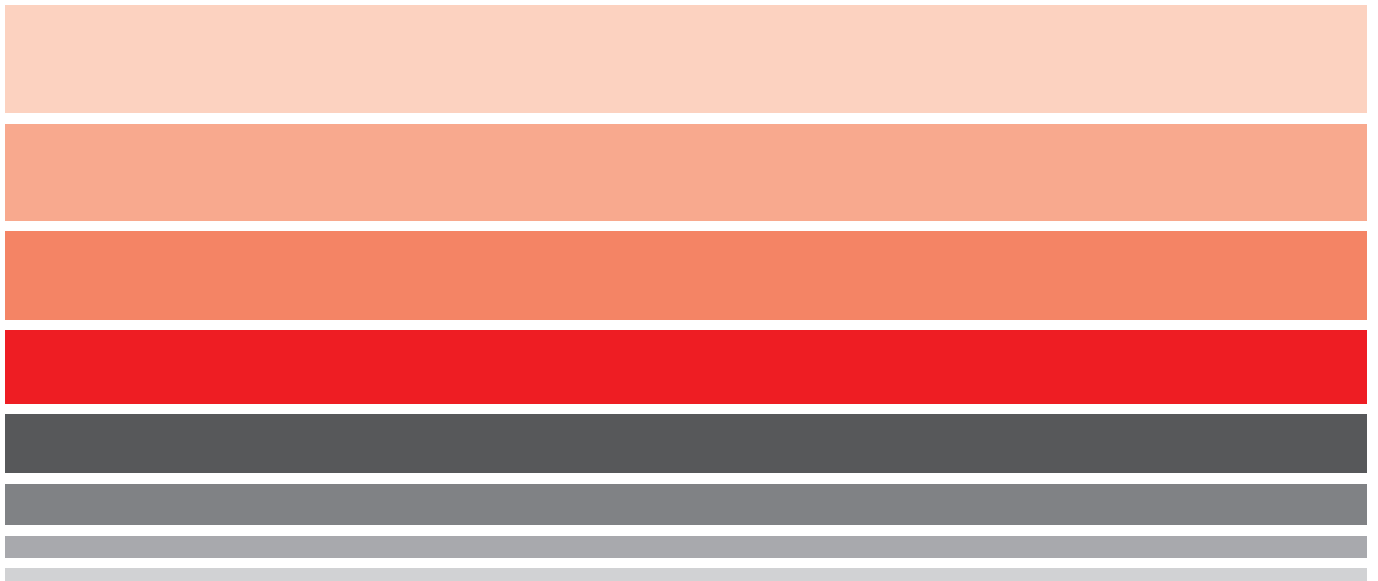


RESEARCHING POVERTY:

The Benefits of a Community
Research Approach



Researching Poverty: The Benefits of a Community Research Approach

Introduction

The Evidence Participation and Change (EPIC) project began in 2009 and is funded by the Big Lottery Fund. The aim of the project is to create processes whereby people with experience of the issues of poverty have the opportunity to play an active role in anti-poverty policy development in Scotland. As part of this process the project has undertaken a programme of community research. This programme has delivered three well-received pieces of research by working with young people in Stirling, ex-offenders in west central Scotland, and lone parents in rural Fife.¹

Community research looks to involve people experiencing poverty in the research process. This shifts away from traditional research approaches where people living in poverty are perceived as merely to be the subject matter of the research, with very little influence or control over the research process. Community research seeks to change this approach looking to involve people in the design, delivery, analysis and dissemination of the research, moving from treating people as passive subjects to active participants in research.

In order to share the learning from the EPIC research programme to date, this briefing sheet outlines the theory of community research, the advantages and challenges of this methodological approach and provides an outline of the value community research can bring to the policy process.

Key messages

- Community research seeks to empower and embed experiences of those affected by poverty into the process.
- Recruitment in the research requires time and resources, particularly if working with more marginalised or vulnerable groups.
- It requires careful planning and resources to be an effective process.
- Ethical considerations must be embedded throughout the process.
- It provides new ways of exploring a subject matter and therefore can provide new insights and data on a topic.

Background and theory of community research

Research is a dynamic process that explores social life and in the context of the modern society, the need for information has never been greater. Social research allows us to explore and generate knowledge on the world around us.

Exploring the power dynamics of research we find that power is concentrated and placed in the hands of those who are able to generate and produce knowledge. This has been traditionally in the hands of specific groups or institutions within society such as think tanks, government departments, and academic institutions. Traditional research draws upon the 'positivist' tradition, this constructs knowledge as being deduced or created by following specific lines of enquiry (D' Cruz 2000). This theoretical position emphasises objectivity and focuses on minimising the subjectivity of the researcher (D' Cruz 2000). It fails to acknowledge the position of the researcher in the knowledge he or she generates in the research. As Sarantakos argues the research controls the research design, process and interpretation and so therefore the researcher can "influence the nature of the knowledge produced through the project" (2005:14).

Construction of knowledge through research can be examined through another perspective. Interpretivist models of research draw from the researchers own position within the research (D' Cruz 2000). This empathises the subjectivity of the researcher and the role this plays in the construction of knowledge (D' Cruz 2000). By doing so the researcher is implicit about their values and positioning within the research project. They are clear about the power of the researcher within the work.

Community research models or participatory research models draws upon interpretivist paradigms of research. They seek to readdress the traditional power relations within the research process and are often used to allow individuals and groups within society access to producing and generating their own knowledge.

Community or participatory models incorporate an interpretivist perspective. They seek to embed a reflexive approach and will be implicit about how their role as producers of knowledge is shaped by for example, gender, ethnicity and other factors.

¹ See McHardy, F (2011) 'Out of Jail and Still not Free: Experiences of Temporary Accommodation on Leaving Prison', Glasgow: Poverty Alliance, McHardy, F (2011) 'Lost Sheep Looking for Somewhere to Go: A study into young people in the transition from school to employment, education or training.' Glasgow: Poverty Alliance, McHardy, F (2013) 'Surviving Poverty: The Impact of Lone Parenthood', Glasgow: Poverty Alliance, www.povertyalliance.org/epic

Researching poverty

For policy makers, there is a broad range of research studies available on the subject of poverty. The context of an increasing emphasis on evidence based policy making has created a context that creates a more active audience for research. There is a wide range of research studies available on poverty, in particularly exploring experiences of poverty such as housing adequacy, access to services, child poverty, fuel poverty, to name a few key areas. All of this provides policy makers with a broad range of evidence, however very few research undertake or utilise methodologies that empower and actively utilise the experience of those affected by issues of poverty.

Traditionally research undertaken on poverty treats those affected by the experience of poverty as passive participants. Individuals were viewed as the subject of the research, the topic of which was more often than not pre determined prior to their involvement. The research in this form could be viewed as top down and disempowering. It viewed people living in poverty as passive recipients of the research (Bennett & Roberts 2004: 9). This has led many researchers to reflect on the production of knowledge that such methods employ and there has been a shift in recent years towards changing this research approach towards approaches promoting active involvement and 'co-production' of those affected by poverty.

The move towards participatory methodologies has derived from a broader shift towards recognition of the rights and skills of citizens within society. In particular there is strong emphasis from international development work carried out in the global south (Service User Involvement 2007). The United Nations (1995) places emphasis on participation in their definition of empowerment, stating that:

'Developments must be by the people, not only for them. People must participate fully in the decisions and processes that shape their lives' UN (1995b:12).²

Allowing people in poverty control and power within the research process can bring many benefits. Bennett & Robert argue for the need to recognise "the particular expertise of people with experience of poverty to put forward their own realities and their right to do so and can also make research more effective and improve its impact on policy" (2004 : vii)

Participation within research

The level of participation involved in participatory research projects is dependent on context of that research. Research projects are constrained and shaped by many factors and projects seeking to employ participatory approaches are no different. Indeed, it is important to note that participatory approaches will often require greater resources and sometimes more time than 'traditional' research.

Various approaches have been taken to attempt to clarify the different 'levels' of participation that can take place, levels that apply in a variety of contexts, not simply within research processes (Hart 1997), (Shier 2001) (Arnstein 1969). These models illustrate the levels of involvement or stages of participation or co production as it is also referred.


One of the key lessons to emerge from the participatory research carried out by the Poverty Alliance, through the EPiC project and that, fundamentally, participatory methodologies refer to an approach and ethos. As summarized "when people talk about participatory research, participatory monitoring and participatory evaluation, on the whole they are not discussing a self-contained set of methodologies, but a situation whereby the methods being used have included an element of strong involvement and consultation on the part of the subjects of the research" (Pratt and Loizos 1992 cited in Bennett and Roberts 2004: 5).

What is needed to conduct participatory research?

In order for any participatory research project to be successful it must be clear on the resources that are available and what 'level' of participation that the research project can deliver. Community research requires a reflective and considered approach and those involved in guiding the process should view their position as a facilitative role.

Those seeking to undertake this approach to research projects must be honest and realistic about what the project is able to do. Carefully reflecting on this will avoid frustration and tokenistic involvement of individuals and communities of interest. Failing to do so this can bring about negative effects such as further disempowerment of those involved and damage the credibility of participatory research projects.

² United Nations (1995) Human Development Report 1995: Gender and human development. <http://hdr.undp.org/reports/global/1995/en>



Practical considerations are also central to the success of the research project. Involving people with experience of poverty requires that barriers to participation, as far as possible, are removed. On a most basic level, issues such as travel costs, and other financial barriers must be addressed. In addition, consideration must be given to creating an environment that is inclusive and comfortable for people to feel that they have ownership within the process. Central to this will be the need to build relationships between those initiating the research and those who are being involved at the start of the process.

Participation must be viewed in context. To begin an inclusive participative research process, adequate time must be allowed to recruit and involve people. This time should not be underestimated as it can often take time to recruit people who may be distrustful or cynical about what they will gain from the process. In particular key questions will often be asked of how research will bring about social change and in the early stages of the research process this may be difficult to answer.

People will engage with different motivations and so managing expectations is crucial. In addition being involved in research is a time consuming and intensive process and the process of research dissemination will often be ongoing process, taking far longer than original predicted dissemination timescales. And again, this part of the process must be planned and resourced if the research is to have a real impact.

Flexibility is also critical within the research process. The nature of this process will involve many factors that traditional projects do not face such as demystifying the research process, building in support and training, and building in slippage time within the project is critical. In particular, a level of flexibility in relation to the timescale for analysis and write up, which will often be some of the more challenging stages of the project, should be included. Alternative methods of dissemination, as opposed to the traditional reports or paper should be considered.

What are the advantages?

There are clear advantages to research that utilize participatory methodologies.

Firstly, the knowledge produced in the research will provide new insights and often data that may not have been obtained by other more traditional forms of enquiry. Often those with similar experiences will be viewed as trusted intermediaries within a community of interest. Those involved in the research will have experience or

connection with the subject matter at hand and will be able to draw upon that expertise and knowledge to create a more sensitive research process.

The construction of the research process will in particular create a different lens for understanding an issue and in particular the reach of the research may provide different solutions to problems. In doing so more effective policy solutions can be identified, for example helping to provide a better understanding of how services are accessed.

Secondly the research will provide those involved with new skills and resources that they may not have had previously prior to involvement. Such skills may have longer term benefits such as enhancing employability.

What are the challenges?

As outlined previously this is not an easy approach to implement. Several critical challenges are posed by participatory approaches.

- Resourcing the process: there is a significant amount of time and money involved to make participatory research process effective.
- Maintaining involvement: for people experiencing poverty this can be challenging as the nature of living in poverty means that life circumstances can change and may inhibit the ability of individuals or communities to be involved. In addition for more vulnerable or hard to reach groups may have more chaotic lifestyles which make longer term participation more difficult.
- Credibility: research that employs such methodologies can sometimes be viewed against other forms of research as biased or of a lower quality than other forms of research.

Ethics

Support is critical within community research to ensure that individuals are not negatively affected by their involvement in the research process. The nature of the research involves a deep immersion in the subject matter which will often raise difficult and unsettling experiences. In particular those who are researching will have a close connection with the experiences. Acknowledging this is critical to enable steps and processes to be built into the research process. Good community research projects should adhere to ethical guidelines such as those of the Social Research Association.

Why is it effective for researching poverty?

The policy context in which research on poverty is carried out is subject to constant change. This changing policy context requires, it can be argued, a need to focus on the lived experience of poverty. Participatory research on poverty can be useful in adding to quantitative studies of poverty, where there will often be a significant time lag between collecting data and its analysis and publication. In this way participatory research on poverty can be more responsive, often giving an early indication of the impact of new policies.

People experiencing poverty often speak of the stigma and discrimination faced as a result of living in poverty. By using participatory methods, it can be possible to undermine the often stereotypical views that underpin the stigma that many people experiencing poverty face. The research can be shaped by the perspective of those affected by the issues and can provide a lens for viewing poverty from a grassroots perspective. In effect this lens can be one that is more inclusive. It focuses on being "sensitive to the way one designs the research and interacts with research participants, community members, gatekeepers and relevant others" (Sieber 1993 :19). This creates a new knowledge base which will provide vital evidence on the experiences of poverty. Fundamentally this approach draws upon "the opportunity of getting more and better information the rights of people in poverty to put forward their own realities; and the opportunities it can give them to influence policy and practice" (McGee with Norton, 2000 cited in Bennett and Roberts 2004: 10).

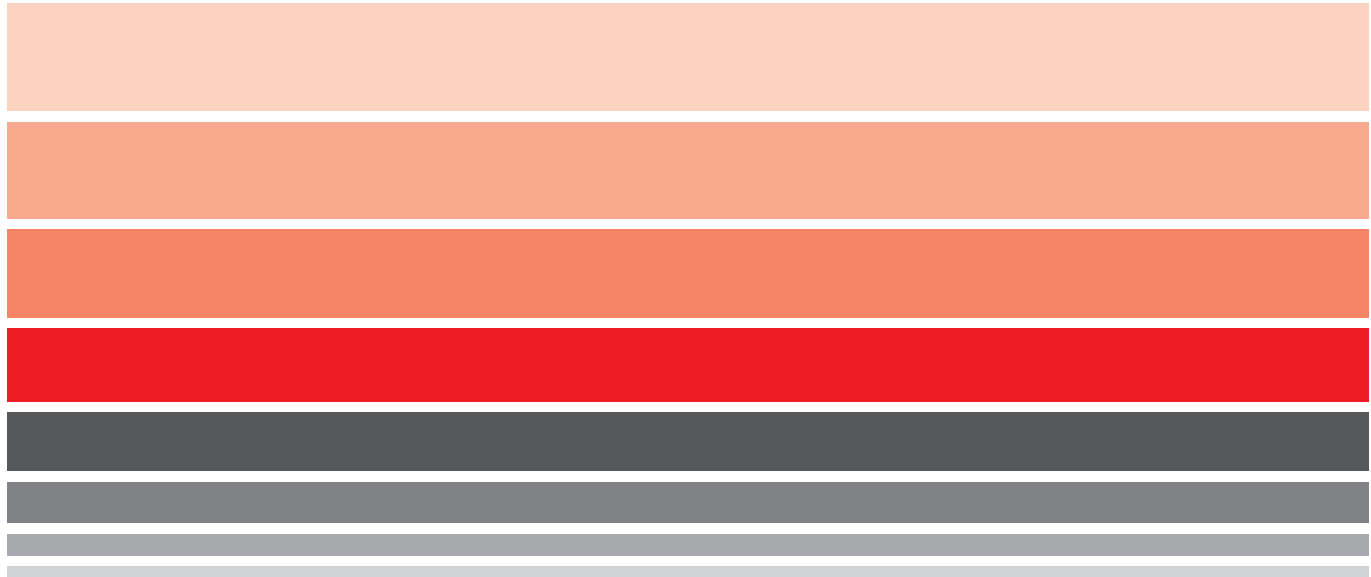
Future for Community Research: Recommendations and Reflections

As in many other areas of social policy in Scotland, there is a growing emphasis on participation and co production within social research. Research carried out on quality within social policy research has found there is more work being undertaken within social policy that utilizes user involvement in the research process and that there are many perceived benefits in this in terms of the quality of research produced. (Becker et al 2006 : 17)

Within a policy making context, work published by the Cabinet Office stated several characteristics that policy making should aspire to. Three of those characteristics in particular are relevant to participatory research. The Cabinet Office states that policy making should be "innovative and creative: questions the status quo and is open to new ideas; Evidence based: uses the best available evidence from a wide range of sources; Inclusive: is fair and takes account of the interests of all " (Cabinet Office 1999) By opening up the policy making context, participatory models of research could have a far greater role to play in the future of policy making.

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