Social
Policy and
Ageing
Research
Centre

Lessons learnt: Conducting participatory research with older people

Martha Doyle
Social Policy and Ageing Research Centre, Trinity College Dublin, Ireland

ISA World Forum, RC11, Sociology of Ageing, Barcelona
6th September 2008

Social
Policy and
Ageing
Research
Centre

Participatory Research
Key Points

- Can be based on a continum from consumerism to empowerment (Walker, 2007).

  ‘Most participatory research focuses on ‘knowledge for action’ [and emphasises]…a ‘bottom-up’ approach with a focus on locally defined prioities and local perspectives (Cornwall and Jewkes, 1995:1667)

- Fundamental within the participatory ‘process’ is the development of non-hierarchical empowering relations.

- Bottom-up approch does not compromise integrity of the academic researcher.

Social
Policy and
Ageing
Research
Centre

An Account of a Participatory Project and the Lessons Learnt

Overall Aim

Using a participatory research method:

To identify ways of improving the delivery of social services to older people in a Dublin suburb and make practical and feasible recommendations on how these changes could be achieved.

Who participated?

- Community Group circa 10 members (approximately 8 meetings)

- 26 volunteers aged 60 and over (17 meetings)

Research Method

- Compilation of a survey instrument developed in collaboration with the volunteers which was administered to 205 local community dwelling persons aged 60 years and over by the volunteers.

- Seven focus groups (33 people) with service providers and family members, neighbours or volunteers who delivered informal social care and support to older people in the community.

Social
Policy and
Ageing
Research
Centre

Assessing Progress & Process

- Non-hierarchical reflexive group meetings which sought to discuss volunteers' continued and changing impressions of the process.
- Group discussion on project facilitated by community group member mid-way through project.
- Research diary
- One-to-one interviews (using time-line charts) with 5 volunteers at conclusions of the project.

Motives for Involvement

- Altruistic desire to help. Perceived the research as being of immediate practical value to them & their neighbours.
- Personal benefits – acquire information on entitlements and age-specific services and improve services in the area
- Social reasons and possibility of forming new friendships

Devising the Questionnaire

Questionnaire compiled with the volunteers over 6 sessions.

33 questions

- Background Information
- Health care and practical services
- Entitlements and benefits
- Transport Services
- Security
- Help received from families and friends
- Clubs and organisations

Social
Policy and
Ageing
Research
Centre

Devising the Questionnaire (continued)

- Enjoyable experience.
- Informal process. Volunteers intimated that they felt comfortable discussing ideas.
- Noticeable opening up of group by 3rd or 4th meeting.
- Discordance between the volunteers' and research committees' opinions on number and length of questions.

Social
Policy and
Ageing
Research
Centre

Data Gathering

Questionnaires collected in two stages:

1. Distributed to friends, neighbours and acquaintances

2. Distributed to persons identified by local service providers and the clergy (many housebound and as such sampling strategy targeted)

164 women and 41 men completed the questionnaire

- 16.6% - 60 – 69 years
- 46.3% - 70 -79 years
- 37.1 % 80+ years

Data Gathering

- Most believed it was ‘exciting’ and ‘different’

  ‘It’s an attitude more than training you’d want, how you approach people, really I would say, open, chat to them and let them talk to you.’

- Many wanted to only approach people they were already acquainted with.
- All the volunteers thought it was important to exercise discretion and were pleased that people could self-complete the questionnaire (n=160).
- Most enjoyed the social contact – with some spending over an hour talking with survey respondents.

Data Gathering (continued)

- Many potential survey respondents refused to answer the questionnaire.
- Volunteers believed the motives for refusal included, suspicion, scepticism, secrecy, sensitivity about issues relating to social participation and health deficits or some believing they were too young and questionnaire not of relevance of them.
- Led to extension of fieldwork by 6 weeks.

Focus Groups

7 focus groups conducted with 33 local voluntary and statutory providers including:

- GPs
- Public Health Nurse
- Community Psychiatric Nurse
- Home Carer Assistants
- Informal Caregivers
- Religious Members of the Community
- Meals on Wheel Service Providers
- Order of Malta
- Crosscare - Carers Association

Data Analysis

- Six meeting with community group on write-up and analysis.

- Community group commented on layout, content and structure of the draft report.

- On production of final complete draft of report meeting held with the volunteers who provided final comments on the recommendations and content of the report

Data Analysis

Subsequent meeting with volunteers suggested:

- Many believed they had contributed enough time already to the project:

  ‘The like of us feel now, what we have done, the next crowd is coming in and should be doing more work, we did the ground work, and we’ll see what comes out of it now’.

- It may have proved unwieldy to have been more involved in analysis:

  ‘If you have five or six people talking about how to do it you’ll never get it done, the thing is one person goes off and does it, and the others make the comments on it, if you had them all in a room, you’d never get it done, ’cause people feel they must make their contribution even though they’d be saying the same thing’.

- Some would have liked the meetings to continue in order to maintain friendships between the volunteers.

Social
Policy and
Ageing
Research
Centre

Final Stages & Outcomes

- Launch of report in Feb ’08 by Minister of Health
- Sense of pride and belief that the research belonged to the community.
- Commitment fostered among group to continue to do additional work in the area.
- Desire to take action and implement the recommendations
- Roll out of new community initiatives:
- ➢ Creation of a visitation team
- ➢ Roll-out of Friendly call service
- ➢ Age ActionCare and Repair Services
- ➢ Book club
- ➢ Preliminary talks on the establishment of a community day care centre

Social
Policy and
Ageing
Research
Centre

Lessons Learnt

Pros	Cons
Rewarding experience for volunteers and researchers Local knowledge required to develop questionnaire on activities and services Fostered community networks and pool of volunteers willing to work together to improve services in their area (Ongoing) Hard-to reach survey respondents identified. Community initiatives have been introduced as an outcome of the project	Power dynamics – Committee self – selected group Time and flexibility Extra administrative work Researchers Rights

Lessons Learnt

Pre-development Phase	Time and flexibility Requisite skills
Initiation	Understanding of partnership process and power dynamics
Project	Systematic Evaluation from outset
Completion	How process influenced outcomes (knowledge for action)

Social
Policy and
Ageing
Research
Centre

Many thanks for your attention

Also thanks to:

Dr Virpi Timonen

Dr Kelly Johnson

Ms Mary McCarthy

And all the volunteers

Useful References

Barnes, M. and G. Bennett. 1998. "Frail Bodies Courageous voices: older people influencing community care." *Health & Social Care in the Community* 6(2): 102-111.

Becker, A.B., B. A Israel, and A. J. Allen.2005. “Strategies and Techniques for Effective Group Process in CBPR Partnerships.” in *Methods in Community-Based Participatory Research for Health*, edited by B. Israel, E. Eng, A. Schultz and E.A. Parker. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Cornwall, A. and R. Jewkes. 1995. “What Is Participatory Research?” *Social Science & Medicine* 41: 1667-1676.

Freire, P. 1970. *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. New York: Continuum.

Dewar, B. 2005. “Beyond tokenistic involvement of older people in research- a framework for future development and understanding.” *International Journal of Older People Nursing* 14 (3a): 48-53

Walker, A and Barnes, M. (1996) Consumerism versus empowerment: a principled approach to the involvement of older service users, *Policy and Practice*, 24, (4) , 375-393.

Walker, A. 2007 Why involve older people in research? *Age and Ageing* 36(5):481-483

Social
Policy and
Ageing
Research
Centre

Contact Details:

Martha Doyle
Social Policy and Ageing Research Centre
School of Social Work and Social Policy
Trinity College Dublin
Dublin 2
Ireland

E-mail: martha.doyle@tcd.ie