

FULL-LENGTH ARTICLES

Understanding the Role of Community Peer Research Training in Creating New Knowledge Across Different Forms of Expertise: A Reflection on Methods

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This paper considers the role and practice of training in community peer research projects. Community peer research aims to engage with and work across communities inside and outside of academia to co-develop research plans, activity, analysis and action. The role of training is recognised as important and yet detailed descriptions of content and methods are rarely shared. To address this, this paper shares my own practice and reflects on the wider literature to consider different approaches, methods, and assumptions. I consider how training engages with issues around power, knowledge construction and ethical practice to consider what ‘good’ looks like across the process. I suggest that greater attention should be paid to the development of methods and theories that underpin training in community peer research practice and call for methodological innovation and theoretical development of the role of community peer research training.

Introduction

This paper reflects on the role of training in community peer research by discussing the literature and sharing examples of my own practice with the aim of opening a dialogue about the methods and theories that underpin our conceptualisation and practice of training in community peer research practice.

The idea for this paper came about as I began working on a series of workshops and seminars for academics and students on community engaged research and impact. I use the term community engaged research broadly to refer to research undertaken with communities. I recognise that the theories, language and practice of this research field are varied and complex and there is no one simple definition. A commonality across community engaged approaches is that community members are in some way part of the research process beyond being simply research participants. My own practice involves working with community members as community peer researchers to carry out research together. This approach generally involves an element of research training, this is framed in the literature as a way to support community members to carry out research activity and maintain research integrity.

As I reviewed the literature on community engaged research and designed the workshops and seminars, I found my thoughts kept returning to the tension between taking a genuinely community engaged approach to research which centred community knowledge and skills and challenged traditional ways of understanding the world, and the need to carry out research that the academic world would recognise as ‘good’ and fit within institutional and wider funding structures and timelines. It is a tension that I have been aware of, worked with, found challenging, compromised on and discussed with colleagues many times. Training sits at the heart of this tension, training community peer researchers needs to prepare people to carry out good, impactful, ethical research. However, carrying out community peer research is about changing academic practice and doing things differently, not replicating our current ways of working and simply training communities into working as academics do. My aim with this paper is to explore this tension and reflect on how I work with it in my own practice, engaging with debates around knowledge production, expertise, ethics and power. In writing this paper I do not wish to suggest that there is a ‘correct’ way to train community peer researchers. Rather I adopt an open narrative approach to open-up a conversation that supports the development of community peer research training.

I began working in community peer research around 10 years ago on the Alonely project, working with a team of community researchers to research loneliness (Barke, 2016; Manchester & Barke, 2020). I was employed by a community organisation, BS3 Community Development, in Bristol, UK as part of The Productive Margins Programme (www.productivemargins.blogs.bristol.ac.uk). Following this project, I worked for several years across community engaged research at The University of Bristol and The University of the West of England. I became increasingly interested in the practice and ethics of working with community peer researchers. I worked at The Young Foundation for two years where I managed a portfolio of community peer research projects and delivered training in community peer research to peer researchers, communities, academics, artists, charities, and others engaged in community peer research. In 2024 I moved into an academic role at the University of Exeter with a focus on engaged research and impact. Much of the community peer research training I have designed and delivered has been approached instinctively, drawing on my multidisciplinary background and experience in different sectors. I take a pragmatic approach to community peer research asking; what would work in *this* context with *these* partners to understand more about *this* topic. This paper attempts to unpick this by sharing and interrogating my methods and approach.

In the following sections, I outline my approach to community peer research and situate my practice within the wider field of participatory practice. I reflect on the principles that frame this work and review the motivations and values that underpin it, sharing the ethical principles that I

draw on across my practice. I then focus on the ‘doing’ of the work, sharing the pragmatics of how I approach this work and consider what ‘good’ looks like across the process, focusing on the importance of finding explicit ways of sharing, valuing and working across different forms of expertise.

Situating Community Peer Research

Across communities, the third sector, and academia there is an increasing focus on working co-productively using participatory methods to develop, carry out and act on research so that research is inclusive, ethical, meaningful and impactful.

Research increasingly draws on participatory methods to co-produce projects, findings, and outputs (D. M. Bell & Pahl, 2018; Pain et al., 2011). Coproducing research can be an act of inclusion, a way of democratising research by bringing diverse forms of expertise together and engaging with lived experience (Beebejaun et al., 2015; D. M. Bell & Pahl, 2018; Campbell & Vanderhoven, 2016). Those engaged in participatory practice include activists, researchers, education and heritage teams, artists and community members, drawing on practice and traditions underpinned by diverse epistemologies, research methods, aims and ethical standpoints (Facer & Enright, 2016). This ‘*participatory turn*’ (Facer & Enright, 2016) can be seen across disciplines, sectors and communities where ‘research’, ‘coproduction’, ‘participation’, ‘impact’ and ‘ethics’ as terminology and practice have different meanings, underlying principles, and aims, as well as complex histories. While this diversity is to be celebrated, there is a danger that these different understandings and practices are not always shared across disciplinary and sectoral boundaries. This may lead to missed opportunities for learning and miscommunication.

In UK academia participatory research methods can be seen as part of a civic university agenda, a way of widening participation, making research more engaging and are a recognised route to impact (Bandola-Gill et al., 2023; Bayley, 2023; Bayley et al., 2018; Eisenstadt & McLellan, 2020). Impact is an area of focus for many UK academics with the next Research Excellence Framework (a nationwide assessment exercise which measures academic quality and impact outside of academia) approaching in 2029. These initiatives, amongst others, call for a different understanding of research and the place of universities in society. Outside of academia, communities, charities, artists and researchers have long questioned the hierarchy of knowledge production and have carried out collaborative and creative research practice drawing on a wide range of different traditions across the arts and community development. Community research can be a way to build resilience and capacity, by bringing people together (Arnall & Kanjilal, 2024). In the third sector, a strong interest in participatory research can be seen through schemes including Community Research Networks and the Community Knowledge Fund that support communities to play a more active role in research (administered by The Young Foundation and funded by UK Research and Innovation). While approaches have diverse

histories, practices and terminologies what they generally have in common is a commitment to valuing different types of knowledge and the desire to produce new knowledge in a democratic and collaborative manner (Banks, 2012; Heron & Reason, 2008; Vaughn & Jacquez, 2020).

One way to democratise research and challenge power imbalances between communities and universities is to carry out research together. Much of my own practice in participatory research has involved working with community peer researchers. I choose to use the term ‘community peer research’ to focus on community engaged participatory research that actively engages with individuals and/or collectives who have lived or felt experience of the research topic as researchers. This work can be broadly defined by its aim which is to engage and work across communities inside and outside of academia to co-develop research plans, activity, analysis and action. Involving people with experience of a research topic in the research process recognises that knowledge is enhanced through ‘experiential expertise’ (Collins & Evans, 2002). The lived reality of community peer researchers brings a distinct perspective which crosses disciplinary boundaries and bridges different forms of knowledge (Eversole, 2010; Greenaway & McDowell, 2019). Working with community peer researchers is seen as a way of supporting the redistribution of power, by bringing together diverse forms of expertise to produce and disseminate knowledge that is relevant and interesting to communities inside and outside of academia (Christopher et al., 2008; Mosavel & Sanders, 2014; Salway et al., 2015). This approach is an attempt to work collaboratively with communities and move away from an extractive model of research. This recognises that individuals in the community are competent, knowledgeable and capable of participating in research on a variety of levels, including as researchers (Yang & Dibb, 2020).

In their guide to working on research projects with universities Wellspring Settlement, a community development organisation, write that “*The potential benefits of co-produced research are broad, sometimes far-reaching and potentially radical*” (Hutchen & Oliver, 2021, p. 7). They suggest these benefits include the community and university learning from one another. They note that the production of knowledge informed by ‘real experiences’ leads to better and more valuable insights. They also note that through collaboration, the methods of participatory research can be influenced by communities. New friendships and collaborations develop which in turn promote better awareness and understandings of one another’s worlds and practice. Pragmatically, they write that research can deliver funding to communities as well as time and the opportunity to focus on an issue and reflect. For individual community peer researchers, they note the importance of people seeing a model for progression and gaining an understanding of ‘the university’ as well as increased employability, skills, connections and confidence. They suggest that a community research project can be the start of something new for many individuals.

In writing about community peer research, it would be remiss not to recognise that the language of ‘community’ and ‘peer’ is disputed and complex. Communities are not homogenous, and claims of representation can be overstated, the concept of community in and of itself has been critiqued (Banerji, 2020; Joseph, 2002). Furthermore, the distinction between academic researcher and community member/researcher can be fluid and complex (Monzon & Warsame, 2024). The ‘empowerment’ model of communities adopting responsibility for social care and structures, has long been described as neo-liberal (Hall & Reed, 1998). In reflecting on their experience working with citizen scientists, Bell & Whyte (2024) share how the communities they worked with challenged the idea that they were ‘empowered’ by the projects as this suggested they were previously disempowered.

While community peer research has its roots in principles of social justice and inclusion, it is also important to recognise that, as Fine et al (2021, p. 346) write *“The move to include and privilege those most impacted by injustice as coresearchers is not simply an act of empathy or decolonizing; it is a commitment to good science”*. Community participation in research can reach further into the community (Fernández, 2002) and can improve methodological development, data analysis, and lead to greater impact (Åkerström & Brunnberg, 2013). Working with communities can help researchers to ask the right questions, use the right methods, interpret contextually and apply findings. Collaborative research is used and valued across disciplines to solve complex ‘wicked’ problems by working across different forms of expertise (Facer & Enright, 2016; Scher et al., 2023). Community peer research can increase access within and across communities, providing in-depth experiential contextual knowledge which makes for better data. This has the potential to activate communities and create radical transformation of social reality (Yang & Dibb, 2020).

Community peer research is only meaningful if all aspects of engagement and collaboration are given appropriate and careful thought, this involves adopting a reflexive approach and thinking carefully about who to work with and how. In community peer research ethical research is related to the procedural, the personal, the relational and the pragmatic. Projects are generally funded through universities meaning that institutional processes frame and regulate the project (McDermont et al., 2020). University systems and regulations are essential to engage with, however if unexamined university ethical procedures can lead to a paternalistic approach as; *“They assume predictability rather than flexibility in the research process, tend to be ‘risk averse’ and may categorise community researchers in the same way as research participants who are simply informants.”* (Banks et al., 2016). There is therefore a balance to find between the academic ethical position of ‘doing no harm’ and genuinely changing practice and sharing power with communities.

An ethical approach to community peer research must be relational and include investing in and developing community peer research roles by supporting individuals through training and mentoring (Elliott et al., 2002). Across accounts of community peer research, the importance of training community peer researchers is well recognised, although the literature lacks consistency and clarity (Vaughn et al., 2018) and detailed accounts or evaluations are rarely shared. There is a clear need to strengthen the discourse of community peer research training methods and curricula (Eaton et al., 2018), and this is where I situate this paper.

What is training in community peer research?

Guidance on designing and delivering training in community peer research is available from a range of sources including charities, community groups, health and social care organisations, and universities. Resources generally provide advice on approaching training and highlight topics to cover including research methods and skills as well as ethics and safeguarding. Free training guides and resources are offered online in the form of videos, guides and toolkits. Training is often context or project specific, although there are groups and organisations offering consultancy, broader training and accreditation for community peer researchers (including The Young Foundation www.youngfoundation.org/peer-research-network/get-involved/, UCL www.ucl.ac.uk/short-courses/search-courses/community-based-research-getting-started, and Kings College London & Future Learn www.futurelearn.com/courses/research-methods-a-practical-guide-to-peer-and-community-research).

Some of the most well-known resources in the UK third sector are those shared by Partnership for Young London who provide free support and training for organisations and young people. Their report (Walsham, 2020) on peer research projects found that while training was a huge consideration, community peer research projects varied greatly in the amount of time dedicated to this. Training generally lasted less than 10 hours in total on a project and focused on practical information rather than theory. Training delivery varied, some projects had intensive training upfront, generally on the research topic and methods, others took a staged approach with training spread out during the life of the project. Research training focused on qualitative skills like interviews. Topics such as data protection and consent forms were usually taught practically. Safeguarding training differed depending on the methodology chosen and was often scenario based. Research ethics were described as difficult to teach in an engaging way. Walsham's report highlights that training needs to be tailored carefully to the project and people involved, must be high quality and help researchers to make meaningful decisions and minimise risk to them and participants. Drawing on the report findings Young London produced a comprehensive toolkit and online resources and advice on peer research training (Walsham, 2021). In this the authors note that the "*most important aspect to the success to a peer research project is the time reserved to training*" (p21). They write that

training should develop capacity and skills for community peer researchers, address power imbalances, support meaningful decision making and produce better research. This involves paying attention to time allocated to training, the timing and pacing of training and how it is delivered. The toolkit provides guidance on all stages of the research process, from developing research questions to designing methods, carrying out research, analysis and dissemination/campaigning. The toolkit draws on case studies and provides prompts, links and practical tips. Ethical principles and advice are included along with example consent forms and safeguarding advice.

The value of adopting a tailored approach is a common theme across accounts of community peer research. Kaida et al (2019) describe how they designed a tailored training curriculum by considering the skills and attributes of the community peer researchers they were working with and the intended training outcomes. This helped them to identify the core knowledge and skills needed and develop appropriate training methods. Others describe how, rather than running a series of training sessions, they draw on scaffolding and capacity building approaches (Åkerström & Brunnberg, 2013) or describe adopting an open empathetic approach based on blended action learning principles (Eaton et al., 2018). Kilpatrick et al (2007) describe a community peer research training programme which drew on resources developed by Kirby (1999) and Save the Children (2000) publications. Training focused on team building, understanding the research, and outlining the methods (interviews). Role-play was an important element of the training which included working on interview technique and drafting interview schedules. Training also covered ethics, including consent, monitoring the impact of the research on participants, privacy, confidentiality, child protection procedures, the use and storage of data and researcher safety. Training involved agreeing clear procedures and protocols and developing practical tools.

It is well recognised across the literature, in guides and blogs that community peer research generally requires more time, money and training than researchers may anticipate (Vaughn et al., 2018). This approach is time heavy and resource intensive (Yang & Dibb, 2020). Training does not just take place at the start of a project; learning happens throughout a project. Ensuring that there is adequate time allocated to delivering responsive, good quality training across a project is a challenge articulated across the literature. It is important to build in sufficient flexible time during research process to adapt to the needs of the community peer researchers and to hold time later in project timelines for acting on the findings (Greenaway & McDowell, 2019). Project budgets need to allocate appropriate funding to ongoing training and support. Within this, payment for community peer researchers should be clear and fair. There is guidance available regarding rates and methods of payment and expenses (including <https://www.nihr.ac.uk/payment-guidance-researchers-and-professionals> and Yang & Dibb, 2020).

However, community peer research is generally precarious, and payment processes are often complex which may compound injustice within research projects (Kinnon et al., 2021).

Training should engage community peer researchers and enable their knowledge and expertise to be centred in the research process. Community peer research should challenge the concept of expertise (Fine & Torre, 2019, p. 2021) and not simply replicate existing structures. As Horner (2016, p. 35) writes;

“... the practice of training community participants in academic research methodologies serves to promote hegemonic research methods and knowledges, with the imposition of western, male and privileged research approaches and paradigms onto communities. In this sense co-construction can be considered as a new form of colonialism”

Horner suggests that mitigating this requires careful reflexivity and awareness of different ways of knowing. Throughout training, there must be a commitment and openness to challenging ways of thinking and working otherwise researchers are simply replicating traditional research practices. Community peer research should value different forms of expertise and actively find ways to work across them. This involves careful explicit consideration of accessibility and inclusivity. It is essential to actively consider individual barriers, community histories and structural obstacles to involvement and then design projects and training that meets the needs of those engaged. Facer and Enright (2016) note that in particular, Black and Minority Ethnic communities are poorly represented in collaborative research partnerships with universities. Addressing this involves acknowledging that research is not a level playing field for minoritised groups (Monzon et al., 2024). In their charter for co-production through an anti-racist lens, Monzon and colleagues outline the evidence of power imbalances in collaborative research and share guidance on how to address this. This work necessitates a commitment to equality and diversity throughout project development, research and dissemination (Facer et al., 2018; Monzon et al., 2024).

Designing training in community peer research

My approach to training draws on my experience working with academics across a range of disciplines, as well as community groups, activists and artists and the literature and resources I have shared in this paper. My approach is aligned with what Torre (2008, p. 110) refers to as contact zones; *“a ‘contact zone,’ is a messy social space where very differently situated people could work together across their own varying relationships to power and privilege”*. At the heart of my approach is the ambition to carry out research collaboratively, engaging across different ways of knowing and understanding the world. To do this meaningfully and ethically it is essential to create a space where different forms of expertise can be shared, explored and connected. This is an active facilitated process during which thought processes and structures

are made visible within and across the boundary spaces where different types of knowledge overlap (Beebejaun et al., 2015; Bovaird, 2007; Brown et al., 2020; Pohl et al., 2010).

In considering how to actively create this space, I draw on the work of Anne Edwards (2005, 2010, 2011). Edwards explores how expert collaborators work together to prevent the social exclusion of children and young people and proposes that successful collaboration involves working at the boundaries between different types of expertise. In these spaces collaborators develop common knowledge through dialogue and by making motivation, intent and values clear (Edwards, 2011, 2012). Through this activity collaborators collectively and clearly define what knowledge is important to the task they are collaborating on, expand their joint focus, unpick issues related to power and define tasks and resources. This common knowledge then mediates the work to be undertaken. Edwards is interested in the expertise that is employed in working in this way, writing that “*attention needs to be paid to the work that is done to create fluid and responsive horizontal linkages between practices.*” (Edwards, 2012, p. 23). Edwards’s work highlights the importance of purposeful relational expertise, activity, and common knowledge.

In the following sections I consider how I draw on the work shared in the previous sections to design training that makes thought processes and systems visible, creates linkages across practice and expertise, and develops the common knowledge that supports research activity.

Understanding the community context

Good quality community peer research, that results in meaningful action and change, involves careful thought about who to work with and how, recognising the relational framing of community peer research (Manchester & Barke, 2020). Partnerships take time and effort to develop (Facer & Enright, 2016), taking time to prepare for projects and identify common ground and mutual interests is essential (<https://www.commoncauseresearch.com/report/>). From the very early stages it is important to carefully consider who needs to be involved, at which juncture, and what involvement looks like (Monzon et al., 2024). Eisenstadt & McLellan (2020, p. 245) discuss this work in terms of ‘foregrounding’ and identify three dimensions of this work:

“(1) the practical, pertaining to what the project is for and how it will progress; (2) the epistemological, pertaining to shared understanding about how knowledge is and should be produced; and (3) the affective, pertaining to the felt ties between, or aversion to, collaborators, including the degree to which historical trauma or oppression is addressed through the collaboration process.”

These dimensions need to be expressly addressed and centred in early conversations and then threaded throughout the project. This involves all partners actively learning about one another’s practice, histories and the context they are working in including ambitions and challenges. This relational work involves being curious and taking the time to listen to

community partners and understand their world and adapt projects to fit within it. This is often best led by community partners. On the Lonely project (see: www.productivemargins.blogs.bristol.ac.uk/projects/isolation-and-loneliness/) the research team visited each of the community sites and a local community history expert led us on a guided walk of the area. Academics on the project were in learning mode and were shown the community context by those who knew it best.

Motivations, interests and values

As I begin planning training for community peer researchers, my initial focus is on making motivations, interests and values clear. To collaborate effectively and fairly all partners need to understand the task at hand and one another's motivations, interests and values so they can identify the opportunities that collaboration might bring and the challenges to manage. In practice this starts by collectively reviewing the project outline, sharing why the project came about and what the broad aim is. Within this it is important to make clear what is set in stone and non-negotiable and what can be changed and developed collectively.

Once there is a shared knowledge of the project outline, the next step is to share who all those involved in the research are as individuals and/or organisations. In practice this involves exploring why we are involved in the project, and sharing the assets, skills, and expertise we each bring with us. My approach to this depends on the make-up of the group, whether we are online or in person, how well people know each other and the time available. My starting point is to reflect on individual experience, one method for approaching this is by working through a 'River of Life' activity (originally devised by Joyce Mercer, see www.participatorymethods.org/method/river-of-life). This reflexive activity asks people to consider what their life would look like if it were a river, I encourage people to consider what they would like to share, sometimes I may add additional context around the project topic or provide a time frame or question. People generally work on this individually and then share what they are comfortable with. This activity provides a mechanism for sharing experience and expertise and gives control to the individual. Sharing a picture helps move conversations into a space which can feel less vulnerable and exposing than discussion alone. I have often found this exercise also supports conversations around accessibility and inclusion.

I then facilitate exercises that help people share why they joined the project, exploring different motivations values and aims. These can be anything from the very pragmatic to the political; for the pay is just as valid a reason as gaining skills or wanting to change the world. I might start by asking 'what do you hope to get out of this project?' and 'what about this project interests you?' This can take the form of a facilitated group conversation or may start in small groups or pairs with people sharing later with the collective. It can also be on post it notes or a creative task where people bring an artefact or pick a postcard that represents why they got involved. The aim is to provide

a comfortable and appropriate way for people to share and then explore commonality, as well as highlighting any ideas that may not fit within the project work.

My next step is to focus on assets, skills and expertise. This can involve asking people to share five things they bring to the project, these skills and expertise can be anything: big or small, political or personal. People are encouraged to name things they may not expect to use but want to share. This can be a written, discursive or creative activity. Another way to explore this, as we did on the Alonely project (Barke, 2016) is to map assets collectively. This can be done by writing on large pieces of paper with sub-headings, through collage or in conversation. Individuals list their skills, connections, organisations they know locally and physical assets they can draw on (see www.nurtureddevelopment.org/asset-based-community-development).

The activities shared here are designed to support community peer researchers and wider project teams to reflect on their own interests, skills and motivations and share them gently with others. Through this activity people start to get to know one another, start making connections, recognise difference and think about how they might work together. Sharing individual skills, interests and motivations provides a group with a shared understanding of the collective assets the group can draw on. As a facilitator these activities provide me with an understanding of those I am working with which supports me to take a relational, asset-based approach to research skills training, planning and activity.

Developing collective research plans

Once a group have shared their individual and collective motivations, interests and values my next step involves clearly defining what knowledge is important to the task that we are collaborating on and expanding our joint focus. In practice this involves developing a shared understanding of the research topic and a plan of how we want to work, defining the key tasks and resources to draw on.

I start by facilitating sessions that help a group to collectively engage with the research topic. This can be a group discussion, sharing written literature, watching videos or listening to podcasts or it can be delivered in the form of a masterclass. On a project about health equity, we invited a director of public health to talk through the theories and histories related to health equity theory and asked them to share local strategies. On the SPAN project (www.thespanproject.org.uk) we invited the previous CEO of SPAN to the community peer research group for a talk and Q&A on the organisation. This activity might involve community peer researchers sharing relevant information from other sources, convening a reading group or could involve the group carrying out independent research and discussing findings. This needs to be appropriate, accessible and engaging. This aim of this activity is to support the development of a collective understanding of why the research needs to happen and what is already known.

Designing plans and thinking about how to carry out the research involves facilitating exercises that promote conversations about what the group wants to do collectively and how they can achieve that. It is worth noting that research projects differ greatly in terms of how much community peer researchers can inform and adapt research questions and plans. On some community peer research projects almost all aspects of the work are predefined, on others there is little more than a broad topic, and some have been developed by communities themselves. I do not suggest that one way is intrinsically better, or worse, different projects have different goals, funding and timelines. What is essential is that how community peer researchers are involved (and why) is transparent, discussed during recruitment, and reported appropriately.

On most community peer research projects, I would expect to co-develop some aspect of the research questions and plan. To do this I employ a simple exercise which I first used on the Lonely Project (Barke, 2016). As a collective we were struggling to work through our priorities and design a research plan and question, so we framed our planning around three questions:

- Q1. What do we want to understand better?
- Q2. How can we do that?
- Q3. How do we tell people what we found out?

Each question was written on a sheet of paper on the wall, and we added post it notes with responses to each. We then collectively grouped responses into themes, discussing priorities and questioning one another. Through this activity we were able to see one another's ideas, make links and prioritise. We found it be an accessible and clear way to formulate research questions and discuss research methods as well as outputs and dissemination. This activity surfaces both commonality and divergent views which are important to share, understand and discuss.

After this activity I find it helpful to share a short document which outlines the discussion and any agreed points, formulated around the three questions. This can be shared as a draft and the group can refine and edit the document, either in person or in an online document. This document is generally the basis of a research question and plan. Sharing a draft document encourages engagement and interest; editing a draft is generally more engaging for community peer researchers than writing on a blank page. The process of editing the document is collaborative, in the open, and becomes a shared record and history of the project development.

Preparing to carry out research

Once there is an outline research plan the next step is thinking about how to draw on the groups shared assets and skills to carry out the plan that has been devised. Research methods differ across and within disciplines

and should be used to appropriately answer the research question. In participatory research, methods are chosen to facilitate participation, shared decision making and mutual learning. Methods can be written, visual, verbal, observational, arts-based, and action oriented, they should be employed based on research project needs and collaborators motivations and expertise. It is important to recognise that; *'No research is inherently participatory: it is largely through its application that research becomes participatory; even methods that are defined as participatory can be disempowering and excluding for respondents if used with the wrong group, in the wrong situation or the wrong way'*. (Boyden & Ennew, 1997, p. 83)

In my experience, this stage is not teaching a group of community peer researchers how to do a task but rather it is active and co-constructed, it involves planning, practicing and thinking through how to accomplish the tasks the group have designed, drawing on collective experience. The details of this work are context specific, influenced by the time the group has together, available funding, delivery mode, accessibility needs, research plans and overall timelines. At this stage training is task oriented, this might involve working together to design research tools such as surveys or an interview guide or there may be specific skills to learn such as archiving if working on a history project. My approach to training here is practical and involves reviewing scenarios, discussing different approaches and role playing or practicing. This stage is about supporting community peer researchers to undertake key research tasks well and with confidence. It involves drawing on appropriate and relevant forms of expertise, interrogating them and integrating them into research plans and practice. This recognises that training is not a one-directional activity but rather involves developing aspects of the research together.

Training on safeguarding and research ethics can also take an experiential and purposeful approach. Carrying out research as a collective involves agreeing a system and a process; a critical part of preparing for fieldwork or research activity is reflecting on and agreeing ethical research practice and project protocols. In practical terms this may involve working through and sharing institutional ethics processes that frame the project and reviewing community partners policies and ways of working. There may be forms and procedures to be followed or used across the project and ensuring these are understood, well designed, clear and accessible is essential. Designing a process and having the opportunity to practice, question and agree it gives ownership to all involved. This moves ethics from being a procedural 'tick box' to a way of thinking. Ethics in community peer research is about asking; 'what feels fair and ethical' and then sharing and managing a context specific ethical framework collaboratively with reflexivity and care. Ethical research practice involves reflecting on positionality and being reflexive, which are key to good ethical practice and should be built into training for community peer researchers (Banks et al., 2016).

Supporting fieldwork

Learning is a continuous process, and projects develop throughout the research process. Supporting this might include co-interviewing and joint reflection, reviewing transcripts and providing feedback, or it may be debriefing one to one. Supporting fieldwork involves supporting individuals and ensuring processes are fair and accessible. This might involve adapting systems and creating appropriate resources. High-quality, interactive training for community peer researchers takes different formats including supervision and/or mentoring, (Vaughn et al., 2018). Within this, active reflexivity is important for individual and shared learning (Horner, 2016; Torre, 2008). Reflexivity can be explored through individual research diaries or by asking specific questions to support individual and group reflection. Reflexive check-ins throughout research timelines and the encouragement of reflexive thinking and questioning can support the development of confidence and research skills. This also provides a space to share and learn from any ethical challenges. Furthermore, this work can be drawn on later, to support analysis, dissemination and impact.

Understanding, sharing and acting on findings

Once fieldwork or research activity is complete there needs to be time and space to consider what findings mean and think about how to share them or act on them. Walsham (2020) notes that very few projects in their review provided focused analysis training or involved community peer researchers in the analysis stage. While there were often ways to feed in, participate in workshops or review findings, active engagement in the co-production of findings was low. The authors suggest two key factors that made engagement at this stage challenging; first the training and time required to meaningfully involve peer researchers in analysis was reported as too great. Second, they note that many organisations did not have the necessary research skills in their own workforce to lead on training in analysis. Arnall and Kanjilal's (2024) suggestion that initial training should include a focus on data collection techniques that supports and enables the full participation of community peer researchers in analysis and dissemination seems particularly important here. This would involve taking a skills-based approach to project design and carefully co-designing methods of collection and analysis that are well understood across the project team. This also means ensuring that training time is ringfenced later in projects, during analysis and after to support dissemination and the impact of research.

How I approach analysis training with community peer researchers depends on the type of data collected, the research questions, the time allocated to this stage and the aims of the project. I have worked with community peer research groups to code data, interpret data and/or help shape a framework. Not all community peer research projects include this stage, on some it may not be part of the project design, however this feels like missed opportunity for collaboration. Analysis processes can be open or

purposeful, they can draw on or borrow from existing frameworks, such as thematic analysis, content analysis or narrative discourse analysis. Analysis may be creative or action oriented. Projects may be quantitative, involve data synthesis or comprise of a systematic literature review. These all have theory and practice attached to the method that can be revised for the purpose of a community peer research project. Practice based projects, or action research projects might not produce data for analysis as such (for instance, an archival history project). However, this is still a point at which the group can reflect on learning and the research process. I generally adopt a scaffolding approach to analysis. Rather than training people how to carry out a particular type of analysis I will share different approaches and discuss their aims and theories. I then work with community peer researchers to co-construct an appropriate approach for the project.

On several projects I have carried out a thematic analysis, this is a very flexible process, depending on how much involvement people want to have and time on the project. The aim is to actively engage with the research findings. Initially community peer researchers review their own and shared project data and note down, highlight or make a voice note of any important points or parts that seemed stand out to them. Next, I facilitate a session where we collectively explore what we have learnt, if appropriate I might start by reviewing our research question, writing it on a wall or in the chat online, reminding ourselves of the project aims. I ask people to reflect on a series of prompts maybe; the most interesting thing they had found, the most challenging comment or the most surprising thing. I might ask people whether they found commonality and whether there were differences across participants. These questions ground people in their research activity and data and I encourage a discussion where people draw on examples to illustrate their points. I have found some community peer researchers worry about bringing their opinions into the analysis process, so I find it helpful before analysis sessions to reflect on the issue of subjectivity. I discuss the importance of recognising one's own positionality and subjectivity but also highlight the importance of their own opinions, thoughts and experience within the process of understanding and contextualising research findings. Once we have discussed the research broadly, I devise a way to bring data together and start to explore themes and ideas, gradually working through a process collectively. This can take place in a session or over many, in person, online, or by email in shared documents, often the pragmatics of the research timeline and project design dictate this.

Analysis can be creative, on the *Alonely* project we reviewed interview data, developed themes and then used these themes to explore areas within the data further through creative writing and performance. The community peer researchers chose aspects of the data that interested them and explored them in detail, working with a dramaturg to write monologues. These monologues were then shared as a theatre piece, at festivals and online (www.productivemargins.blogs.bristol.ac.uk/projects/isolation-and-

[loneliness/](#)). This process helped us to explore commonality across our interviews and look in-depth at aspects that interested individuals. On several projects at The Young Foundation, I worked with an illustrator as part of an online analysis session where we worked through a process of sharing our data and stories about our data whilst an illustrator created a live illustration of our conversation. This supported a structured conversation, helping us to visualise how different aspects connected and answered the research question. On participatory film or photography projects, the process of editing, or choosing pictures for an exhibition or publication is one that mirrors the process of analysis, working together or one to one with an editor or curator community peer researchers can decide what is important to share and how.

Analysis can also be purposeful. One approach that I used on a large community peer research project with peer research collectives across England and Wales was to design a purposeful process to support individual research groups work through a thematic analysis. We co-developed a collective framework which could be used as a template to analyse large numbers of interviews across the dataset (www.youthendowmentfund.org.uk/peer-action-collective/).

Analysis can also have a practical orientation within community peer research, groups can be encouraged to use what they have learnt to co-design an intervention, piece of art, new project or event. On a health equity project, after carrying out interviews and observations, community peer researchers co-designed an event where they shared their work and facilitated a co-analysis process with invited experts, asking them what was important from their perspectives. Training for this involved co-designing the event, writing and rehearsing presentations, and co-designing facilitation plans. Working with community peer researchers to share findings involves drawing together the different possibilities and then facilitating conversations to define priorities. It is important that community peer researchers are an active part of sharing or dissemination, this can have a profound impact on its reach into the community (Arnall & Kanjilal, 2024).

It can be useful to discuss as a group the many ways that research can be shared, including talks, papers, conferences, reports, leaflets, events, interventions, installations and pieces of art. When I am working with groups during this stage of the research, we may have a particular brief to meet, maybe a project report, event or talk, or it may be that sharing and disseminating is open. Within this it is critical to discuss community peer researchers' involvement in academic publications and conference presentations. This involves sharing timelines and conventions, which are often surprising to community peer researchers. These timelines generally extend beyond the boundaries of the project which can be challenging in terms of on-going engagement and remuneration. We have addressed remuneration by ringfencing money for writing and conference attendance post-project, this has sometimes involved community peer researchers being

paid in advance to work a specified number of days beyond the project itself. On several projects we have included a budget for community peer researchers to attend conferences. Some conferences have bursaries and funds to support community attendance which we have successfully applied for.

Regardless of how community peer researchers are involved in sharing findings it is essential to discuss how people would prefer to be acknowledged or credited in publications and how any project data is to be used. Ideally this is a conversation that takes place with all partners at the start of a project and is revisited as data is collected and plans become clearer. This approach is also important in recognising the extractive nature and histories of research in many communities and can support an anti-racist approach (Monzon et al., 2024).

Developing outputs and planning dissemination is a process which again draws on community peer researchers' skills and interests to support them to design plans as a collective. This involves defining what we want our impact to be, who we need and want to communicate with and how best to do that. Projects can, budget dependent, have multiple outputs made for different audiences. The form of outputs will be informed by money and time, on several projects we have ringfenced money for this stage, on other projects we have applied for additional funding for outputs. An important question here is what needs to happen to ensure findings have impact. A challenge identified by many, including Partnership for Young London, is that often research findings are shared but no action is taken. It is important to make sure that people and groups who can make change are engaged in projects throughout and that where possible community groups are supported to explore further funding and projects that arise from community research projects.

Often on community peer research projects understanding, sharing and acting on what has been learnt is highly iterative and cyclical and takes place throughout the research activity. Working with community peer researchers to share findings involves reflexive practice and actively facilitating conversations to define priorities.

[Table 1](#) below summarises the stages I have outlined in designing community peer research training.

What is 'good' community peer research training?

Training should lead to a shared understanding of the research aims and topic by building on the skills assets and experience of those involved in the project to co-create the methods to carry out, analyse and share meaningful, ethical and safe research. Training is about finding ways to share diverse forms of expertise and develop systems and methods that are jointly owned. It is the site in which barriers to equality are explored and systems are changed and co-designed to be more equitable, recognising that: *"There is no predetermined endpoint for equity; rather, it is a fluid and shifting aim."* (Teeters & Jurow, 2022, pp. 27–28).

Table 1. Stages in community peer research training

Stages of community peer research training	Aims of the stage	Methods and approaches
1. Understanding the community context	To develop meaningful collaborative relationships and ground the research in the community context and history	Takes time and should be purposeful. Adopt a learning stance and engage with community led activity
2. Motivations interests and values	To build a collective understanding of the project To understand community peer researchers' assets skills & expertise	Share and interrogate the project 'story', outline and timeline Share individual stories through creative and discursive activities
3. Developing collective research plans	Decide what knowledge is important to the task Design research questions and plans	Engage actively with the topic, collectively review relevant materials and convene masterclasses Work through 3 key questions Q1. What do we want to understand better? Q2. How can we do that? Q3. How do we tell people what we found out?
4. Prepare to carry out research	To draw on learning from stages 1 and 2 to carry out the plan devised in 3	Training should be project specific and should develop individual research skills and capacity more generally Includes training on research skills, ethics and safeguarding
5. Supporting fieldwork	To support research activity and community peer researcher wellbeing and engagement	Includes, co-working, de-briefing and individual/group reflexivity
6. Understanding, sharing and acting on findings	To collectively explore and understand the data To share and act on findings	Co-construct a method to systematically understand the data Develop dissemination and action with community peer researchers

Training should support the production of 'good' quality research it should build individual skills and develop community capacity. Training should support the development of equitable partnerships, shifting power and creating new knowledge. In comparing participatory and conventional research processes Cornwall and Jewkes (1995) suggest that an important difference in participatory research is in the location of power across the research process. Community peer research training can be conceptualised as a method that supports the relocation of power, and this is central to creating more equal relationships between academics and community peer researchers (Rees et al., 2024). Evaluating community peer research training must therefore consider if and how training supported a shift in power and move towards equity.

Good community peer research is highly reflexive and relational, it takes place within complex relationships which must be attended to as, "*...it is in relationships that people express their needs, communicate, and receive care and recognition.*" (Groot et al., 2020, p. 2). My approach to community peer research training adopts a care-ful relational approach (Manchester & Barke, 2020) which moves ethics from being an abstract system of rules to being about relationships and empathy. Tronto (1998, p. 15) describes ethics of care as "*...a way of thinking about caring that expands our notions of the "ethical"*"

to include many of the everyday judgments involved in activities of caring for ourselves and others". As Ellis (2007, p. 4) writes "Relational ethics requires researchers to act from our hearts and minds, acknowledge our interpersonal bonds to others, and take responsibility for actions and their consequences".

Adopting a care-ful relational approach towards training provides me with an ethical framework in which to manage the complexity of relationships and find a balance between being a 'professional researcher' with caring for community peer researchers throughout a project (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004). This work is messy and involves emotional labour (Thomas-Hughes, 2018). It is important to engage with this mess and recognise it as part of the work of community peer research training. This involves taking account of the characteristics of any dilemmas through reflexive practice (Goodwin et al., 2003) and reflecting critically on positionality and power as well as group relationships, inclusivity and access (Banks, 2012). Academics must be committed to being open to changing their practice and learning from community peer researchers (Beebejaun et al., 2015; Pohl et al., 2010).

Challenges and recommendations

'Good' community peer research training needs to develop slowly and iteratively by building relationships and developing shared understanding. It involves taking an asset based relational approach, building community research capacity and developing new more equitable forms of knowledge. This means approaching research differently and changing our practice as academics. However, we work within systems where this can be difficult. When I run training with academics and communities the two biggest challenges articulated relate to funding and timeframes.

Finding funding for early relationship building and co-writing research bids and plans is particularly challenging. This means that funding bids are often led by universities or any early input from communities is unpaid. For this work to be equitable, community organisations and community peer researchers must be paid appropriately for their work across the research process, including in bid writing and project development. If funders want to support community engaged research, they must start by making funding available to pay people to engage in the whole process and co-write funding bids.

I have described in this paper how community peer research training needs to take an asset-based approach and work with the skills of the community peer researchers. This means that when budgets are developed research plans are purposefully not fully defined. There needs to be flexibility in budgets and timelines to co-produce plans, again this needs to be understood by funders.

Budgets also need to include money for contingencies and accessibility. Being inclusive is an active process, it involves thinking carefully about potential barriers that community peer researchers might face and addressing them. For example, funding childcare may help parents to engage in a project, paying for travel may help people with disabilities to attend training sessions,

paying for interpreters may support people who do not speak English to train as researchers. Researchers need to ensure they are adequately resourcing projects.

Paying peer researchers is generally accepted as good practice. I have paid peer researchers the real living wage (www.livingwage.org.uk/). Working in a charity we employed peer researchers on contracts and agreed a payment schedule in advance depending on the project timelines and individual needs. This was managed by a named person who was easily contactable and available to provide support. I have found paying community peer researchers more challenging in universities. In larger institutions human resources and finance systems are often difficult to navigate and unwieldy, managing payment can take a great deal of time and effort. This has a significant impact on community peer researchers who are working in a precarious space and compounds inequity. University systems need to be more flexible to support community peer research.

Alongside funding, one of the biggest challenges in community peer research training relates to timeframes. The content and context of community peer research training can be difficult for funders and commissioners to understand if they are not familiar with the practice. I have seen many tender documents that expect training to be prescriptive and completed over a minimal and unrealistic timeframe. Such documents show little understanding of how long it might take to develop relationships, engage community peer researchers and design training appropriate to their needs. This type of project design leads to projects that perpetuate the problems the organisations suggest they are attempting to address with no real understanding of equality diversity and inclusion. To address this, timelines should hold adequate time to train across the research process recognising that peer research is an iterative, complex, messy process.

Who is involved in training is an important consideration. Some of the most successful training I have been involved with has been as part of a team, delivering training alongside community organisations and other members of the research team. This can help academics to understand the community context and builds research capacity within community organisations. It is a way of modelling working across expertise. On the SPAN project a particularly valuable aspect of this collaborative approach was that the community organisation held regular 1:1 check ins with individual community peer researchers. An evaluation of this project found this helped community peer researchers to engage with the project, remain part of the group and take their learning forward into new projects (Henry & Cole, 2021).

I have described community peer research as relational and different to conventional research. It is important that we recognise that this can bring about challenges. Researchers are not separate to communities, this relational

approach to research often draws on our own identities in complex ways. We need to support researchers and encourage active and meaningful conversations about vulnerabilities, mental health and wellbeing.

Finally, we should not assume that training groups in community peer research is instinctive but rather should develop appropriate training and mentoring for researchers developing and running community peer research projects. This work is highly skilled, it involves understanding a range of research methods, being open to new ways of working, being a confident facilitator and undertaking complex project management. We need to develop systems and forums to support academics develop their practice.

Conclusion

Involvement in the production of knowledge matters because this involvement frames the questions we ask, the ethical approaches we take and is key to the interpretation and impact of findings. Community peer research training should support people involved in a project to engage fully and equitably across the research process to carry out ethical, high-quality research that creates new knowledge. Training is not replicable, it should not be seen as 'one size fits all' but rather it needs to be delivered with expertise and flexibility, it must be inclusive and adaptable and go beyond skills development. Adopting a relational approach and reflecting critically on positionality and power should be the basis for designing and facilitating community peer research training.

Fine & Torre (2019) write that community participatory research is often mischaracterized as a method rather than as an epistemology, a theory of knowledge that in their words "*radically challenges who is an expert, what counts as knowledge and, therefore, by whom research questions and designs should be crafted*" (p435). This conceptualization of community participatory research practice is one that resonates with me, and I suggest that greater attention should be paid to the development of methods and theories that underpin training in community peer research practice to promote the methodological innovation and theoretical development of the role of community peer research training.

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