

# Is changing who leads research a methodological innovation?

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## **Abstract:**

Emancipatory research is controlled by the people who are usually the subjects of research and who are implicated by it, whether this be disabled people, older people, survivors of mental health services or other marginalised groups. While labelled differently child-led or user-led research involves this same change in who is in charge of the process of knowledge production. There is a notion of accountability to the people involved and others in their situation and of working towards tackling their social oppression. This paper explores what this change means for innovation in research methods. If, as many argue, this methodological turn is more about political philosophy than a set of techniques, then does it leave the techniques unchanged and does this constitute a methodological innovation? The paper draws on data from two recent research projects to examine this issue: an ESRC study of quality and capacity in inclusive research with people with learning disabilities and an NCRM study of methodological innovations in the social sciences including a case study of child-led research. By focusing on concepts and practices in tandem the paper illustrates some of the contradictions in an apparent paradigm shift.

**NCRM** National Centre for  
Research Methods

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## Acknowledgements

This paper draws on 2 recent research projects and I acknowledge ESRC for the funding and my co-researchers, **Hilra Vinha, Rose Wiles, Andrew Bengry-Howell and Graham Crow**, for their contributions.

Without these studies running concurrently I would not have been led to ask the question: *Is changing who leads research a methodological innovation?*



## Two concurrent studies

### Innovation

3 case studies of innovation – 1 about child-led research

### Inclusive research

Series of focus groups – 1 comprising researchers with learning disabilities who lead their own research



## NCRM Innovation study: Questions

- What are the social processes surrounding methodological innovation?
- How and why are innovations developed?
- How do developers and champions view ownership?
- How are innovations taken up, adapted and received by academic communities?



## Defining innovation

- Applying only to new methods or methodologies *or* advances or developments of established methods (see Taylor & Coffey, 2008)
- Taken up by the wider social science community (Taylor & Coffey, 2008; Wiles et al) *or* not yet filtered through to the mainstream (Xenitidou & Gilbert, 2009, 2012).



## Innovation context

- Funders and publishers increasingly view methodological novelty as important in decisions about funding and publication (Taylor & Coffey, 2009; Travers, 2009).
- Pressure on researchers to develop adaptations to established methods/ develop 'new' methods/ make claims for such developments (Wiles et al, 2011).



## Innovation: Methods

interviews with  
developer of the  
method/approach

review of  
academic  
response to  
innovations

interviews with  
users, reviewers  
and established  
academics



## ESRC Inclusive research: Questions

- What do we mean by working in partnership in research?
- What kinds of knowledge are attributable to inclusive research and how can we evaluate the outcomes of inclusive research?
- What are the benefits and problems?
- How might good science and good inclusive research practice come together?



## Defining inclusive research

- Must 'address issues which really matter to people with learning disabilities, and which ultimately leads to improved lives for them',
- 'access and represent their views and experiences', and
- reflect 'that people with learning disabilities need to be treated with respect by the research community' (Walmsley & Johnson, 2003: 16)

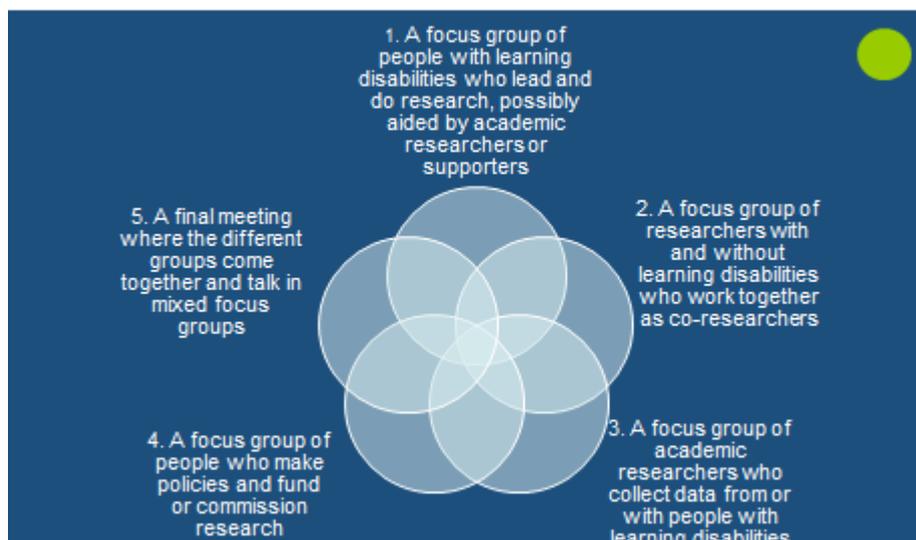


## Inclusive research: context

- Strong history of participatory & emancipatory research approaches in disability studies.
- Literature on why it's needed, how it's done, the challenges, some findings, how to disseminate inclusively (mostly individual studies)
- People with learning disabilities doing research, leading, commissioning, training, peer reviewing.
- But quality not debated or understood and difficult stuff not talked about....



### Inclusive research: Methods



## Epistemological shifts re who leads

- Kellett (2005) describes her approach as 'a new paradigm'
- Innovation = training and supporting children & young people to design and conduct research that is led by them from the initial idea through to its dissemination.
- 'What drove me was empowering children ... what I really wanted to do was to see if I could pioneer a way where children can be empowered to do their own research' (Kellett)



## Kellett on who leads...

'Children 'create knowledge that we [adults] couldn't necessarily create. And they can analyse in a way that, we don't analyse, because ... sometimes they see things that we don't.' They need to lead research on children because of their unique 'insider' perspective which is critical to our understanding of children's worlds, inaccessible via research led or managed by adults. They have 'a better understanding of what contemporary childhoods are' by dint of living them, this leads to a privileging of their perspectives throughout.



## Inclusive researchers on who leads...

- For researchers with LD and their inclusive research allies who leads was important: 'Ideas have to come from members of the group' (Rohhss in Nind & Vinha, 2012); 'they're only there for support' (Gareth in Nind & Vinha, 2012))



## The argument

- 'If people do their own research it's about doing things for themselves and for their groups and not being led, or rejected by others. ... It is started and led by us, we are not following someone else, or being partly included, which also means partly rejected, by someone else. ... it has to be done by people themselves right from the beginning by using the words people want to use, putting together reports and papers that are understandable for them and others, and using the methods that make the most out of each person's skills. Then we have real ownership of the research.' (Townson et al, 2004, p73)



## Ethics arguments

- 'The right thing to do' (Holland et al, 2008)
- About redressing wrongs and tackling marginalisation of their voices
- About engagement & empathy & who has the right to ask questions, make decisions, tell the stories, take the credit
- Democratization of research process
- And because they can!



## Methodological innovations?

- This adds up to a new political climate for research, new concerns for funders ('wanting to invest ... co-researchers shaping all aspects themselves, part of bringing around changing their own lives, the lives of the group, life beyond the research output' (Emma in Nind & Vinha, 2012), new criteria for who gets grants
- But can be very traditional research codified
- *Except* for some creative approaches to joint analysis



## Core tension (1)

- Need to learn and adopt research conventions to be taken seriously. This makes lay researchers more like academic researchers – in our likeness. So if this is an innovation, it has to be less innovative/different to be more successful! (And risky business for academics to be associated with...)
- Academic gatekeeping keeps it in check – if too different it is deemed not to be research at all!



## Core tension (2)

- Can replace one essentialism with another ...
- But children's perspectives are "not devoid of influence from the adult world" (Exp 3, Nind et al, 2012); all voices are mediated.



### Core tension (3)

- Lack of (innovation in) theorisation about empowerment and about research problems perhaps?
- Studies so grounded in experience they can fail to go beyond experience into new knowledge...



### Re-discovery – feeling like innovators

- The move to challenge the power dynamics of research production is happening in disability studies, feminist research, race, childhood, among mental health service survivors, health service users etc etc
- Each seem to be inventing it for themselves afresh and even individual researchers doing this – product of the lack of a traditional literature review!



## The innovation is in the ambition

In the two studies the thinking about the role of others supporting or mediating the leaders of the research differed greatly, and often methods were not new, **but in both the innovation was in the ambition – what the researcher sets out to do.** This meant that the purpose of collecting and analysing data went far beyond adding to the body of knowledge.



## Inclusive & child-led research reflects an agenda to:

- transcend inequalities in research power dynamics
- demonstrate competence
- be more valid, more authentic and create knowledge
- enable self-development, political agency, increased confidence and skills, lead to more active participation, enhance social inclusion, give voice, build self-advocacy provide training, skills, jobs, networks, and friendships
- do something new for those involved and affected, if not always to do something new methodologically



## For more detail see

- Nind, M., Wiles, R.A., Bengry-Howell, A. & Grow, G.P. (2012) Methodological Innovation and Research Ethics: Forces in tension or forces in harmony? *Qualitative Research* 11-12.
- Nind, M. & Vinha, M. (2013) Doing research inclusively: Bridges to multiple possibilities in inclusive research, *British Journal of Learning Disabilities* 11-8. / [www.doingresearchinclusively.org](http://www.doingresearchinclusively.org)
- Nind, M. (in press) *What is inclusive research?* London: Bloomsbury Academic.
- Wiles, R.A., Bengry-Howell, A., Nind, M. & Crow, G. (in press) But is it innovation? The development of novel methodological approaches in qualitative research, *Methodological Innovation Online*.