

Participatory Research with People Who Are or Were Homeless: Transcript



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David Shallcross: Hello. My name is David Shallcross and I want to talk to you about doing participatory research with people who are currently or have previously been homeless. First, a little bit about myself. I have a background in public health and I've been working at a homelessness charity called the Connection at St Martin's since October 2017. I'm responsible for monitoring evaluation, learning and research there. And I've led or advised on some different participatory research projects at the Connection briefly described on this slide. This is only a short presentation, so I'm just going to run through three principles for participatory research. I haven't drawn on any specific online guidance, but most of the points I make do have further resources available online. In my opinion, the principles are universal, but what I'm going to try to do is unpack them for the specific case of working with people who are or were homeless.

So, the first principles is to really consider the social context of the homeless people that you are interested in, or if you're working with a preformed group, the specifics of that group and their social world. So, what are their experiences? What makes them different from other people who might have been through homelessness. We use homelessness very loosely as a term, but it actually covers a multitude of different experiences. For example, it might refer to rough sleeping or squatting or living in unsuitable accommodation, or you might be interested in understanding the needs of a particular demographic group. For example, is your research project really about refugees or young people or women escaping domestic violence? I think these choices are all incredibly important because these characteristics will say a lot about the degree of social marginalisation or distress of the people you're

interested in and will also reveal perhaps how they became homeless in the first place. Also, in the UK context, demographic factors play a significant role in determining what support someone is eligible for, so they will also affect their experience of and access to public services. And finally, I think that it's an important consideration for when you come to analyse your data because you should probably be thinking about which voices are represented and which voices aren't, what kinds of homeless experience are in the data and what kinds aren't. Okay?

So, once you've got an idea of the specifics of your group, then you can start to think about what participation might look like for that group. And I think the next principle here is to do no harm. The most obvious pitfalls to avoid would be exploitation. So, some of the most vulnerable homeless people will be in a state where they're not able to look after themselves or to make fully independent decisions for themselves. So, where there are doubts over someone's capacity, true participatory research isn't possible and should be avoided.

The next one is re-traumatisation. So, many people who are homeless have had traumatic personal experiences in the past and the experience of homelessness itself is also in and of itself deeply traumatising. So, what are you going to do to minimise the risk of further psychological harm to the people who are taking part in your research? The third one is remuneration, so anything that looks like paid income from work can have implications for tax or benefits eligibility or active immigration applications. Make sure that your project doesn't put people at risk of losing their benefits or jeopardising their legal status in this country. It's your responsibility to research and actively consider this, especially when you're working with really vulnerable people.

And then the last one is publicity. So, homelessness is still widely perceived and felt to be shameful. This means that people who've got experience of homelessness might be willing to do research but not willing to be publicly

identifiable as a homeless person. These feelings are legitimate and should be respected. Not everyone is going to embrace the public identity as a homelessness survivor, so you need to have really detailed discussions about dissemination. For example, if there's a report, do they want to be named or do they want to be completely anonymous? If there's a video, do they want to appear as themselves or in voiceover, or would they like an actor to read their words? If there's a public event, do they want to be there but not speak, or do they feel comfortable speaking out and so on. So, you should explore this with people in a really timely way so they don't feel pressured and give them lots of options.

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And then the last principle I want to explore is about being flexible and sensitive and somewhat humble in how you do the approach to the project. So, some things to consider. Time commitment. In my experience there's generally an inverse relationship between the amount of time that you can reasonably expect from people and the stress of the situation that they're going through, so if you're rough sleeping then you're going to be thinking about shelter, where to wash, where to charge your phone, all these things. It's not going to be high on your priority list to do a one-hour interview, let alone sign up for a long-term research project. If you start to add in other kinds of trauma or crisis then you begin to understand why people might not view your research as a priority.

Expenses. Covering basic expenses, so travel costs and lunch, won't fall foul of tax or welfare or immigration rules, so make sure you do it. Choice over time and venues. As much as possible, try to reduce barriers to people taking part in activities. And if that means that you're the person that's doing all the running, then so be it. Other incentives. Some of the best incentives for this kind of project will be new skills or new friendships, so think about how you can design your project in such a way that you build up people's social capital or confidence. And then revising the plan. People who are homeless generally have a lot of appointments. They may also be going through a lot of personal

crisis or chaos even, so very rigid timetables and deadlines are not going to help them. Be willing to flex and adjust.

And one way to address the above points is to find trusted intermediaries, which might be homelessness community groups who can advise you on your project and help to make sure it lands well with the target group. Another common solution is to recruit people who were previously homeless, who have lived experience, but are not currently homeless because they're more likely to be stably housed, they're more likely to be able to commit over the long term, and the skill set there might be more immediately transferrable into their next steps and their career.

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