

Does Smaller mean Better? Evaluating Micro-Enterprises in Adult Social Care: Evaluation of Co-researcher Involvement Summary Report

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1. Co-researcher involvement in the study

Twenty co-researchers were recruited and trained for the project, 17 of whom carried out interviews. Of those, eight were older people who were, or had been, carers for family members and the ninth older person had no personal experience of caring but had good links in the local health and social care community. Six co-researchers had learning disabilities and all used services locally. The two remaining co-researchers were paid personal assistants for three of those co-researchers (although one also had personal experience of caring for an autistic son). Three quarter of the interviews took place with a co-researcher.

2. Method for evaluating the co-research approach

Two researchers, independent from the study conducted the evaluation. The research questions were:

- i. How is easy and practicable is it for co-researchers to learn how to use a narrative interview method?
- ii. How effectively are co-researchers able to use a narrative interview method in research interviews?
- iii. What impact does the co-researchers' use of a narrative interview method have on the research process and outcomes?
- iv. What is the role of the second (academic) researcher in this process?
- v. What factors helped or hindered the co-research process?

In view of the change in approach to interviewing, our evaluation of the co-research approach focused mainly on the use of the semi-structured interview method which largely replaced the narrative method.

We used the following three methods to evaluate the co-researcher involvement:

- Conversation analysis of a sample of 18 interviews undertaken by co-researchers across the three sites.
- Three focus groups with 15 of the co-researchers, one in each of the research sites, asking them about their experiences of involvement in the research project.
- Individual face-to-face semi-structured interviews with the three academic researchers, asking about their rationale for the research model and their experiences of working with co-researchers.

3. Findings

How is easy and practicable is it for co-researchers to learn how to use a semi-structured interview method?

Both academic researchers and co-researchers identified the need for further interactive training to prepare the co-researchers for their role. This was particularly the case for the co-researchers with learning disabilities who felt that the pace was too fast.

The co-researchers felt that they needed: more training in different forms of communication in order to respond to the communication needs of participants; greater clarity about the degree of flexibility to adapt the wording of questions and practice in how to do this; discussion of possible situations/difficulties that might be encountered in the research; further opportunity to undertake practice interviews with service users; and more time spent on how to introduce oneself and the co-research role.

The co-researchers did not refer to a difference between a narrative or semi-structured approach to interviewing. However, they did distinguish between interviews where they needed to ask a lot of questions and those where the conversation flowed and responses emerged naturally in the course of conversation. The academic researchers felt that contradictory messages were given in the training about the style of interviewing expected. Structured questions were formulated and co-researchers were advised on how to bring interviews back to topic, which steered them away from a narrative approach.

How effectively are co-researchers able to use a semi-structured interview method in research interviews?

Some co-researchers were highly skilled and effective in facilitating interviews based on participants telling their stories about service use. However, perhaps because of the mixed messages given to co-researchers in the training about what was expected in terms of the structuring of interviews, conversation analysis of the interviews revealed that some interviews followed a semi-structured rather than a narrative format. When carrying out the interviews, some co-researchers felt that they were failing if they did not keep the interview 'on track'. This led them to rely on a script of questions and created a reticence about departing from this, even to prompt or encourage further responses. Lack of clarity and confidence in their interviewing role therefore in some cases militated against a narrative approach being adopted in practice.

What impact does the co-researcher use of a semi-structured interview method have on the research process and outcomes?

The processes, dynamics and roles within the interviews varied widely. In particular, co-researchers showed varying levels of research skills and also differed in the extent to which they used their shared identity or experiences to build a rapport with participants. Some co-researchers showed a high level of skill in teasing out information and also used their shared identity and/or experiences to forge a relationship with participants. Other co-researchers showed a high level of research skills, perhaps drawing on previous professional or research experiences, but did not make connections with participants on the basis of shared identity or experiences. In contrast, other co-researchers were less experienced or confident in their use of research skills, but they did establish shared connections with participants. These interviews ran the risk of going too far 'off topic' without the intervention of the academic researcher. In other situations, co-researchers showed a low level of research skill, adhering to a script of questions without prompting participants to give further details, and not establishing shared connections with participants. However, even here it is possible that the engagement of co-researchers in the interviews helped participants to relax and feel comfortable in the interview situation.

What is the role of the second (academic) researcher in this process?

The role of the academic researcher was of 'back up' to the co-researcher who took the lead role. The academic researchers usually transported the co-researchers to and from the interviews and they all found this a useful opportunity for briefing and debriefing. Two of the academic researchers did the initial introductions and organised consent right at the beginning of the interview but the third felt that the co-researcher as lead should do the initial introductions. In some cases this caused some confusion about roles. In all interviews the co-researchers then took the lead and the academic researchers said they only interrupted if they could see the co-researcher wanted them to. Some of the co-researchers said they looked to the academics to 'bring people back if they digressed.' Initially the plan was that co-researchers would administer the ASCOT questionnaire at the end of the interview. However, after the first set of training the academic researchers realised there were too many domains in the questionnaire and they would restrict themselves to 2 questions. The academic researchers asked these questions at the end of the interview which was often referred to as the 'formal bit'. Even in their restricted form, the ASCOT questions remained awkward to ask. The formality of the words and difficulty of communicating the meaning to some people meant that the academic researchers sometimes had to infer or interpret the answers of the participants. Nevertheless, some of the co-researchers felt that this formal ending to the interview allowed them to step back from the emotional impact of what they were hearing from participants and provided a distinct ending to the interview. One of the academic researchers felt that this sometimes meant the interview ended on a low note.

What factors helped or hindered the co-research process?

Both co-researchers and academic researchers felt that the training for co-researchers needed to be more extensive, more interactive and cover additional areas. The need for preparation and debriefing for co-researchers immediately before and after interviews was also recognised as important.

Co-researchers felt that their effectiveness in the interviews was helped by having clearly defined roles so that they knew what was expected of them. However, this needed to be combined with a measure of flexibility so that the academic researcher could step in if they were struggling. Mutual understanding between the academic researcher and co-researcher was essential in enabling this to occur.

The building of a rapport with participants was facilitated not only by shared identity characteristics between co-researchers and participants but also by their sharing of interests and geographical connections.

Co-researchers and academic researchers noted that some questions were too obscure or abstract for participants to understand them. This was particularly the case for the ASCOT questions, even when these were rephrased.

In some instances, the academic researchers found that the presence of co-researchers who were at ease with participants in difficult situations increased their own confidence and competence.

4. Conclusions

- Experiences from this project suggest the need for more detailed consideration of the preparation required to equip co-researchers to carry out narrative interviews.

- Analysis of the interviews has highlighted the importance of moving beyond a concern with simple identity categories when involving co-researchers. Sharing a similar age or an experience of having a learning disability does not in itself provide the basis for the building of a rapport between co-researcher and participant. A wider range of factors, including shared experiences, interests and geographical connections, were shown to be relevant. Knowing more about participants' backgrounds and interests prior to the interviews may enable a wider range of factors to be considered when involving co-researchers.
- It seems that the greatest 'added value' of involving co-researchers occurs when their shared identity and/or experiences reinforces their deployment of research skills. Discussion and agreement with co-researchers about how they will communicate and 'own' their shared identity and experiences with participants may increase the value of co-researcher involvement.
- Detailed analysis of extracts from interviews is a potentially useful tool for enhancing interview skills and processes. This includes improving the clarity of research questions, increasing understanding of interactional processes between co-researchers and participants, and highlighting the significance of 'identity work' undertaken by all parties to the interview.
- A missing dimension in this, and other, evaluations of the co-research approach is the experience of research participants.