

Considering a participatory approach to social work – Service user research

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Abstract

Service-user involvement in social work research is much vaunted and considered desirable. Yet, it is not common. This is despite the fact that research-funding bodies are increasingly mandating inclusion of service users in the research process. It would seem timely for the profession to look again at participatory research as an approach to working collaboratively with service users in the co-production of research. This article reviews the arguments for service-user collaboration in social work research; it considers the evolution of service-user engagement and its current status in practice. Building on the foundations of social work research methodologies, the article considers the practicalities of participatory research and the potential barriers. The article draws on vignettes of published participatory research to illustrate this type of research in social work.

Keywords

Participatory research, practice research, service users

Introduction

One of the principal aims of social work research is to reveal and document a situation accurately, e.g. to reveal the impact of an intervention, reveal the circumstances of peoples' lives, or document a lived experience. Whatever the goal of the

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research – impact, description or experience – accuracy is all important. Peter Beresford (2005) in his powerful article on the theoretical basis for service-user led research challenges the traditional research wisdom that ‘distance’, ‘neutrality’ and ‘objectivity’ are important in capturing truth accurately. He argues that these principles, instead of promoting accuracy in research, discriminate against service users and their experiential knowledge. He proposes that ‘*the shorter the distance there is between direct experience and its interpretation . . . the less distorted, inaccurate and damaging resulting knowledge is likely to be*’ (2005: 7).

Moreover, he points out that service-user knowledge *alone* is based on *direct* experience of service delivery from the *receiving end* (Beresford, 2000: 493). As such, he argues that service-user engagement in research privileges experiential knowledge, placing value on the knowledge that service users hold (Beresford, 2005: 7), recognising the constructive nature of research. Over and above benefits of accuracy, proximal and experiential accounts, meaningful service-user involvement in research is believed to promote empowerment and emancipation (2005).

Beresford (2000, 2002, 2005) makes a strong pragmatic argument for engaging service users in research, not only as providers of information, but also as collators and interpreters of information. Why then does service-user engagement in the production of research remain at the margins of social work research (Branom, 2012; Morris, 2019), ignoring people’s ‘ability to critically analyse their own experiences’ (Wagaman and Sanchez, 2017: 79)? This article explores the evolution and role of service users in research today drawing on vignettes of published participatory social work research studies.

Evolution of service-user research

Although it is increasingly common to position service users as central stakeholders in the research process, this is a relatively recent phenomenon. Interest in public participation in policy has been traced to civil rights, normalisation, community care and community development initiatives of the 1960s and later social movements grounded in disability, mental health, age, and care-experience issues (Beresford, 2002; Biskin et al., 2013; McLaughlin, 2010).

Golightley and Holloway (2018) and McLaughlin (2012) point to the 1970s and the work of Mayer and Timms (1970) as the point when service-user engagement in social work practice emerged. Service-user engagement in both policy and practice accelerated throughout the 1980s and 1990s giving rise to a new rhetoric of ‘user-involvement’, ‘partnership’ and ‘empowerment’. The bottom-up drive for service-user engagement witnessed in the 1960s was followed by a top-down requirement for service-user engagement in policy making by the New Right in the 1990s (Beresford, 2002).

While engagement of service users in research did not gain traction till much later, the 1970s marked a move away from medical, behavioural and observational research, which cast service users as ‘research subjects’, towards a focus on service users as ‘research participants’, listening to and documenting what service users had to say about their lives and experiences (French and Swain, 1997). The paradigm

shift to service users as ‘co-researchers’ remained some way off; however, the tools which researchers would use to engage service users as co-researchers were developed in the 1970s. Tools such as participatory research evolved from Freire’s critical approach to adult education (Padgett, 2016; Sheely, 2018) and emancipatory research from the disabled people’s movement, which saw existing research more as a source of exploitation than liberation. These groups, influenced by feminist, black and educationalist writers, highlighted the importance of changing and equalising the social relations of research production (Beresford, 2002).

The early 2000s saw a growth of interest in service-user involvement in research. This was evidenced by funding bodies encouraging and mandating service-user involvement in health and mental health research (Beresford, 2005; Littlechild et al., 2015; McLaughlin, 2012) and an expansion in literature about service-user involvement.

While there would appear to be widespread consensus on a growing interest in service-user involvement in social work research (Cossar and Neil, 2015; Fleming et al., 2014; Gutman and Ramon, 2016; Littlechild et al., 2015), as recent as 2013 Boxall and Beresford (2013) concluded that service users are not central to social work research and there remains a need for further development. There are examples of participatory research within social work research; however, these are not commonplace (Branom, 2012) and are predominantly academic led. Loughran and McCann (2015: 706) concluded that ‘*Although service user involvement in research is desirable, it remains unclear what this means in practice*’.

This would seem to be a timely call for clarity and refocusing of practitioner attention on the advantages and challenges of participatory research.

Foundation of research: Its purpose

The foundation of any research is the research *approach* or research *purpose*. However, discussion of this crucial foundation is often glossed over, possibly because it is hampered by interchangeable terminology, being variously referred to as ‘methodology’, ‘approach’ or ‘type of research’. The choice of foundation for a research project warrants greater attention, as it guides the choice of methods, data type, questions and participants.

‘Basic research’, where the purpose of the research is to garner knowledge (Patton, 2002) without a specific application in mind, is the most commonly adopted research approach, typically exemplified by student academic research. However, it represents only one end of a continuum of research approaches which aim to achieve impact through various means such as knowledge acquisition, evaluation, problem solving, action, participation and emancipation (Figure 1). These approaches can of course be used in combination, for example participatory action research (Fals-Borda, 1999) or participatory evaluation (Cousins and Chouinard, 2012) which employ approaches concurrently.

Basic research traditionally casts the researcher as expert with specialist knowledge and skills, retaining the power over the questions that are asked and how they



Figure 1. Continuum of research approaches/purposes.

are interpreted. *Unlike basic research, evaluation research and applied research have a specific application in mind;* however, they may also employ a ‘researcher as expert’ stance. Indeed the further along the continuum the research moves, the more service users take a role in the research process. *Participatory research* casts service users and researchers as co-researchers or partners (Swartz and Nyamnjoh, 2018). Engagement of service users in the research process is the key principle of participatory research, and the power of the researcher is shared, to varying degrees, between service-user researchers and practitioner or academic researchers.

Emancipatory Research is also built on the premise of service-user research. However, what sets it apart from participatory research is the non-negotiable principle that the service user is in control of the entire research process, from initiation to formulation, interpretation and dissemination of findings (Swartz and Nyamnjoh, 2018; Zarb, 1992). The power of the researcher is entirely vested in the service user. If emancipatory research truly adheres to the principle of service-user control, it arguably sits outside the remit of social work research. Therefore, the approach most relevant to service user’s engagement in social work research is participatory research.

What is participatory research?

Participatory research, rather than prioritising knowledge creation alone, also focuses on the roles co-researchers play in initiating, designing, generating, analysing, interpreting, writing and disseminating the research. This type of research is undertaken with a view to breaking down the traditional hierarchical relationship

and power dynamic between researcher and respondent groups. The service user and researcher work in partnership to varying degrees, aiming to change the social relations of research production. Participatory research therefore refers to research that is done ‘with’ or ‘by’ service users through active involvement in the research process rather than ‘to’, ‘about’ or ‘for’ them as research subjects (Involve, 2012: 6). Participatory research aims to harness the research process as a vehicle for change and empowerment for research participants, reflecting more closely the voice of the service user and using this to influence policy and practice. The role of the researcher is typically one of facilitator (see Vignette 1), empowering the service user to develop or co-create their own knowledge and take action (Cossar and Neil, 2015).

Participatory research may be considered an umbrella term, referring to a range of approaches that strive to engage service users in the research process. These include, for example, *Participatory Action Research*, *Community-based Participatory Research* and in some instances, *Community Engaged Research*. Each shares a commitment to service user or community empowerment and egalitarian partnerships (Padgett, 2016). Participatory research, in common with action research and applied research, is frequently characterised by a grounding in pragmatism, as they relate to solving real-world problems (Padgett, 2016).

Why participatory research in social work?

Many writers point to the synergies between social work and participatory research given the congruence of their values of empowerment, liberation, emancipation, commitment to social justice and social change, and a social model of

Vignette 1. Experience of drug problems (Loughran and McCann, 2015)

Loughran and McCann’s (2013) study investigating the experience of drug problems in three Dublin communities engaged service users as both participants and as co-researchers in the study.

Social Work Researcher Hilda Loughran and Mary Ellen McCann (UCD) approached the communities to build a research team comprised of themselves as coordinating researchers, community drugs agency representatives/service providers and a community-based researcher from each community. This team developed a research protocol in which responsibilities were spelled out and formal contracts and payment for all partners agreed. The coordinating researchers oversaw the work ensuring that work adhered to best-practice, enabling effective communication and recruitment, providing leadership, training and support for community researchers. Community service providers contributed community researchers to work on the project, provided linkages and facilitated accessing community participation. Community researchers identified participants, participated in instrument design, identified local barriers to participation, undertook data gathering, analysis and dissemination of findings. In all 97 respondent participants engaged in either focus groups or interviews and the research resulted in profiles of three communities and identification of a set of community drug indicators.

understanding (Boxall and Beresford, 2013; Branom, 2012; Littlechild et al., 2015; Lyons, 2002; Newman and McNamara, 2016; Wagaman and Sanchez, 2017). Moreover, participatory research approaches are in line with anti-oppressive ideologies of social work practice seeking to build partnerships with service users, oppressed and hard-to-reach communities to promote empowerment (Jarldorn, 2016; McLaughlin, 2012; Strier, 2007).

Participatory research... can be seen as challenging the conventional structures and power bases of researchers, academics and professionals, through the sharing of skills and inclusion of the traditional subjects of research as co-researchers at all stages of the research design and execution. It has consciousness raising and educative functions alongside the actual results of the enquiry (which may themselves lead to reconceptualization of the problem or strategies for action). (Lyons, 2002: 343)

Furthermore, authors have suggested that the reflective practice skills of social work are an asset when navigating the challenges of participatory research (D'Cruz and Gillingham, 2017; Wagaman and Sanchez, 2017).

Levels of collaboration in research

It might be argued that service-user involvement in research per se is not a new phenomenon, after all service users have been providing information for research since social workers began researching! However, the level or degree of involvement of service users can range from the aforementioned provision of information, right up to service-user-controlled research where the service users are the principal decision makers.

Building on various theoretical models (Arnstein, 1969; Hanley et al., 2004; McLaughlin, 2010; Shier, 2001; Sweeney and Morgan, 2009), the levels of service-user participation can be conceptualised as a continuum or pyramid, arguably reflecting the volume of research conducted under each tier (Figure 2).

Service-user respondent

Much research remains at the bottom tier with service users as passive *respondents*, subject to the plans and interpretation of the researcher. Indeed, some have argued that this tier includes not only passive responses or informing but also manipulation and therapy (Arnstein, 1969).

Tokenism

Regrettably, expanding interest and associated mandated inclusion of service users in research has led to a risk of tokenistic inclusion, either intentionally or unintentionally. This may be where symbolic efforts are made to include service users, but in reality, not recognising their voice in the process. It may also include frustrated involvement where service users, although invited, are excluded due to lack of

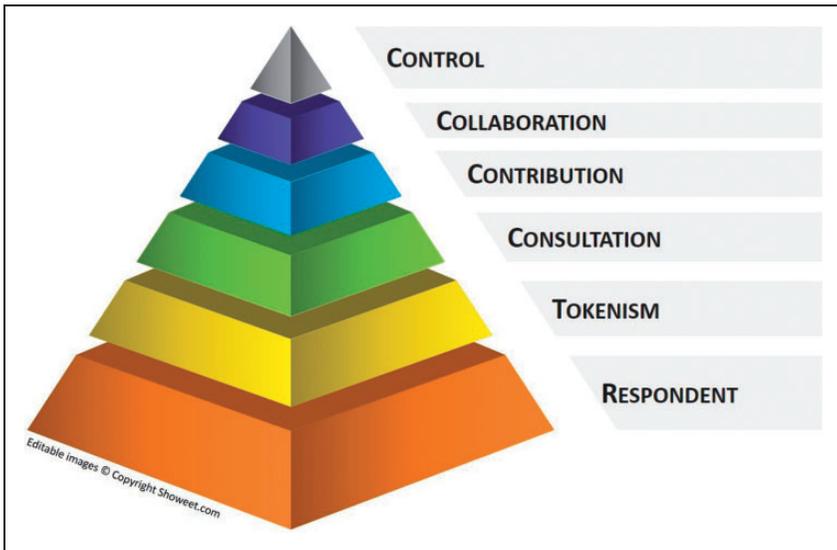


Figure 2. Pyramid of participation.

accommodations, e.g. unsuitable times or venues, lack of support or associated costs (McLaughlin, 2010).

Consultation

Researchers may ask for the input of service users, perhaps on an advisory committee, and may well be influenced by this input. However, at this tier, they will not necessarily adopt that advice. Arnstein (1969) described this type of participation as ‘placation’: *‘simply a higher-level tokenism because the ground rules allow have-nots to advise, but retain for the powerholders the continued right to decide’*.

This maintains the top-down status quo of the research process. Moreover, this ‘useful ambiguity’ can be abused, potentially resulting in ‘consultation overload’ on service users (McLaughlin, 2010: 1596–1597).

Contribution

At this level, researchers do more than ask service user’s opinions, actively involving them in the research process. However, *contribution* is distinguished from the next tier, *collaboration*, by virtue of incomplete participation, that is involvement in some but not all stages of the process, e.g. the service user may be involved in framing the question and/or recruiting respondents, but not in interpreting the results. Because participation is incomplete, decision-making powers are not shared (Sweeney and Morgan, 2009), researchers retain control of the overall process, ceding only limited power to service users.

Collaboration

Building on the preceding tier, collaboration involves more complete involvement, from advisory committee, framing research questions, identifying research tools, recruiting participants, analysing data, writing up the report and/or disseminating findings. A collaboration may not necessarily include involvement in every aspect of the process, e.g. academic or practitioner research may not necessarily involve service users at inception or before securing funding. The question of ‘how much involvement is enough’ to constitute collaboration is still open to debate. While some writers would refer to this as a *partnership*, others distinguish between two types of collaboration arguing that a partnership is a formal relationship with rights and responsibilities, whereas collaboration refers more to people informally agreeing to work jointly (Fleming et al., 2014).

User control

Straddling the divide between participatory research and emancipatory research, at this tier of service user participation, the locus of control is with the service user: initiating the study; determining the research focus, the process, the interpretation of findings, conclusions and dissemination. Although open to debate, this does not imply that the service users will necessarily undertake each part of the research process, they may commission contractors at various stages, but they will be in control of every stage. Despite representing a fundamental shift from traditional research approaches, Beresford says ‘*while it may be seen as the most developed expression of user involvement it largely remains on the margins of research and research funding*’ (2005: 5).

Setting up a participatory research project

Consideration of the various levels of service-user participation offers some insight into what’s involved in setting up a participatory research project. Drawing on Loughran and McCann (2015) and Lushey and Munro’s (2015) studies (see Vignettes 1 and 2), the frontloading of tasks involved in setup is clear.

Planning

Careful, collaborative and realistic planning for such a project involves consideration of resources – money, time and input; relationships and roles; channels of communication; the needs – emotional, practical and technical research support – of all collaborators and an awareness of the journey ahead and the need for a willingness on the part of everybody to learn, adapt and overcome challenges (see Vignette 2).

Preparation

Unlike traditional research studies where the researchers may already possess technical research skills, participatory research projects invariably involve provision of

Vignette 2. Participatory research with young people (Lushey and Munro, 2015)

Lushey and Munro (2015) reported on an evaluation of programmes aimed at improving outcomes for young people transitioning from care to adulthood.

Following ethics reviews, a job description and information sheets were distributed to gatekeepers who identified suitable young people. Twenty-eight care-experienced people aged 18–25 were recruited via semi-formal interviews, although an attrition rate of 25% occurred across the 18-month study timeframe. Three training events were held to (1) build relationships and agree roles, (2) provide interview training and protocols and (3) provide training on thematic analysis and design reports. Notwithstanding these, authors concluded that there were variations in the quality of the data and adaptations were made to training. Changes were also required to payment arrangements. Robust systems and processes of support and guidance were provided to peer researchers throughout. Furthermore, the authors recommended post-interview debriefing in the early stages of the process.

Peer researchers completed the target 65 interviews, all outside their local area. However, time-tabling had to be extended by some months and, although peer researchers played a role in all stages of the research process, it did not prove possible to involve young people in all aspects of design of the study or preliminary thematic analysis. This led the authors to conclude that peer researchers cannot be involved in research projects to the same extent as full-time academic researchers.

Regardless of these limitations the involvement of peer researchers led to a unique interpretation that may not have otherwise been obtained and findings from the evaluations had policy impacts.

training support and facilitation for collaborators who have not researched before. While training may be a frontloaded requirement, support and facilitation will be required throughout the study to ensure the quality of the study and prevent harm to service-user researchers (Loughran and McCann, 2015; Lushey and Munro, 2015).

Commencement

Experienced researchers typically come to a project with a sense of the task ahead and their role within that. The makeup of participatory research teams invariably requires a more explicit statement of the research tasks, broken down into manageable tasks. The role and responsibilities to complete these tasks must then be negotiated. As indicated earlier, inclusion of a formal contract-stipulating roles and responsibilities differentiates collaboration from partnership. Ideally, formal contracts should be signed, including payment for all partners in line with employment law. As work on the project commences, it will be important to ensure that partners work inclusively, providing feedback to the team in order to ensure cohesive progress (Cossar and Neil, 2015; Loughran and McCann, 2015).

Who's involved in participatory research?

Unlike emancipatory research where the service user is central and in control of the process, participatory research offers more flexibility in terms of the makeup of the partnership. A collaboration, while privileging the voice of the service user, can draw on expertise, with potential co-researchers from service-user, professional and researcher backgrounds (see Vignettes 1 and 4).

A participatory research team may include *direct service users* who are actively availing of the service at the same time as the research is ongoing, or those who availed of the service in the past. The team may also include *indirect service users* who have experience of a similar service elsewhere (see Vignette 2). Similarly, *alternative service users* may be availing one part of a service while collaborating on research in different area of provision (McLaughlin, 2010). A participatory research team can also include practitioners or professionals such as direct service providers or others working in the local community (see Vignette 1). Research expertise, over and above that of practitioners, can be drawn from local communities, academia or commissioned researchers.

Why engage in participatory research?

The work of Loughran and McCann (2015) and Lushey and Munro (2015) clearly document the additional workload involved in participatory research and it seems reasonable to ask what the advantages, disadvantages and challenges of undertaking participatory research are.

Advantages for service users

Review of literature suggests that the principal advantages to engaging in participatory research stem from the equality of relations in research production (Beresford, 2005) and reduced power differentials between partners (Fleming et al., 2014) working in partnership to define problems, identify solutions, more community-based analysis of social problems, oriented toward community action (Loughran and McCann, 2015) and shared ownership of outputs and improvements in the lives of fellow service users (see Vignettes 3 and 4).

For service-user collaborators, empowerment is mooted as the principal benefit. Indeed, partnership between provider and user lies at the heart of the empowerment process (Powell, 1998). Particularly in the context of research with children, participatory research provides a medium for operationalisation of Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child which calls for children to have a voice in all that concerns them (Horgan, 2017). The experience is considered a powerful learning experience (Fleming et al., 2014), and empowerment is supplemented by the more tangible increase in knowledge, awareness and skills (Gutman and Ramon, 2016) and associated confidence and self-esteem, remuneration and employability (McLaughlin, 2010). Researching in their own service arena or community affords service users the opportunity to meet others in similar situations

Vignette 3. Ex-prisoners and photovoice participatory research (Jarldorn, 2016)

Jarldorn's article reports on a single case from a photovoice research method study which aimed to empower ex-prisoner research participants to highlight women's unique experiences of imprisonment and release in South Australia. Jarldorn explains that photovoice, especially when researching 'on the margins', enables participants to produce a body of knowledge outside of traditional 'scientific' means of data collection and thereby challenge dominant understandings of their lives as they produce and analyse their own data. This project flips the usual conventions of surveillance by empowering ex-prisoners to create and discuss images that represent their experiences.

Following special consideration of potentially identifying data and cultural representation in images, ethical approval was granted. Funding and access limitations shaped the one-to-one nature of the study and extended the timeframe. Recruitment was purposive, with participants proposed by workers and ex-prisoner community groups. In all, 12 participants completed the research. Written information about the project supported informed consent. Participants were provided with examples of similar projects, basic instructions, ideas and a small honorarium. The author and participant researchers each provided the context of their personal experience and phototaking was guided by the question 'if you had 15 minutes with a policy maker . . . what would you want them to know about your experiences?'

In their photos participants used humour, metaphor, narratives and props, e.g. poetry, artwork or newspaper clippings. Analysis of the photos in one-to-one discussion between the author and participants was recorded and transcribed. De-identified ideas were also discussed with subsequent participants. An exhibition of photographs was held to disseminate findings.

The study findings provided a counter story to common assumptions about criminalised women and an opportunity for women ex-prisoners to help restore dignity and feelings of connection.

and become active in their community; establish a sense of purpose for themselves within their community and improve community capacity for addressing needs; participation can put service users in the position of being a meaningful part of positive outcomes for their own lives (Gutman and Ramon, 2016) and being part of social and political change (see Vignette 4).

Benefits for the research study

Harking back to Peter Beresford's argument that service-user involvement results in less distorted and damaging, and more accurate research knowledge, the benefits to research can be seen in both process and outcomes. Availing of input from services users is believed to benefit the research process through greater validity among the target population: more appropriate methods; optimisation of recruitment – particularly for hard to reach populations; respondents put more at ease; more ethically sensitive practices and more relevant questions (see Vignette 4). The reputed benefits accruing to outputs include more accurate conceptualisation;

Vignette 4. Roma needs assessment (Kennedy et al., 2019).

Pavee Point Traveller and Roma Centre and Department of Justice and Equality's national study of the needs of Roma in Ireland (2018) adopted a participatory research approach in order to counter the community's distrust of non-Roma and authorities. Such a study could not have been completed without the active involvement of community researchers at every stage of the research process.

The study, funded by the Department of Justice & Equality, was conducted by a team of researchers at Pavee Point Traveller & Roma Centre comprised of a principal (Independent) researcher, project coordinator, 18 Roma Researchers, a research academic and a social work graduate.

The 18 Roma researchers, including some Roma advocates, had visibility and the trust of their community, the networks, cultural competence and language necessary to engage with participants. They were involved in framing the research questions; publicising the research and selecting respondents; administering the questionnaire; participating in focus groups; translating interviews; interpreting the data, facilitating greater understanding of the subject and presenting the findings.

The work of the research team was supported by a 17-strong multi-disciplinary research advisory group consisting of representatives of statutory agencies and NGOs. The objective of this group was to provide expertise, access to frontline service providers and to advise on the research process and write up.

In all, 108 face-to-face questionnaires, 8 focus groups and 31 in-depth interviews were completed. Findings on the key priority areas of employment, accommodation, health and education revealed diversity within the community, poverty, marginalisation and discrimination.

improvements in the richness and quality of data; greater relevance of findings and impacts; greater accessibility and more accessible and powerful dissemination (Cossar and Neil, 2015; Lushey and Munro, 2015).

Potential costs

It would of course be naive to believe that such benefits do not come at a cost to both service-user and practitioner/researcher collaborators. Literature suggests that for all involved the time-consuming nature of the process is the greatest cost (McLaughlin, 2010; Strier, 2007). For service users, there may be a financial trade-off and for practitioner/researchers a lengthier and more resource-intensive research process than traditional research. This can result in an emotionally draining process with the potential for demoralisation when the process lags. The process, of course, also runs the risk of raising expectations of change (Branom, 2012) and the risk of tokenism and exploitation for service-user collaborators (McLaughlin, 2010).

Challenges

The process of research teamwork always brings challenges. However, it is fair to say these may be amplified in participatory research. For both the service user, and often for practitioner researcher, the experience of collaboration, support requirements and pacing of the project may be a new and unpredictable experience.

Literature suggests that issues of power and control and personal dynamics are the most challenging aspects of this approach to research: managing differing opinions born of different epistemological positions can challenge co-researchers; agreeing the roles of co-researchers and other stakeholders can be a point of contention; guarding against tokenistic involvement and decisions must be made with regard to ‘peeriness’ of service users, i.e. how close to the topic do peer researchers need to be, and the flipside, how close is too close? (Lushey and Munro, 2015; McLaughlin, 2010). These complexities contribute to a process which is time-consuming and resource intensive (see Vignette 2).

Challenges associated with ethics approval highlight two principal issues: Firstly, paternalistic frameworks adopted by ethical review bodies can hamper participatory research (Horgan, 2017; Jarldorn, 2016). Indeed, it has been argued that requirements to protect ‘the vulnerable’ from harm and to respect their competence can come into conflict (Kennan et al., 2012). Secondly, the role of gatekeepers as channels to access potential service-user collaborators can lead to bias in selection (Horgan, 2017), undermine integrity (McLaughlin, 2010) and further exacerbate power inequalities (Kennan et al., 2012). For example, young people are less likely to be involved as partners in participatory research (Jacquez et al., 2013). Others point to potential conflict between advancement of participatory goals and production of academically robust research which will be accepted by policy makers (Branom, 2012; Lushey and Munro, 2015).

Weighing up participatory research

This article has taken a close look at participatory research, foregrounding the practical implications and realities of participatory research and considering its place among the various approaches available to social work practitioner researchers. Review of the evolution of participatory research pointed to clear synergies between participatory research and social work values and this, coupled with the growing interest in and commitment to this relatively new research approach, supports a case for the use of participatory research in social work. However, we are drawn back to the question of why service-user engagement in the production of research remains at the margins of social work research (Branom, 2012).

A number of challenges underpin this apparent anomaly. A first challenge facing potential participatory social work researchers is the fact that there is limited evaluation of participatory research (Gutman and Ramon, 2016; Hanley, 2005; Sheely, 2018). Indeed, Beresford (2002: 95) concluded that evaluation of service-user engagement was typically uncritical, erring on the benefits and thus

depriving researchers considering participatory research of a solid evidence-based foundation upon which to build. A second challenge, identified by Doyle and Timonen (2010: 259), is the danger that the ‘moral’ argument for participation obscures the practical implications and realities of involvement. They argue that the practical realities and potential costs of participatory research, such as those outlined above, must be considered in order to avoid undermining the research. These dangers include threats to the empowering nature of the project in addition to threats to the quality, reliability, validity and acceptability of the outputs (Branom, 2012; Lushey and Munro, 2015). A third challenge, interrelated with the aforementioned two, is the fact that the outputs of participatory research have not yet achieved the perceived validity and acceptability of other more traditional approaches such as basic research, applied research and evaluation which may be ‘expert-led’ (Lushey and Munro, 2015). As such policy makers may be less receptive and more cautious about relying on the evidence from participatory research, thereby limiting the policy impact of the research (Aldridge, 2014; Salmen and Kane, 2006).

These are, however, challenges not barriers and the cited authors who pose these challenges conclude that while they are not ‘straightforward’ (Aldridge, 2014: 126) and benefits of participatory research are not automatic (Lushey and Munro, 2015: 525), better understanding will lead to greater safeguards (Doyle and Timonen, 2010: 261). Indeed, Littlechild et al. (2015) point out that even those who have delivered trenchant critiques of service-user involvement conclude that we should retain a hold on its liberatory potential and that limited participatory initiatives are generally preferable to an absence of involvement.

In foregrounding the practical implications and realities of participatory research, this article aims to prompt reflective questioning by social work practitioners embarking on research. Asking if the practical realities of service-user engagement in their research are sufficiently onerous to outweigh the moral arguments for participation? Or if even limited participation in their research is preferable to an absence of involvement? Greater understanding of the process and practicalities of participatory research is undoubtedly the first step toward greater levels of service-user engagement and participation in social work research.

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