



Older co-researchers exploring age-friendly communities: An “insider” perspective on the benefits and challenges of peer-research

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Aim of the presentation

- Reflect on the **advantages and disadvantages** of working with **older people as co-researchers** to examine the age-friendliness of their neighbourhood
- Critically review some of the broader questions that surround the **participation of older people in research**
- **Open up a discussion** about participatory methodologies in ageing and urban research

Outline

- Background of the study
- Aims and objectives
- Participatory research methods and training
- Advantages associated with involving older people as co-researchers
- Challenges associated with involving older people as co-researchers
- Discussion



Background

- Growth of interest in user involvement, public engagement and **coproduction** in research

“For a real **democratization of social research** to occur, there will have to be changes not just in the status of the researched, but also in the **right to be a researcher**”



Cathie Marsh, 1981

Background

Towards a public gerontology in action

- **Public sociology**

A sociology orientated **towards society's problems**, which engages with the concerns and needs of **communities, organizations and individuals**



(Burawoy, 2004)

- **Public gerontology**

Assisting groups and individuals in assessing their situation to make the **links between personal experience and structural inequalities** and to engage stakeholders in **collective change**



Praxis is a key element:

The practical transformation of the world towards a desired end



(Estes, 2008; 2011)

Background

- The importance of involving older people in developing 'age-friendly communities'

“The **participation of older people** is both the **goal** of age-friendly environments and important **in the process of creating them.**”

“A participatory approach helps ensure that **interventions meet the needs and expectations of citizens**, but also fosters **ownership**”

(Warth, 2016, p.40)



Background

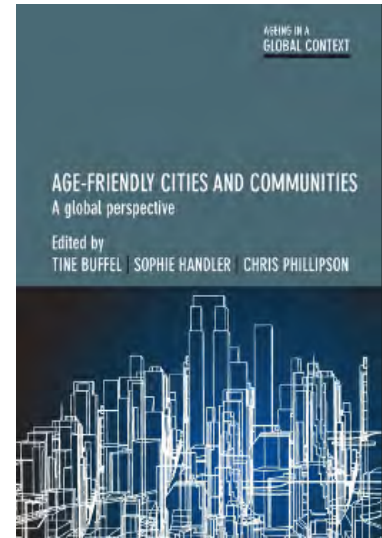
- The importance of involving older people in developing ‘age-friendly communities’

“**Coproduction** methods are at the heart of developing age-friendly initiatives:

Amongst other stakeholders, older people are recognised as **key actors** in developing **research** and **action** plans to improve the ‘age-friendliness’ of their neighbourhood.”

“However,... there is an **urgent need** for **more experimentation** to **test**, and **learn from** [such], participatory and collaborative approaches.”

(Buffel, Handler and Phillipson, 2018)



Research aims and objectives

- To explore the ‘**place**’ **dimension** of older people’s experiences of **social exclusion and inclusion** in three contrasting low-income neighbourhoods in Manchester, UK
- To identify the **issues older residents and community stakeholders view as important** in developing the age-friendliness of their neighbourhood
- To **involve older people as experts and actors** in the development of the study – “co-production” principles
- To promote **evidence-based policy-making** and practice at the local level

PAR framework: co-research design

- ‘co-research’ design with older people taking a leading role in developing and implementing the study



- 18 people (aged 58-74) recruited and trained as co-researchers: assisted with focus groups and conducted individual interviews
- 68 **one-to-one interviews** with people 60 plus
- Themes: experiences of living in the area, views about the environment, public space, housing, community

(Buffel, 2018a, b)

Training, reflection and collaborative learning

- **Training sessions:** all stages of research cycle from codesigning research objectives and research materials to dissemination and evaluating impact.
- Issues relating to **interview techniques** were an important feature of the meetings, with the areas discussed including: how to ask questions, how to listen, how to probe, how to raise sensitive issues, how to pick up cues about when to follow up, when to move on,...
- **Framework for ‘good care’** in developing research relationships
- **Reflection meetings**
- **Dissemination workshops**

(Buffel, 2018a, b)

Data Analysis

- Co-researchers involved in data analysis sessions: a joint coding framework was negotiated and agreed



Who are the co-researchers?

- **Residents** in the study areas
- Recruited through local **Age-Friendly Committee** and community events
- “**Role description**” to recruit co-researchers
- **Between 58 and 74 years old**
- **10 women, 8 men**
- 7 people from **minority ethnic groups**; 11 white British
- 4 people with **health issues and/or difficulty walking**
- 9 people live with their **spouse**, 9 people live **alone**
- **Length of residence** between 3 and 70 years

RESEARCHING AGE-FRIENDLY COMMUNITIES: Stories from older people as co-investigators

Film 'Researching age-friendly cities' featuring older co-researchers who were involved as experts and actors in all stages of the research project



Book focusing on the advantages and disadvantages of training and working with older residents as co-researchers in examining the age-friendliness of their neighbourhood

Involving older people as co-researchers: Opportunities

- It generates a sense of **'ownership'** of the research which stimulates participation and advocacy of older citizens
- It **counteracts stereotypes** of older people by emphasizing and making their involvement and participation visible
- It provides **opportunities for science, policy and practice to meet**, interact and develop an understanding of each other



Involving older people as co-researchers: Opportunities

Interview quality

“I don’t think the very elderly people would have disclosed as much to students or young academics, as they were often ashamed of their problems such as fear of computers, severe deafness, using a commode...”

(Margaret, 71 years old).

Involving older people as co-researchers: Opportunities

Accessing people

“The people I interviewed would not have participated in a study with academics or students as interviewers. Particularly Rose, who doesn’t even leave the kitchen, let alone the house. You would have never found her. But she’s used to me. I go and see her for an hour every Saturday and the interview was just an extension of that”

(Martha, 73 years old).

Involving older people as co-researchers: Opportunities

Signposting

“Cath [one of the interviewees] needed particular help in winter. I have encouraged her to come along to the [local] Care Group. ...

James [another interviewee] feels cut off from younger people and family life so I have included him in family events, and I let him know about events taking place locally which are more family based”

(66 year old co-researcher, female)

Involving older people as co-researchers: Opportunities

Community networks

Community empowerment

“I do think that the research and the contacts we’ve made with people is going to be really useful because we’ve engaged people and **got them thinking... What are the priorities?** What are we going to do first? What are the quick wins that we could actually show **we can make a difference? ...**”

(62 year old co-researcher, female)

Community action

Community change

Involving older people as co-researchers: Impact

The “85Age-Friendly Bus”



- Before the start of the research project, the **local bus service was cut** due to **funding pressures**
- The research identified this as a **major problem for older residents**
- The co-researchers played a **key role in campaigning for the successful restoration of the bus service**
- Residents dubbed the A in the 85A the ‘**Age-Friendly**’ bus service

Involving older people as co-researchers: Challenges

Interview quality

“Unfortunately... the very factors which proved helpful, such as having local knowledge and contacts in the area, also represent the biggest drawback. The avoidance of asking leading questions becomes more difficult with the closeness of people taking part”

(Paddy, 60 years old).

Involving older people as co-researchers: Challenges

Who is being empowered, by whom, and in whose interests?

- 18 co-researchers (58-74 years old) in this project
- **Heterogeneous group**: 10 women, 8 men; ethnic diverse group; diverse group in terms of resources and health status
- **BUT higher level of education**
- Co-researchers were trained to conduct interviews with **vulnerable groups of older people**
- Research dilemmas in **power imbalances** and interpersonal dynamics between 'researcher', 'co-researcher' and 'researched'

Involving older people as co-researchers: Challenges

- **Intense levels of contact and collaboration** between (co)researchers, community stakeholders and policy-makers
- Negotiation of **local politics and power relationships**
- **Sustainability** is a significant issue and **challenge**
 - *Short term research project* as compared to older people's *longer term commitment to the community*
- Ideology of involvement is not matched by the **financial resources** to meet the expectations which are generated – reinforced by **austerity**
- **Ethical challenges**

Conclusion

Despite the limitations, the case for participatory research with older people is threefold:

1. It is a viable method to engage older residents and **mobilise their expertise, skills and knowledge** in research that can lead to **social change**
2. Older co-researchers can **assist with the recruitment of vulnerable groups of older people** to participate in research and contribute to tackling social exclusion
3. The approach has **benefits for the older co-researchers, community stakeholders and policy-makers** involved, because it provides a forum for social engagement and mutual learning

Questions for further research/discussion

- To what extent do coproduction methods contribute **new knowledge** about older people's experiences of their neighbourhood?
- How can we involve the **most excluded groups** of older people as co-researchers in such projects?
- How can we develop co-production projects **beyond the neighbourhood level**?
- How can we promote **exchange and learning** about different co-production methodologies?
- Do you know of any examples of projects that use **creative, innovative or participatory methodologies** which have proven helpful in exploring people's experiences of ageing/living in the city?

– Thank you –



All co-researchers and interviewees – Rebecca Bromley – Paul McGarry – Age-Friendly Manchester – Stefan White – Jo Garsden – Mark Kelly – Chris Ricard – Helen Hiberd – Chorlton Good Neighbours – Whalley Range Community Forum – MICRA – Patty Doran – Samuele Remillard-Boilard...



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