

Service users as peer research interviewers: why bother?

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While there are increasing numbers of social research projects using homelessness service users as peer researchers, the question of what methodological advantage is gained by this remains pertinent. Drawing on studies completed within the social housing sector, the issue of why use service users as peer researchers at all is examined in detail.

There is a received argument that the benefits to peer research are certainly in terms of the service user interviewers themselves: positive self-esteem and personal confidence are said to be boosted by their undertaking this role. With the studies in question, the homeless peer interviewers were able to utilise their personal (negative) experience of homelessness in a positive way to a research end. However, what remains unclear are the benefits to those service users interviewed by their peers, and indeed whether this can be ascertained clearly. The assumption that there is a positive difference to vulnerable and homeless people as research participants who are themselves interviewed by their peers is explored.

Furthermore, the possibility as to the methodological justification of peer interviews within a wider qualitative design is discussed in detail. It is argued that rapport is at the heart of using peer researchers. Inasmuch as qualitative research is to be 'grounded' with the people who are the subject of a study, so peer interviewing can offer a radical approach to understanding the nature of a research aim, namely with the active participation of those in question. Peer interviewing, it is argued here, can lend vital insights of and rapport with those often regarded as 'hard-to-reach'. This in turn can assist with the overall design and methods in seeking to understand complex issues as they relate to vulnerable people who have multiple social and health needs.

However, the limitations of peer interviewing is also openly discussed. Most significantly, the possibility of compromising the confidentiality of a research interview is acknowledged. In particular there is considerable risk in asking a homeless person to discuss their experiences and articulate their perceptions to another service user. Strategies to minimise this risk while upholding essential research ethics in any given study are offered. Similarly, ways of developing peer research interviews are outlined with a view to contributing to an overall methodological debate.

What is peer interviewing?

Peer research is an increasingly debated area of social research. It is championed by some as the only way to do social research properly. Others have serious reservations about its effectiveness. Still others feel they ought to engage with the subject but don't know exactly how. Peer research thus has the potential to engage or alienate professional and academic researchers. Peer research has also been termed participatory action research in methodological literature (Becker and Bryman, 2004). Peer *interviewing* concentrates on one approach to fieldwork, particularly qualitative fieldwork. It involves people who are currently (or recently have been) receiving services as interviewers of others receiving similar services. This is a specific aspect of peer research. It is the gathering of data from interviews alongside people who share experiences with those who are themselves being interviewed. It is a process of joint interviewing between a researcher and someone who has direct experience of the social issue being explored.

Beresford (2002) identifies two approaches to research with 'user' involvement which are inherently conflicting. There is the consumerist approach which seeks to manage the delivery of services, and there is the democratic which offers empowerment to those receiving services. One retains power, while the other seeks to share it. In many ways, however, peer interviewing is a methodological approach which aims to facilitate the data gathering of research. While not disregarding the empowering process that peer interviewers find beneficial, the focus is on enabling the person being interviewed to do so on a common ground.

In this paper, the term 'peer interviewer' is preferred to 'service user' 'user' or 'client' interviewer. This is in recognition of the fact that those interviewing alongside professional researchers might no longer be in receipt of services. It is the commonality of experience, its benefits and limitations that is explored here, whether or not that experience of receiving services is concurrent with the role undertaken as an interviewer. Taylor (2005) rightly raises concerns of inadvertently stigmatising peer researchers. It would be a hindrance to identify peer interviewers only as part of the social problem studied in order that they qualify as people to be involved at all.

The studies in overview

This paper draws on two studies conducted in the field of homelessness research. The first was funded by Nottingham City Council to explore day centre services for homeless and vulnerably housed people (Smith and Harding, 2005). The second investigated tenancy support for formerly homeless substance users (Harding et al, 2007) and funded by a service provider. Peer interviewing was a

distinctive research design feature in both studies whereby formerly homeless people became joint interviewers alongside researchers. There was a deliberate attempt to undertake the research *with* homeless people as participants. Research *with* those who are usually seen as recipients of social welfare is an aim of other studies (Dwyer and Hardhill, 2008; Sutton et al, 2007).

The peer interviewing was undertaken with care, and considerable preparation was invested in advance of the actual interviews themselves. Each peer interviewer was trained to lead on given interview questions, and were able to familiarise themselves conscientiously with the semi-structured qualitative schedule. Once they felt ready, they were invited to join the researchers in an interview. Here, they each undertook a specific role of leading on the interview questions. In this way, the homeless person being interviewed was able to respond directly to another who had also experienced homelessness. Any prompting, re-wording or re-phrasing was undertaken by the researcher alongside the peer interviewer. In this way, involvement of a researcher was only when departure from the prepared interview schedule was necessary to elicit sufficient data in answering the research questions. Similarly, exploring unprepared questions arising from individual interviews pertinent to and significant for the research aim was also undertaken by the researcher. Thus it was not expected that a peer interviewer was a trained researcher; responsibility for managing the interview situation lay with the researchers. However, the significant contribution of peer interviewing lay in allowing those with personal experience of the social issue studied to lead on the schedule.

Benefits to peer researchers

Those involved as peer researchers can be said to benefit from the experience in a number of different ways. There is the benefit to personal self-esteem in that the taking part in research interviewing is often a tremendous boost to individual confidence. Clark et al (2005) comment that for a peer researcher to be regarded as having such a fundamental role to a project's success, is enormously empowering in itself. Furthermore, the opportunity to learn (or re-learn) research and interviewing skills can be exciting and rewarding (ibid). From the two Nottingham studies cited above, one peer researcher was also able to articulate a sense of 'giving back' or returning through interviewing something of the support he had himself earlier received. For him, there was the opportunity of turning the negative experience of homelessness into something positive and useful. It was as if the role in the research project provided the chance to help others similarly to how he was helped. This perception is not to equate interviewing with that of a support worker's task, but there was clearly a satisfaction in having a turn to enable another homeless person.

This same peer researcher was also able to focus on the interviewing experience as a distinct role. His contribution to the research project as a whole, for

example, included approving the report for accessibility, a task identified in other participatory studies (Northway and Wheeler, 2005). There was a particular development of self-awareness for this peer interviewer in that he was able to appreciate that although he had been homeless as those he helped interview were also homeless, his experience was personal and particular to him. This highlights not only the complexity of homelessness issues in that each homeless person's story is unique, but also the importance of listening. It was crucial for this peer interviewer that he was able to listen to what other homeless people had to say and not assume he would know by virtue of having being homeless. Thus listening remains highly significant in a qualitative interview (Mason, 2002). Whatever the apparent commonality of experiences, interviewing requires basic skills of listening and respect for another's view.

Perceived benefits to those interviewed by their peers

All those interviewed for the research studies gave their informed consent to do so by a peer interviewer alongside a researcher. All were also offered the choice of being interviewed by a researcher only. Interestingly all chose to be interviewed with a peer interviewer. Having a peer interviewer appeared to facilitate the interview in two ways. Firstly, there was an immediate and relaxed manner on the part of the person being interviewed. While it might be unjustified to suggest that without the peer interviewer the interview would have been difficult, there was a perceived benefit in assuming a commonality of language. Less experienced interviewers of homeless people might require secondary questions eliciting explanations of specific language. The 'street language' or terminology, namely jargon peculiar to sleeping rough, drug and alcohol use etc., can inhibit the natural flow of an interview if it is interrupted with a need for non-homeless phraseology. Having a peer interviewer did not necessitate such 'translations', and the interview was able to proceed with the interviewed person's own choice of words understood and recognised. Clarification was sought where an account was complex, for example. For example, inasmuch as peer interviewing requires the interpretation of the social world within the vocabulary of those who have lived what is being researched, doing so with just such people lends integrity to a study. In this way, the terms of reference of those being researched were retained (Harding and Hamilton, 2008).

Secondly, there was a notable levelling of power relations in the interview situation. Again, it is unhelpful to suggest that an interview by a professional and experienced researcher would not be a good one. However, that a homeless person was addressing a peer interviewer who had themselves been homeless facilitated rapport. Essential to any qualitative interview, rapport facilitates a dialogue necessary for the gathering of rich data, even if the situation remains contrived (Duncombe and Jessop, 2002). Observing this dynamic of two people with homelessness in common, the researchers were able to see an interview unfold that did not have the added ingredient of vulnerable people relating to

professionals, academics or those 'outside' the direct experience of the social issue being investigated.

Some notes on standpoint epistemology

In many ways, peer interviewing can be located within standpoint epistemology. Feminist standpoint epistemology, for example, is a particular understanding of the world to be researched, especially a woman's world, and engaging in this requires particular skill as well as specific experience. Harding (1987) writes of "...the intellectual and political struggles necessary to see nature and social life from the point of view of that disdained activity which produces women's social experiences..." (p. 185). There is, it is argued, a distinctive experience of human relationships that is peculiar to women (Stanley and Wise, 1983). Thus female researchers with this approach will uncover different data and in different ways to that of male researchers. It can be said that this tradition has been developed and transferred to peer research by those with for example mental ill-health (UFM, 2005) and disabilities (Beresford, 2005), to name but two groups of people who have received health and social services and been involved in published research.

A standpoint epistemology would contend homeless people are the best to understand homelessness and relate to other homeless people, for example. This justifies peer interviewing as part of exploring the social world with the advantage of a particular point of view, namely that of people who themselves have specific experience of an issue or phenomenon. To see them as key to the research in question is to acknowledge their unique contribution to its answer. However, peer interviewing does not refer to standpoint epistemology alone. There is a strong argument that it is fundamentally about doing qualitative research properly. It involves those belonging to the social issue studied in a positively democratic way. As Beresford (2005) says of 'user involvement', "It is a systematic process of discussion and negotiation – which is what the best practice always has been" (p. 12).

And yet, from a methodological point of view, peer interviewing is also an extension of qualitative research, seeking what Arksey and Knight call the articulated accounts of people's lived experiences (2005). It can be argued that if researchers want to gather data from homeless people, there is already an assumption that they have a specific contribution that must be included in a project's design. Doing this *with* homeless people themselves is the next step, or a logical progression to understanding their social world as best as possible; a progress from data sources to joint data gatherers. Qualitative research undertaken with peer interviewers challenges academics to appreciate in more depth what it is that other people have lived. As mentioned above, peer research also suggests that those with a particular experience are not necessarily only part of the problem but also have a crucial role in its solution. Peer interviewing is

therefore about doing research literally alongside those who also belong with the people being studied.

Limitations and risks of peer interviewing

Peer interviewing does remain limited in a number of ways. Regarding homeless people, the selection of suitable interviewers demands applying a criteria of reliability, individual personal confidence and sufficient stamina. It could be disastrous for a research project if a homeless person's substance use meant they could not keep appointments, or if their drinking levels were so high they were unable to lead on an interview, or if their housing situation left them mentally and physically exhausted. These might be generalised and hypothetical complications, but significant delays in fieldwork can jeopardise a project. It is therefore usually people who have survived homelessness successfully enough to want to assist with research who get selected as peer interviewers. Often, they are no longer homeless themselves or with any accompanying issues, but sober, intelligent, educated, physically and mentally well, housed individuals with enough confidence to undertake such a challenge. It is also necessary not to overlook the fact that those identified as potential peer researchers must want to join a research team for themselves. Being suggested or nominated by a well meaning support worker is not sufficient to assume the individual is self-motivated.

Briefing and de-briefing is critical to protecting the well-being of a peer interviewer. They must be aware that they can hear difficult stories, particularly accounts that might evoke personal or even painful memories of being homeless themselves. Although each person's homelessness is unique, hearing accounts of common themes (for example insecurity, fear, shame, stigma and sheer physical and mental hardship) can remind someone of the panic of being homeless. Coping with these and other feelings as a peer interviewer can be difficult. Ensuring effective briefing both before and after an interview is to be seen as part of the responsibility of a researcher in involving peer interviewers. It is also important to pace the interviews appropriately. The demands of qualitative interviewing can be significant for a peer interviewer (Clark et al, 2005), and it is wise to plan the fieldwork accordingly. Avoiding unnecessary risks associated with tiredness of the peer interviewers will help maximise the benefits for all involved in the research at all levels. Simply reducing the number of interviews carried out in a day will contribute significantly towards the most effective collection of qualitative data.

To carry out peer interviewing it is necessary to secure resources of both time and funding. Fieldwork might well take longer with peer interviewers than without and this should be accounted for in planning the research timetable. Having a group of peer interviewers rather than just one individual would help share the commitment and responsibility of joining researchers in the fieldwork. This would

also allow for peer support within the peer interviewers group; additional support would be gained from meeting and discussing with the other interviewers. Sufficient funding would pay for financial acknowledgement of the peer interviewers' time and work on the research project. In both projects mentioned, peer interviewers were also given an open reference to assist with employment and/or voluntary work applications on satisfactory completion of their interviewing role.

Ethical dilemmas associated with peer interviewing include that of confidentiality. There is no guarantee that a peer interviewer would treat the personal accounts and details of those they interview as confidential. While it would be the researchers' decision that the project was suitable for peer interviewing, a risk remains. It is accepted that the world of homelessness is not only tightly knit, but also carries its own danger and potential to intimidate and harm those vulnerable within it (Johnsen et al, 2005). Careful selection, preparation, training and briefing will go some way to minimise this risk. However, it would be possible to make those being invited for interview aware of the risks without undermining the peer interviewers at the point of consent. This would perhaps be a statement of greater integrity than offering any *guarantee* of confidentiality (see Bryman, 2004). While not wanting to shift ethical responsibility from the researcher to the researched, peer interviewing should be agreed by all parties. Ultimately, it is the researchers managing the project who will be accountable for any issues arising from including peer interviewers.

Intellectual property and ownership of the project, its outputs and any outcomes is also a potentially contentious area. It would be essential to negotiate these from the outset, signing agreements if necessary. In the two Nottingham projects, peer interviewers were brought in after securing funding. Peer interviewers in one project were anonymously acknowledged in the research report. With the other, the peer interviewer's name was included as author of the report as he had assisted with its accessibility, but not included on an academic paper to which he had not contributed.

Developing peer research

It would be right to suggest that the impact of peer research and interviewing is still to be tested, and its value proved (Becker et al, 2006). How to do this is, of course, another matter. Indeed, proving anything within qualitative research is fraught with difficulty, not least that qualitative researchers usually prefer terms such as 'building theory' or 'suggesting evidence' rather than 'causation' or 'proof' (Henn et al, 2006). Yet there does remain scope for evaluating peer interviewing. For example, it would not be impossible to ask at the end of an interview why a person chose and gave their consent to being peer interviewed. It would also be welcomed if such a person was asked what they thought of being peer interviewed and whether they would agree to this again, given the opportunity.

Exploring peer research in this way would contribute to the literature 'from the receiving end'. It would give a balance to the increasing number of publications written from the point of view of peer researchers and their academic supporters (Lowes and Hulatt, 2005). It would also move beyond the accusations levelled that peer research is about academics being able to 'feel good' about their methodological design.

Ultimately, peer interviewing is only one aspect of peer research. It would be fascinating to develop peer research along the lines of involvement in other significant aspects such as proposals, design and planning, analysis and report and publication writing (Birch and Miller, 2002). It is also not necessary to limit peer research to qualitative design, but make quantitative and mixed-methods accessible. Given that funding bodies are moving towards considering research outcomes as much as the standard outputs, this would be strengthened by finding a place for those who are often targeted as the subjects of social research. It can be argued that they do have a contribution as decision-makers, grant approvers and application assessors alongside funding bodies and other professionals. This could be based on the power-model or control assumed here of professional researchers having responsibility and acting as enablers, but not necessarily. At this point in time it remains something of a vision that homeless people can become expert homeless researchers with the academic support of trained and experienced professionals. Perhaps, though, this is how they can help change their social world and make a difference far beyond academics and professional researchers alone.

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