Researching multiple exclusion homelessness using ex-service user peer researchers

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Issues to be covered

- What is 'peer research'?

- Why use service users as peer researchers?

- A case study from homelessness research

- What happened in practice?

- What lessons can be learnt for research practice?

What is 'peer research'?

- Peer research is a discreet approach to research design in which 'researchers' are drawn from among the 'researched'
- Interviewing in peer research involves recruiting interviewers from among the subject group of the research
- The service user as peer interviewer arises where both interviewers and research subjects are recruited from among users of services, in this case, for homeless people.

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Why do peer interviewing?

- Two kinds of arguments with different theoretical bases:
  - 'Consumerist': Benefits to research through incorporating participant perspectives into the design and conduct of the research
  - 'Democratic': Empowerment of research subjects through substantially handing over control of the research process to participants
- There are therefore two debates:
  - What are the practical limits to peer research in terms of how far different subject groups can be involved in the research process?
  - How far does peer research genuinely empower subject groups in the research process, and how far *should* it do so?

The HOME study

- Full title: 'The support priorities of multiply excluded homeless people and their compatibility with support agency agendas'
- Part of ESRC Multiple Exclusion Homelessness research programme
- Aims to deepen our understanding of homelessness, especially,
  - How do homeless people prioritise the problems they face?
  - How far do these priorities square with those of different support agencies?
- 105 interviews with homeless people in Nottingham and London, plus 44 interviews with key informants

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What was the planned role for peer interviewers?

- As co-designers of the interview schedules

- As co-interviewers of single homeless research subjects, alongside a member of the academic research team

- As co-analysers of the data through focus groups at which early findings were presented

- As co-disseminators of the findings through involvement in the production of a DVD

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Peer researchers as co-designers

- Potential peer researchers were initially identified by colleagues at Framework Housing Association and Thames Reach from amongst their ex-service user volunteers
- Initial briefing session to inform them of the nature of the research and their role
- Focus groups in Nottingham & London to develop the interview schedule
- Peer researcher interview training day
- A further meeting in London prior to starting interviews

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Peer researchers as co-interviewers (1): methodological issues

- Need for appropriate gender mix
- Overall value in enhancing validity and trustworthiness of interview data.
- Key issues that emerged in the interview process:
  - Should you take the lead at the risk of undermining peer researcher confidence?
  - When should you intervene to stop a potentially irrelevant line of inquiry?
  - How should you deal with repetition or omission?
- How do you balance the tension between three conflicting interests:
  - The needs of the peer researcher
  - The patience of the respondent
  - The demands of the research agenda?

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Peer researchers as co-interviewers (2): ethical issues

- Overall ethical value in generating an atmosphere of trust.
- Key ethical issues that arose:
  - Should peer researchers tell their own story?
  - Should peer researchers 'advise' respondents?
  - What do you do when the peer researcher is absent?
  - How do you manage the interview and manage the interviewer at the same time?
- The importance of de-briefing
  - At the end of each interview;
  - Periodically with peer researchers.

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Further peer research roles

- As co-analysers through feedback workshops

- As co-disseminators through the production of a DVD

- As overall participants through membership of a project steering group

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Benefits to all parties

- To the project in enhancing the trustworthiness of the data

- To the respondents in improving their sense of being heard and understood

- To the peer researchers in enhancing their employability:
  - Several have gone on to secure jobs, often in housing support work, since the end of the interviews

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Challenges for research practice

- How do you induct and train peer researchers to work effectively in an alien environment?
- Should we be more selective?
- How do you resolve the conflicting priorities of training peer researchers and fulfilling project expectations?
- In the end, what's in it for peer researchers?
- How far is genuine empowerment possible in the research process?

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