, it needs to be about empowering ourselves and empowering one another. It can’t be a top-down thing.”*

The Community Researchers ultimately decided to replace *empowerment* with *power* as a focus point in their manifesto, acknowledging the need to name and address the power hierarchies in the “*declarationist*” model to develop a critical alternative. I suggest that this recognition of the inherent duality within the principle of *empowerment* provides the foundation to develop an anti-oppressive practice with transformative potential.

#### **6.2.5 Re-interpreting ‘legality’ (PANEL)**

Within the PANEL approach, *legality* is defined to mean that:

*“The full range of legally protected human rights must be respected, protected, and fulfilled. A human rights-based approach requires the recognition of rights as legally enforceable entitlements and is linked in to national and international human rights law.”*

This applies a juridical lens to the meaning of rights and how they are realised. As such, it is the part of the PANEL approach most at odds with the epistemology of Community Development and in need of re-interpretation to move towards transformative practice. The Community Researchers were first introduced to the principle of *legality* through a discussion facilitated by Ellen (PR) in research cycle one about the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR). I noted how their initial responses focused either on the inconsistencies in the law or the implementation gap between theory and practice. Seema (CR), for example, highlighted:

*“There are concrete statements here about rights that just don’t exist. For this to*

*make sense, the government needs to do more to ensure not just that there is not just access but that this is done in a socially just way.”* (Session 2)

The Community Researchers consequently found it difficult to come up with a definition for *legality* that they were happy with during the PANEL reflection exercises. Although they understood *legality* as:

*“A system of rules that can be enforced that regulates how societies operate.”*  
(Session 7)

They pointed to its inherent inconsistencies and sometimes negative connotations. Gerry (CR), for example, pointed out early in the process:

*“Because something is legal, it has some sort of authority but sometimes you need to question that authority.”* (Session 2)

This recognition of the limitations of the law contributed to wider reflection on the opportunities to inform and shape it. As a result, the Community Researchers chose not to include *legality* as one of the principles in their manifesto and summarised the reasons for this in the final project report:

*“Is ‘legality’ the limit of human rights organisations and their work? Who gets to decide what’s legal and who isn’t involved in the process? If we are limited to the law, are we able to fulfil our needs and wants as marginalised communities?”*  
(‘Whose Rights Are They Anyway?’, Co-authored)

This desire to move ‘past’ the law aligns with Foucault’s recognition that a critical conception of human rights accepts that they can *“be created without requiring foundational juridical premises”* (Faubion, 1994, p. xxxi). Instead, the Community Researchers introduced the values of *solidarity*, *intersectionality* and *access* into their manifesto to encourage laws and policies that accommodate the intersectional nature of human experience, are capable of evolving and ultimately designed to liberate rather than oppress. By allowing for a decoupling of human rights from *legality*, I suggest that there is scope to re-align HRE with the social justice values of

*mutuality and reciprocity*. This enables HRE to move away from a vocabulary of universal moral rights and towards a collective epistemology that recognises the “*pluriversal*” ways in which rights can be understood, shaped and experienced within a transformative model of HRE (Keet & Zembylas, 2019).

### **6.2.6 The Community Researchers’ new ‘Human Rights Manifesto’**

Having outlined above how the Community Researchers re-interpreted each of the PANEL principles, I look here at the points of focus in their ‘*Human Rights Manifesto*’ and how these may contribute to a model of CHRE with transformative potential. The Community Researchers described their reasons for creating the manifesto in their final project report:

*“Do we want to throw away PANEL and have our own acronym? Wouldn’t doing that just create another formulaic static concept that communities don’t identify with? We concluded that we would create our own ‘manifesto’ for a Human Rights Based Approach with five focus points that need to be held at the heart of our work.*

***Solidarity, Power, Access, Accountability, Intersectionality.*** *Maybe with these in our focus we can make this Human Rights Based Approach work for ourselves and the communities to which we belong.”* (‘*Whose Rights Are They Anyway?*’ Co-authored)

The manifesto built on the PANEL reflection exercise at the end of the project, when the PANEL principles were discussed and the new focus points in the manifesto agreed upon. The definitions for these were finalised through online engagement in follow up to the session.

The Community Researchers’ definition of *solidarity* in their manifesto states:

*“Solidarity comes from people, holding space for all lived experiences and the problems that different people and communities face. It can be found in the form of space, feelings or actions that build collective power through empathy and communication. Ultimately, solidarity is about allyship, building our awareness and*

*knowledge of our interdependency and collective power to make change happen.”*  
(‘Human Rights Manifesto’, Co-authored)

This builds on the Community Researchers’ recognition of the knowledge held ‘*within*’ individuals and communities and challenges the power hierarchies in the “*declarationist*” model. Ledwith (2020) connects ideas about power ‘*within*’ with a personal resilience, which has in turn been shown to be strengthened through connection to community (Giroletti & Paterson-Young, 2023). Drawing on the prominence given to social movements in the work of Freire and Gramsci, this definition acknowledges the need to connect with wider movements on a “*local-global continuum*” (Ledwith, 2008, p. 256) and the critical role of emotion in movements for social change. This echoes Zembylas’ (2013; 2016b) calls for *critical HRE* to be underpinned by “*action-oriented empathy*” or “*critical compassion*” to have transformational potential. I suggest that this recognition that change takes place in a context that requires horizontal bonds of allyship sits directly counter to the teacher/learner dynamic in the “*declarationist*” model and signals a move towards a critical alternative.

The Community Researchers’ definition of *power* in the manifesto states:

*“If power can be given, it can be taken away. We recognise the unlocked power in our communities in the form of knowledge and experience that is not seen, heard or respected. Power is structural and needs to shift but it is also inherent and comes from people. We strive for a non-hierarchical society in which there is no ‘insider’ and ‘outsider’, and systems are shaped by the people most affected. We empower ourselves but we cannot be empowered by others.”* (‘Human Rights Manifesto’, Co-authored)

This wording is explicit in its critique of the status quo and the need to change it. It reflects the Community Researchers’ evolution in *critical consciousness* over the course of the project about the relational nature of *power* and the scope to re-negotiate these relationships through processes that incorporate rupture and conflict. It similarly resists the notion of *power* as a hegemonic force ‘*over*’ others, and instead embraces forms of power ‘*to*’ (have autonomy), ‘*with*’ (others in solidarity),

and 'within' (in the form of resilience) (Thompson, 2007). The idea that *power* "needs to shift" is notably more radical than the PANEL definition of *empowerment*, in which people are "fully supported to participate". As a result, the Community Researchers position themselves in a critical relationship with the "declarationist" perspective, politicising the narrative by recognising the hegemonic structures that block the self-empowerment of marginalised communities and challenging the inequalities they create (Bajaj, 2011).

The Community Researchers' definition of *access* in the manifesto states:

*"Access is about more than participation. It must be constant, inclusive, and intentional. Only when everyone has equal cultural and physical access to systems, spaces, and decision-making can those practices and processes claim to be valid. We work, unrelentingly, to open up access, extend access and remove barriers."* ('Human Rights Manifesto', Co-authored)

This inverts the traditional approach to participation as a process through which people are "invited" to contribute by those in positions of power (Cornwall, 2002, p. 3). In its place, it recognises the intersectional nature of the human experience and the multiple factors that may lead to exclusion. This is transformative in the sense that it rejects the glossing over of societal divisions and instead names the barriers that exclude people from decision-making spaces (Ledwith, 2007). In doing so, it encourages forums that embrace a "pluriversal" epistemology and have the potential to transform social relationships (Keet & Zembylas, 2019).

The Community Researchers' definition of *accountability* in the manifesto states:

*"We hold ourselves to account and we hold others to account. We do this to make sure that we remain true to our core principles and that our social systems reflect and uphold these. Where necessary, we will push to change the law to ensure everyone is protected, heard, and treated with respect."* ('Human Rights Manifesto', Co-authored)

This definition echoes Ledwith's principles of *reciprocity* and *mutuality* and highlights the need for a "*social justice oriented human rights practice*" (Keet, 2012, p. 58). In doing so, it takes a wider view of the nature of social relationships and root causes of oppression. This departs from the idea of *accountability* as an "*effective monitoring*" framework, as described in the PANEL approach, and instead uses it as a lens to critique the injustices in the world and build momentum to address them. This provides a means to detach the "*declarationist*" model from its historicism and conservatism, and instead contribute to a dynamic and evolving practice, capable of self-critique and "*renewal*" (Hamilton, 2003; Keet, 2012).

The Community Researchers' definition of *intersectionality* in their manifesto states:

*"Intersectionality is about more than non-discrimination. We understand individuals and communities as complex with multiple and overlapping needs and identities that should be seen, respected, and celebrated. When change takes place, it needs to reflect the different dimensions of personal and interpersonal experience."* ('*Human Rights Manifesto*', Co-authored)

This moves away from the idea of human rights as universals to recognise the intersecting ways in which identities are formed. It echoes calls within the *critical* orientation to end the standardisation of the human experience and recognise "*the layered human subject*" (Keet, 2012, p. 20). Moreover, it offers a new perspective on the ways in which experiences of oppression can be understood within HRE, challenging the validity of static juridical frameworks and positioning lived experience as a starting point for conversations about oppression, liberation and claims to rights. I suggest that an intersectional perspective provides a useful starting point to identify the blind spots in the "*declarationist*" model that prevent it from evolving into a dynamic and productive practice.

In this section, I have examined the ways in which the Community Researchers engaged with the PANEL principles as a second modality of transformative action, describing how they critically re-evaluated the overall approach and created a complimentary set of principles, which they set out in their '*Human Rights Manifesto*'. I conclude that, while the Community Researchers point to several

limitations in the PANEL approach, the manifesto provides a series of guiding principles to create HRE forums which are anti-oppressive, recognise their political purpose and encourage practice that is dynamic and evolving. In the next section, I examine the third modality for transformative action, reflecting on the learning that I and the CSO have taken forward from this project and the value of CPAR as a “*practice changing practice*” (Kemmis et al, 2013).

### **6.3 Mutual learning in HRE**

For education to be liberating in the Freirean sense, it needs to disrupt the existing power dynamic in the traditional model of *banking* education which I align with the teacher-learner relationship in the “*declarationist*” model. I look in this section at the learning by the CSO and myself through our participation in this project and how this is relevant to progressing a model of CHRE. This represents the third and final modality of transformative action that I examine in this study.

#### **6.3.1 Organisational learning through HRE**

The CSO’s original research question for the Community Researchers’ project was:

*“Do Economic Social and Cultural Rights (ESCR) and a Human Rights Based Approach (HRBA) add value to our campaigning and projects?”* (Project Welcome Materials)

Although it was not made explicit, the implication at the outset was that “*our*” in this context referred to the campaigns and projects of the Community Researchers. Cath (PR) acknowledged in her exit interview that initially:

*“[The CSO] did not necessarily see it as a two-way conversation.”*

Although she recognised there was at least a connection between the CSO’s policy work and community-focused activities and that these activities could be mutually beneficial, she described how the learning from the project had prompted a need for the organisation:

*“To think about how it links these two areas, what it means for [the CSO’s] decision-making processes and who makes up [the CSO’s] trustee board etc.”*

This was also reflected in Ellen’s (PR) observations, describing in her exit interview that while the CSO’s learning had initially been happening on more of an “*ad hoc*” basis:

*“There have been conversations within [the organisation] about undertaking a review to make it less ad hoc and more mainstream throughout.”*

This moves beyond the superficial solidarity demonstrated through un-critical models of HRE and towards Zembylas’ (2016b) notion of “*action-oriented empathy*” to drive forward transformative practice. I saw how this self-reflection led to action by the CSO to embed the learning from this project within the organisation. This was done primarily via the recruitment of a Human Rights Officer after the end of the project to complete an internal audit of its culture and practices. The CSO envisaged that:

*“The audit will aim to use the Community Researchers’ findings to look inward and see how we can improve our work through important aspects of a HRBA, such as meaningful participation through access, recognising power dynamics, accountability, and many others. The learning will then be shared widely so that other CSOs [Civil Society Organisations], and the wider public, can learn from this project.”* (Human Rights Officer, Audit Brief)

The explicit reference to the issues of *power* and *access* set out in the Community Researchers’ manifesto, self-reflection on the need to critically evaluate and improve organisational practice and commitment to strengthening bonds of solidarity between CSOs to embed the learning from the project reflects a notable shift from the CSO’s position at the start of the project. The audit itself, which combined desk-based research and interviews with several CSO’s to gather their feedback, used the manifesto’s focus points to inform:

*“Recommendations to [the CSO’s] staff and trustees on how a human rights-based approach can be better realised in our work.”* (CSO Human Rights Audit Report)

Its conclusions, which at the time of writing are being taken forward by the CSO and disseminated to others in the sector, point to a recognition of the need to re-balance power relationships in HRE, acknowledging that:

*“True empowerment does not work through organisations ‘empowering’ people but instead requires the capacity to imagine a different possibility and ‘grow a sense of power from within.’”* (CSO Human Rights Audit Report)

This correlates with the Community Researchers’ alignment with Thompson’s (2007) conception of *power* as power ‘*within*’ and reflects an epistemic shift in HRE from a positivist position, that sees rights as objective truths, to a critical and constructivist perspective that recognises the agency of participants in processes of knowledge production (Zembylas, 2017c). The audit concludes:

*“Coming in as a ‘partner’ rather than a ‘teacher’ allows [the organisation] to continue to learn, grow and develop as an organisation.”* (CSO Human Rights Audit Report)

This ultimately reflects a commitment to move away from “*declarationist*” models of HRE in which knowledge is passed by the CSO in the role of ‘teacher’ to learners (largely drawn from more marginalised communities), and towards a critical model in which learning is recognised as a mutual and reciprocal process (Ledwith, 2020). However, while the commitments and recommendations in the audit report point to future action that may deliver the “*objectively verifiable*” changes that Freire (1970, p. 54) envisages are necessary for practice to be transformational, it is not yet possible to assess whether these take place in a meaningful way to negate the flaws of the “*declarationist*” model. This merits further enquiry into the transformative potential of CHRE delivered by CSOs.

### **6.3.2 My learning journey**

In this section, I consider my own learning journey and how my perspective as a researcher evolved over the course of the project. As a starting point, I consider when I first started to engage with theories about human rights. I studied law as a

postgraduate because at that time I wanted to become a human rights lawyer. From the point I discovered that a specific set of laws were created to protect people from harm, I thought that it would be a worthwhile profession. I did not question it and saw it as a sign of authoritarianism and corruption when nation states refused to sign up to human rights treaties. When I decided not to become a lawyer but to work instead in the not-for-profit sector on access to justice and human rights, I grew more critical of a 'Know Your Rights' style of education that repeated what I came to recognise as a human rights "*mantra*" (Keet, 20017) with the assumption that if everyone joined in, rights would be realised and respected.

I also became more critical of the small group of human rights organisations, the majority of whom are run by lawyers and adopt strategies with a narrow focus on the law – lobbying, campaigning, influencing, and litigating to uphold human rights laws or stop their repeal. While litigation and human rights campaigns often build on examples from individuals who have experienced rights violations, those who advocate for human rights most visibly within our sector are predominantly members of the legal profession.

I started the PhD programme at Lancaster University to explore social justice from a theoretical perspective to better understand how HRE could be improved. As I prepared to begin my thesis, I read more about the "*declarationist*" approach to human rights, which is modelled on a one-directional learning dynamic from 'teacher' to 'learner', and in which I could see parallels in the 'Know Your Rights' approach used widely in the UK nonprofit sector.

I read more about the *critical* orientation on human rights, the problems it identified and its hopes to move towards a more dynamic and democratic model. I also read about the *counter-hegemonic* orientation that views human rights as too flawed to have any value in protecting people. I aligned most closely with the *critical* orientation, seeing the potential in human rights to do better. The practical question being, how?

I reflected on some of the more powerful examples I had seen of human rights being used to effect change. This included recently hearing testimonies from residents of

the Grenfell Tower in London, where a fire in 2017 burned for 60 hours, killing 72 people as a result of unsafe cladding on the building, breaching all residents' right to life. From this, I looked at what Community Development might offer as a complementary approach to human rights and identified a suitable HRE project to explore the idea. My assumptions, and those of the CSO, at the start of the project were that it would provide an educational space in which six activists could learn about human rights to then integrate with their activism within their own communities.

Over the course of the project, I learnt from the participants that human rights, as they stand and in the black letter of the law, are not fit for purpose and that any model of HRE that is not critically reflective is more likely to oppress than to liberate. I learnt that human rights are about people and that to liberate rather than oppress, we need to talk about *power*. Who 'has' it, where it lies, its different layers – naming it, critiquing it, and importantly, re-negotiating these relationships.

While I acknowledged the existence of power dynamics at the outset, I was surprised about my assumptions as the project progressed. I had thought about our roles as Practitioner Researchers and how we would need to acknowledge our privilege and use this to create a learning space that was fully supported. I had also assumed that the Community Researchers, through their activism, would be familiar with the feeling of being 'outside' the 'system' and committed to the need to change it. As the project progressed, I saw how the Community Researchers began to acknowledge their own power as individuals and activists in HRE, locating the 'system' on the outside as they explored and made sense of their ideas about rights through their own lived experience.

While reflecting on this journey, I can see how we started the project in one place, with the Community Researchers asking questions and wondering if they had the authority to talk about human rights, and ended it in another, with the CSO and myself asking ourselves the questions. Questions about our practice, questions about our sector, and questions about human rights. This has made me realise that the most significant learning was by the CSO (and myself) about what they had to learn from the Community Researchers about what it means to be a human rights organisation (and practitioner).

The other significant learning was by the activists, about the power they already have and the 'right' they have to talk about rights. To talk about them in a language that is true to the oppression they experience, in formal and informal political forums, in a way that both sees their value and wants to move them forward so they are better at protecting people, to critique and disagree but build a movement founded on empathy and solidarity. To recognise not that one size fits all, but that a collective will can recognise the multi-dimensional needs of everyone and work towards a better system to protect them.

I am no longer a blind supporter of human rights. If I were to be asked, do you support human rights? My answer would be "yes", and it would also be "no". It depends on the context, who is talking, where, who is affected, and who holds the *power*.

## **Conclusion**

In this section, I have examined three modalities of transformative action that correlate with the final stages of Ledwith's framework, *connecting and acting* and *cooperating for a common good*. These offer different perspectives on the ways in which learning can be transformative within HRE. First, I examined the process of designing a human rights board game as a practical social change tool, illustrating the ways in which the Community Researchers used this process to integrate theory with practice to stimulate human rights critiques within communities and develop a human rights narrative rooted in the lived experiences of players. Second, I examined the Community Researchers' critical evaluation of the PANEL approach as a pedagogical model, and the way in which they re-formulated this to create a new '*Human Rights Manifesto*'. I suggest that the manifesto principles point to a new direction for CHRE with a change-oriented focus and explicitly political agenda.

In the final section, I evaluated the self-reflexive learning of myself and the CSO as critical educators, showing the ways in which our participation in the project shaped our practice and highlighting the importance of self-critique within a dynamic and evolving model of HRE. While there are certain limitations to the claims that can be made in the necessarily localised nature of this study, I argue that these three

modalities demonstrate the potential for transformative action at three important levels: within the community, within the group, and within our practices as practitioners.

## Chapter Seven – Conclusion

### 7. Introduction

This study was guided by one main research question, asking:

*In what ways can an approach to HRE modelled on Community Development enhance its potential to create spaces for critical learning and transformative action?*

I also included two secondary research questions, which relate to the power dynamics in pedagogical spaces and the process of knowledge production:

*How may a Community Development approach help to create a model of HRE that is self-critical and capable of recognising and addressing issues of power?*

*How may a Community Development approach help to create a model of HRE that accommodates multiple perspectives and incorporates conflict within processes of knowledge production?*

In this chapter, I address my assumptions about the context for this study to show the validity of my arguments and set out the answers to my research questions. I use the final part of this chapter to outline my contribution to knowledge and the implications of this research for human rights and Community Development practitioners.

#### 7.1 Key ideas in this thesis

My research questions in this study were underpinned by two key ideas about the adaptability of human rights frameworks and the compatibility of Community Development with this field of study. Having contextualised this study within the *critical* orientation in Chapter Two, I argued for the adaptability of human rights and the potential for its “*renewal*”. In Chapter Three, I set out why I see Community Development as a compatible approach and how it may help to realise the

transformative potential of HRE. Before moving on to answering my research questions, I consider each of these ideas and my assumptions about them.

### **7.1.1 Adaptability of human rights frameworks**

By contextualising this study within the *critical* literature on human rights, I engage with its fundamental critiques of the “*declarationist*” model, which I outlined in Chapter Two. These include the dangers of its interdependence with hegemonic power structures, failure to recognise the political and contested nature of rights, and tendency towards conservatism leading to a static practice that fails to respond to its changing context. However, in contrast to the *technical* and *counter-hegemonic* orientations, the *critical* orientation conceptualises HRE through the lens of *critical hope*, critiquing the injustices in the world while remaining open-minded about its potential to transform for the better (Keet, 2014; Zembylas & Keet, 2019). This spearheads calls for the “*renewal*” of HRE through a model that is self-critical, recognises the inherently political nature of HRE, and is capable of evolution.

To do so involves the incorporation of self-reflective practice within HRE, an *agonistic* approach that allows for rupture and renewal, and a “*pluriversal*” epistemology that welcomes a wider diversity of voices within the human rights narrative. When theorised in this way, human rights offer an adaptable pedagogical framework, open to contestation and re-interpretation (Zembylas & Keet, 2019). This sits between the *technical* perspective, which does not see the need for human rights to evolve, and the *counter-hegemonic* one, which believes it cannot. There is nonetheless a disconnect between the clarity of the theoretical vision for CHRE and the lack of practical studies examining its feasibility. This leads to the question of the compatibility of human rights with a Community Development approach.

### **7.1.2 Compatibility of human rights and Community Development**

In this thesis, I argue for the compatibility of Ledwith’s seven stage framework for Community Development with the critical vision for HRE. In Chapter Three, I set out the key reasons why Ledwith’s approach is well positioned to resolve the tensions within the “*declarationist*” model and pivot towards a critical alternative. First, by

recognising the complex and intersectional nature of oppression, Community Development seeks to address the power imbalances in pedagogical spaces and move away from a narrative of false promises (O'Neill, 2005; Posner, 2014). Second, Ledwith conceptualises community-based education as a site of political struggle, using methods of critical enquiry to name the contradictions in the world in order to challenge them. Finally, by conceptualising knowledge production as a collective and dynamic practice, Ledwith's theories help to detach HRE from its historicism and conservatism (Hamilton, 2003; Keet, 2012) and develop a critical alternative capable of evolution and "*renewal*". I therefore argue that Ledwith's framework is theoretically well positioned to enhance critical learning that leads to transformative action. Below, I set out the practice-based learning that helps to answer these questions.

## **7.2 Research questions**

This study was guided by one main research question, which I answer in two parts. First, how an approach to HRE modelled on Community Development can enhance its potential to create spaces for critical learning. Second, in what ways this leads to transformative action. I consider these themes in turn below.

### **7.2.1 HRE for critical learning**

In Chapter Five, I explored the first part of my main research question, examining the ways in which Community Development enhances critical learning within HRE. While the "*declarationist*" model is characterised by a teacher-learner hierarchy and the presumed acceptance of the dominant narrative, I suggest that using a Community Development approach helped to integrate reflexive and critical practice with HRE. First, I illustrated how a values-led practice underpinned by the principles of *mutuality* and *reciprocity* stimulated collective dialogue that accommodated conflict, critique and new ways of seeing the world. Second, by using *provocations* to identify the *contradictions* in the world, connect these with wider experiences of oppression through *connected knowing*, and start to make *critical connections*, I showed how the Community Researchers began to think critically about human rights and begin to challenge the dominant narrative. Third, I identified three key counternarratives that evolved through this process of critical enquiry, connected with conceptions of

'Power', 'Agency', and 'Rights'. These re-conceptualised power relationships to recognise their relational nature and the potential for re-negotiation, re-positioned learners as active agents in HRE spaces, and re-theorised human rights from a human-centred perspective, in place of a juridical one.

I conclude that, while there were some challenges in managing the power dynamics within the learning space, particularly at the start of the project, the use of non-coercive methods and the open nature of enquiry encouraged critical reflection as a valuable pedagogical tool. The CSO's acknowledgement that it would approach HRE projects differently in the future based on the learning from this project suggests that these findings present a snapshot of wider processes of change as practice is iteratively improved. This does not conclusively respond to the proposition advanced by some within the *counter-hegemonic* orientation as to whether a more radical emancipatory project is needed (Mutua, 2002). However, it illustrates the potential for HRE to integrate practices of critical enquiry in a practice-based setting and points to the value of further research into the different ways in which this may evolve.

### **7.2.2 HRE for transformative action**

In Chapter Six, I explored the second part of my main research question, examining the ways in which these processes of critical enquiry helped drive transformative action for social change. In this study, I examined three modalities of transformative action. First, I outlined the process of designing a human rights board game focused on '*Claiming the Rights to Talk About Rights*' to make conversations about human rights more accessible. Using the three themes of 'Power', 'Agency', and 'Rights' as an analytical lens, I illustrated how the game provided a facilitation tool for conversations about human rights that challenged the dominant narrative.

Due to the timeframe of this study, my analysis of the data focused on the process of designing the game and testing a prototype and did not include its subsequent use in a community context. This inevitably limits the claims that can be made within this study as to the value of the game in fostering transformative dialogue about human

rights in a community setting. Similarly, the lack of wider community engagement in the design of the game raises questions as to its value in contexts outside the Community Researchers' projects and immediate communities. Despite this, I suggest that the data set out in this study shows some potential for the board game to provide a forum within which to replicate Ledwith's methods of critical enquiry to question the world and challenge its injustices.

Second, I explored the ways in which the Community Researchers engaged with the PANEL principles of *Participation, Accountability, Non-discrimination, Empowerment* and *Legality* and re-interpreted these, drawing on their personal experiences and interactions with the Visiting Activists. A key outcome of this process was the publication of a '*Human Rights Manifesto*' to compliment PANEL approach, centred on the principles of *Solidarity, Power, Access, Accountability, and Intersectionality*. I concluded that these offer a valuable set of guiding principles for developing a transformative model of HRE; one that is anti-oppressive, recognises its explicitly political nature and contributes to a dynamic and evolving practice. Finally, I examined the changes that I and the CSO identified in our own practice and how our participation in this project has shaped our perspectives. I conclude that evidence of changes within the CSO's institutional culture following an internal audit and in my own thinking about human rights point to the value of CPAR as a methodology within HRE as a "*practice changing practice*" (Kemmis et al, 2013).

### **7.3 Contribution to knowledge**

#### **7.3.1 Theoretical contribution**

I aim to make a theoretical contribution to the critical literature by positioning the Community Researchers as active participants in the process of interpreting and making sense of human rights. This builds on calls within the *critical* orientation for a "*pluriversal*" epistemology to align CHRE with its emancipatory vision (Zembylas and Keet, 2019). In Chapters Four and Five, I set out the main tensions that need to be addressed within the "*declarationist*" model, the areas in which Community Development may help to resolve these, and the theoretical outcomes of this

process that I document in this study. These take the form of three interrelated counter-narratives focused on the Community Researchers' ideas about 'Power, 'Agency', and 'Rights'. I outline the theoretical contributions this study makes within each theme below.

First, I showed in Chapter Five how Ledwith's methods of critical enquiry encouraged the Community Researchers to engage directly with the structural nature of oppression. Through this process, they re-conceptualised *power* as a series of contested relationships and acknowledged the power '*within*' themselves and their communities to '*Claim the Right to Talk About Rights*'. This expands the theoretical framing of *power* within the *critical* orientation to recognise its multiple sources, as well as its hegemonic nature. Furthermore, it positions the idea of power '*within*' as a critical foundation to nurturing the "*action-oriented empathy*" necessary for movements for social change to achieve their transformational aims (Zembylas, 2016b). This suggests further opportunities to expand the narrative around self-empowerment within the *critical* orientation and points to the value of Ledwith's framework as an analytical tool for doing so.

Second, I argue that using a Community Development approach helped to nurture what Keet (2015) describes as the "*unburdened and un-steered agency that invents, reinvents and renews human rights, and opposes it if the contexts so demand*" (p. 60). Through the critical re-evaluation of the PANEL principles and publication of the Community Researchers' manifesto, they contributed to the reinvention of a human rights-based approach through critical dialogue and highlighted a desire to politicise conversations about human rights in their communities. From a theoretical standpoint, this supports the critical alignment of HRE with an *agonistic* approach, embracing rupture and conflict on the path towards "*renewal*". Yet, rather than simply "*accepting*" that rights claims are political and "*embracing*" the conflict this generates (Hoover, 2013, p. 947), I suggest that the Community Researchers take a more radical position. By emphasising their role as active agents within HRE and their responsibility as activists to call out injustice, they point to the imperative of conflict within critical enquiry to lead to changes in the status quo. This suggests scope for greater attention within a critical model of HRE to Ledwith's use of *provocations*,

*naming contradictions* and making *critical connections*, marking a move away from the conservatism of the “*declarationist*” model and towards a transformational alternative.

Finally, by contextualising ‘Rights’ within personal experiences, rather than juridical frameworks, the Community Researchers showed how they could be conceptualised “*from below*” (Ife, 2009). The decision to offer the manifesto as a complimentary approach to the PANEL principles, rather than an alternative, demonstrates the value of both the “*language of critique*” and “*language of possibility*” within the Gramscian-Freirean tradition (Mayo, 2000). This strengthens the theoretical case for Foucault’s “*critical affirmation*” of human rights, characterised neither by their full embrace, nor complete rejection, as a route towards “*renewal*” (Zembylas, 2016a, p. 284). I suggest that the inclusion of *solidarity* as a key focus point in the manifesto suggests opportunities to explore horizontal relationships of allyship within a critical conceptualisation of rights. This interlinks with Ely-Yamin’s (1993) suggestion of the need for HRE to transition from a singular ideology to a collective one for a critical model of HRE to have viability.

### **7.3.2 Practical contribution**

I also aim to make a practical contribution to knowledge in the fields of HRE and Community Development. First, this study responds to Coysh’s (2017) observation that practice-based HRE studies have a tendency to present secondary accounts and lack the direct insights of research subjects. By using a CPAR methodology, which challenges the power hierarchies in traditional research and involves participants as co-researchers, I position the perspectives of the Community Researchers at the centre of this study. While I acknowledge that I have blind spots and personal biases that impact the way in which the data has been analysed and interpreted, I describe the stages of critical enquiry outlined in Chapter Five and the three modalities of transformative action set out in Chapter Six using the direct accounts of the Community Researchers, Visiting Activists and Practitioner Researchers. I therefore suggest that this provides a direct account of the ways in which human rights were “*interpreted and represented by those involved*” (Coysh, 2017, p. 76).

I make a further practical contribution to knowledge related to the field of Community Development and suggest opportunities to strengthen mutual learning between these disciplines for two main reasons. First, given their shared emancipatory objectives, I suggest that learning from CHRE studies may contribute to the wider agenda in Community Development to fix the social order and engage with issues including globalisation and climate change (Apple, 2009; Ledwith, 2020). Second, the use of a CPAR approach offers insights into the ways in which Community Development and social work practitioners may join HRE spaces as co-researchers, bringing insights from their own work to challenge the dominance of the legal profession in the human rights field. Moreover, by rooting conversations about rights in people's personal experiences, critical models of HRE may offer insights on how to embed *inductive* human rights practice within Community Development and social work, where there is an identified interest to do so (Ife et al, 2022). I suggest that by strengthening the learning between Community Development and human rights, practice in each field may be improved and the social justice objectives of both enhanced.

#### **7.4 Implications and recommendations**

Given the practice-based nature of this study, I look below at the implications of its learning to the field of human rights and the evolution of critical models of HRE within it.

##### ***7.4.1 Addressing issues of power***

The issue of *power*, and the inherent hierarchies in pedagogical spaces, is a challenging one. As Kayum Ahmed et al (2020) point out, this is particularly true within HRE, which is underpinned by specific ideologies and frames of reference. This project illustrates how the intersectional factors that shape experiences of oppression make it impossible to create forums in which power relationships can be fully neutralised, even when these issues are thought about at the beginning. While the "*critical responsiveness*" of those in positions of privilege is a welcome approach, it is equally important for critical educators (including both individual practitioners and

CSOs) to face the realities of the power structures and hegemonic ideologies that provide the context in which HRE takes place (Hoover, 2013).

A key learning from this study is the value of a CPAR approach to addressing power dynamics in social research. By engaging with issues of power from the start, research studies are more likely to avoid the cyclical logic of claiming to be transformative while failing to critique their own moral authority (Coysh, 2017). This is particularly important when considering an ethical approach to impact evaluation and reporting, which inherently involves competing interests and power imbalances (Paterson-Young & Hazenberg, 2021). A second suggests the need for a three-pronged approach to developing a model of CHRE capable of shifting *power*. This requires first, an explicit commitment to challenging oppression, second, a values framework that builds on the principles of *reciprocity* and *mutuality* to re-shape power relationships within pedagogical spaces, and third, an openness to embracing new ways of knowing as part of a dynamic and evolving practice (Keet, 2012).

#### **7.4.2 Understanding the role of conflict**

The *critical* orientation frames conflict as a valuable component in CHRE, recognising the contested nature of rights and the value of HRE as a site of political struggle (Honig, 2008; Hoover, 2013; Zembylas & Keet, 2019). The practical learning from this study highlights several ways in which processes of conflict helped to foster learning. Where tensions arose, for example, between the interests of the CSO and Community Researchers, this was a valuable indicator of the areas that needed attention for practice to evolve. While the Community Researchers reported that they felt the learning space had held true to its values, the group's discomfort about some of the conversations that took place outside it and their exclusion from the CSO's wider activities, such as project fundraising, point to the importance of addressing power dynamics in a wider context for CHRE to have validity. This was significant enough for the CSO to commission an audit of its institutional culture to enhance its practice, suggesting that this forms part of an iterative process through which practice is gradually improved. I therefore suggest that pedagogical models that avoid conflict are ones that cannot evolve, that the language of 'rupture' is equally

vital in developing a model of CHRE to the language of “*renewal*” and that these offer key counterpoints in its process of evolution.

#### **7.4.3 The need for an evolving practice**

While the *critical* orientation points to the need for CHRE to move away from its historicism and conservatism (Hamilton, 2003; Keet, 2012), there is less clarity on how this translates into practice. In this study, I have demonstrated the compatibility of a critical conception of human rights with Ledwith’s theory of Community Development. This is just one possible approach and future studies exploring the theoretical and practical opportunities to integrate learning from related disciplines within HRE may suggest new ways of developing the critical model. Furthermore, the wider embrace of different perspectives within HRE suggests ways in which it can evolve organically as a dynamic practice. This may illustrate how ideas about the universality of human rights exist alongside alternative cultural codes that enhance, rather than challenge, its emancipatory vision. By moving away from the “*mantra*” or “*idolatry*” of human rights (Keet, 2007; 2012), therefore, CHRE can provide constructive forums to strengthen learning between disciplines to enhance their value in a globalising world to counter *counter-hegemonic* predictions of their demise (Hopgood, 2013; Posner, 2014).

#### **7.5 Limitations**

I acknowledge that in my chosen approach, there are several limitations to making claims to knowledge. First, I recognise that many of the critiques of the “*declarationist*” model focus on HRE in a global post-conflict and development context, in which discussions about power structures and cultural difference take on a different meaning. I nonetheless suggest that explorations into the potential of CHRE in a Western context are valuable in helping to establish whether there is learning that may be applied in environments where the power dynamics are amplified. Second, making claims to knowledge through CPAR projects in general has certain limitations. These include the necessarily localised and context-specific nature of these studies set against their transformational aims. The small participant

group in this study limits the claims that can be made at a wider scale in terms of improving practice and instigating change.

Furthermore, working with a group of participants already engaged in social activism meant that they were pre-disposed to adopt practices of critique within an HRE context, begging questions about the viability of this approach in different forums. It is important to acknowledge, in particular, that the design of the board game (which was informed by the perspectives of project participants and their specific experience of HRE) resulted in a social change tool that may not accommodate the breadth of perspectives in more diverse communities. This is significant given its overall purpose to democratise conversations about human rights at a local level. While the Community Researchers did discuss access and accessibility for players during the design process, these concerns stemmed primarily from their personal experiences or known needs within their communities. Finally, I recognise that while this project was not constrained by the institutional processes of formal education settings, it faced the distinct challenges that affect CSO-led projects and form part of the “*practice architectures that enable and constrain practice*” (Kemmis et al, 2013, p.104). These are specific to each context, but in this case included an overall lack of resourcing, which impacted who could participate in the project.

## **7.6 Looking ahead**

The motivation for this study was to improve practice, both my own and within the sector. On a personal level, I have changed my thinking about what it means to be a researcher, a practitioner in this field and about the barriers we often create while talking about our ideas about *participation, access, diversity* and *empowerment*. I have also learnt that it is always possible to improve, even with limited time and resources. The human rights board game designed by the Community Researchers completed development after the timeframes of this study and is now available for anyone (the Community Researchers, other activists, community members, practitioners, lawyers and others) to use as a social change tool, helping to make human rights relevant to a wider audience. It was formally launched at an event hosted by the CSO, inviting others to explore human rights from a different

perspective. The audit completed by the CSO has been used to inform their future work with grassroots activists, policy and influencing, and workplace culture. The CSO has also received feedback from its wider partners at a local and national level about how the Community Researchers' *'Human Rights Manifesto'* has informed their approach to HRE. Looking ahead, I aim to work with the CSO, the Community Researchers and others to continue efforts to change the approach to human rights within the sector.

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## Appendix 1: CSO Community Researcher Consent Form

### [CSO] Community Researcher Project

#### Baseline info gathering

July 2021

1. Tell us about yourself, your background and experience of social action:
2. Tell us a little about your community/project/organisation:
3. Why do you want to be part of the [CSO] Community Research project?
4. Are there any potential barriers you may face in making the most of this opportunity that the [CSO] can work to support?

- - -

Name:

Project name / Organisation:

Contact number:

Email:

Address:

Twitter handle:

*We ask for Emergency contact person in case that any session content is triggering and we need to check in on your welfare after a session. This is unlikely but is part of our digital safeguarding practice and policy.*

**Emergency contact person name:**

**Emergency contact person phone number:**

*It may prove useful to record our zoom sessions, so we are able to extract quotes/footage at a later stage for inclusion in the project's output. Any quotes or footage used will only be used with the express permission of the participants involved.*

**Do you consent to the sessions being recorded? Yes/No**

**Do you consent for your contact details to be shared with other members of the project? Yes/No**

## Appendix 2: Participant Observation Sheet

|                          |   |  |                                      |                                   |  |                                  |  |
|--------------------------|---|--|--------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|--|----------------------------------|--|
| Session [X]              | Session Structure: <i>[agenda, topics, timings]</i>   |  |                                      |                                   |  |                                  |  |
| Date [X]                 | Participants: <i>[PRs, CRs, VAs...]</i>   |  |                                      |                                   |  |                                  |  |
| Framework Stage          | (1) <i>Voicing Values</i>   | (2) <i>Making Critical Connections</i> | (3) <i>Critiquing and Dissenting</i> | (4) <i>Imagining Alternatives</i> | (5) <i>Creating Counter-narratives</i> | (6) <i>Connecting and Acting</i> | (7) <i>Cooperating for a Common Good</i> |
|                          | <i>[Observations]</i><br><br><i>[...]</i>   |  |                                      |                                   |  |                                  |  |
| Transcript               | <i>[full session transcript]</i>  |  |                                      |                                   |  |                                  |  |
| Comments on Interactions | <i>[observations of learning dynamics]</i>  |  |                                      |                                   |  |                                  |  |
| Notes on Themes          | <i>[e.g. discussions focused on ideas around 'power']</i>                                   |  |                                      |                                   |  |                                  |  |
| Group Reflections        | <i>[feedback and reflections from reflection exercises at end of session]</i>               |  |                                      |                                   |  |                                  |  |
| Personal Reflections     | <i>[observations from reflective journal]</i>   |  |                                      |                                   |  |                                  |  |
| Practice Reflections     | <i>[reflections on learning/learning space. Questions/ideas about the research process]</i> |  |                                      |                                   |  |                                  |  |
| Research Reflections     | <i>[preliminary analysis of data in relation to research questions]</i>                     |  |                                      |                                   |  |                                  |  |

### **Appendix 3: Mid-way and Exit Interview Questions**

#### **Examples of Prepared Questions:**

*How are you finding the project?*

*What are your feelings about human rights?*

*How have your perceptions changed?*

*What has been your experience of the learning space/process?*

*What aspects have worked well/not worked well?*

*In what ways could we do/have done things differently?*

*How valuable do you think human rights will be in your future work?*

*Who do you consider your future partners and allies?*

*Do you have further comments or feedback?*

#### **Examples of Prompt Questions:**

*How does this affect you/your work/activism?*

*Why do you think that is?*

*How might this change?*

*What happens next?*

*Who needs to hear this?*

*Tell me more about that?*

#### Appendix 4: Example of Early Theme Matrix (Condensed) – Community Development Analysis

| Theme                | Sub-Themes  | Participant Response   | New Themes   |
|----------------------|---|--|--|
| Voicing Values       | <p><b>Key</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Reciprocity <b>RE</b></li> <li>Trust <b>TR</b></li> <li>Equality <b>EQ</b></li> <li>Human Dignity <b>HD</b></li> <li>Mutual Respect <b>MR</b></li> <li>Diversity <b>DI</b></li> <li>Empathy <b>EM</b></li> </ul>     | <p><b>Reciprocity</b> Giving, Collaboration, Cooperation.</p> <p><b>Trust</b> Trust, Truth, Honesty, Transparency, Overlap in values, Common values.</p> <p><b>Equality</b> Equality, Equal and just society, Fair society, Fairness, Inclusion, Inclusive, Not being othered, Partnership, Non-hierarchical, Non-discrimination.</p> <p><b>Human Dignity</b> Human dignity, Dignity, Humanity, Humanness, Freedom from oppression.</p> <p><b>Mutual Respect</b> Mutual respect, Mutual support, Mutuality, Non-judgemental, Listening.</p> <p><b>Diversity</b> Diversity, Difference, Lived experience, Difference in experience.</p> <p><b>Empathy</b> Empathy, Understanding, Nurture</p>   | <p><b>Access</b></p> <p><b>Accountability</b></p> <p><b>Power</b></p> <p><b>Honesty</b></p>                                |
| Critical Connections | <p><b>Key</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>New Lens <b>LE</b></li> <li>Naming Problem <b>NP</b></li> <li>Contradictions <b>CN</b></li> <li>Provocations <b>PR</b></li> <li>Critical Questions <b>CQ</b></li> <li>Reconstructing Identities <b>RI</b></li> </ul> | <p><b>New Lens</b> Gender, Class, Human Rights, Locality, Structural, Intersectional, Ethnicity, Personal, Social Justice, Collective, Power.</p> <p><b>Naming Problem</b> Racism, Mental health access, Socio-economic inequality, Discrimination, Poverty, Law, Tokenism, Structural inequality, Institutional power.</p> <p><b>Contradictions</b> Poverty discrimination, Systemic inequality, Unfair laws, Empowerment, Ownership, Incomplete rights.</p> <p><b>Provocations</b> Race equality, Mental health, Gender equality, Poverty, Solidarity, Access, Power, Discrimination, Rights.</p> <p><b>Critical Questions</b> Health, Mental health, Work, Environment, Inequality, Power.</p> <p><b>Reconstructing Identities</b> Human Rights, Intersectional, Critical thought, Sites of power, Access, Experts.</p> | <p><b>Mental health</b></p> <p><b>Resilience</b></p> <p><b>Solidarity</b></p> <p><b>Resistance</b></p> <p><b>Power</b></p> |