

METHODS BRIEFING 20

Partnership Research: Negotiating user involvement in research design

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April 2004 - January 2006

A series of methods briefings from projects funded by ESRC as part of the Research Methods Programme.

The Programme aims to develop qualitative and quantitative methods within the context of substantive research. It also aims to encourage effective dissemination of good practice.

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Background and aims of the project

Recent government policy places considerable emphasis on service users' involvement in policy and practice and in the review of best practice. Research funding bodies and public and voluntary sector organisations increasingly require the involvement of service users in quality monitoring and in research. This reflects an increasing concern with accessing and acting on insider knowledge and experience.

Research with service users can pose substantial challenges to researchers who have not worked in this way before. A partnership approach requires the negotiation and development of shared understandings by all parties as they work together and learn from each other. This project built upon our previous experiences of Partnership Research with service users to develop a series of research training activities. Wherever possible, the work was conducted in partnership with a group of learning disabled researchers who volunteered to work on the project. All courses were attended by (roughly) an equal number of academic and user researchers. A further one-day course will take place

on 20 July 2007. The project provided the basis for the production of a web-based educational resource on Partnership Research.

Web-based resource

Educational materials about Partnership Research are available from the Partnership Research website (see box overleaf for url). The website includes background information on Partnership Research and documents the different stages of a research project in Bankside Hostel. In addition, the website contains accessible information to support others who wish to carry out Partnership Research including material on:

- What is Partnership Research?
- Partnership models
- The politics and ethics of Partnership Research
- Legal issues
- Data gathering in partnership
- Data analysis in partnership
- Writing in partnership
- Partnerships: Questions and challenges

Challenges in Partnership Research

The training courses gave people the opportunity to talk about continuing challenges in relation to 'Partnership Research'. Many of these issues are not resolvable in any ultimate way, but will need to be grappled with by researchers in the context of their own work. The website provides background material which we hope will help people think through the dilemmas involved.

Examples of challenges include the power inequalities between academic and user researchers. Connected to this are issues associated with remuneration for user researchers. Institutions such as Universities and other public sector organisations may need to adapt in relation to the particular demands of partnership research, for example in relation to ethical approval. This is because research design and application may need to remain 'fluid' in partnership work. There are also likely to be heavy demands on researchers who work in this way as they need to remain flexible in relation to decision-making, unforeseen turns of events, and the support needs of user researchers.

Selected publications

Frankham, J., Kaplan, I., Regan B. and Boxall, K. (2006) 'Doing Data Analysis in a Research Partnership.' INVOLVE Spring Newsletter (available at <http://www.invo.org.uk/>).

Frankham, J. (2006) 'Network utopias and alternative entanglements for educational research and practice', *Journal of Education Policy*, 21, 6, 661-677. This paper may prove useful to those interested in partnership working,

and related notions, as it examines some assumptions about working in groups or networks.

Further information

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ESRC Seminar Series

Service User Agendas in Research:
Emancipatory and Inclusive paradigms

In a forum in which learning disabled researchers lead the debate, this Seminar Series will bring together learning disabled and academic researchers to explore ways of working together. The seminars will include researchers who use emancipatory approaches and those who use inclusive/partnership approaches – two related but separate ways of working. The seminars will focus on the experiences of people working in the area of learning disability but discussion will be extended to include work with other groups.

Details are still being finalised, but further information is available from:
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