

Community Researchers and Community Researcher Training:  
Reflections from the UK's *Productive Margin's: Regulating for  
Engagement* Programme



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# Community Researchers and Community Researcher Training: Reflections from the UK's *Productive Margins: Regulating for Engagement* Programme

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## Introduction

This paper explores the role of training as a mechanism to support and enable community researchers within co-produced research projects. The paper draws on the authors work within the UK's co-produced five-year research programme: *Productive Margins: Regulating for Engagement*<sup>1</sup>. The authors describe the role of community researchers and community researcher training within four of the programme's distinct research projects. Drawing on evaluative data from each project and evaluative data collected during the delivery of research training, the authors argue that rigorous, flexible and reflexive researcher training can go a significant way towards supporting the development of the skills needed to work as a community researcher on a co-produced research project. The authors also argue that training can be a space in which the transformation of traditional power dynamics that co-production aspires too can be negotiated. The authors contend that the training community researchers receive is an important; but often neglected, detail of co-produced research accounts and reason that, going forwards, details of training including: content, delivery-mode, evaluation and reflections, should be included in accounts. The authors propose a simple design framework to aid planning future community researcher training within co-produced, participatory and action-research projects.

### *Context: Productive Margins: Regulating for Engagement*

The *Productive Margins: Regulating for Engagement* programme was funded as part of the UK's Connected Communities programme, a large national initiative which asked how community and university expertise might be combined to better understand the roles that communities can play in responding to the problems and possibilities of the contemporary world (Facer & Enright, 2016). The programme drew multi-disciplinary academics from the universities of Bristol and Cardiff together with seven diverse neighbourhood-based, identity-based and faith-based community-organisations to co-produce a programme of research which examined the extent to which it is possible to reimagine regulatory practices through strategies of co-production (also see McDermont, 2018).

*Productive Margins* was premised on the argument that 'decentred' (Black, 2001) regulatory systems are generally formed from restricted networks (relatively powerful organisations, regulatory bodies, the companies/organisations that are to be regulated, and advisers, consultants, financiers etc) in ways that leave little space for engagement from individuals and communities who also experience being regulated (McDermont, 2019; McDermont, 2018; also see Teubner, 1987). Through co-producing grass-roots experimentation with regulatory systems, the programme aimed to 'develop [the]socially enriched mechanism for seeing and knowing' that regulation theorists have argued necessary if regulators are to regulate in ways that are 'really responsive' (Black, 2013). In this way, the programme aimed to cultivate new visions for alternative futures (Levitas, 2013).

*Productive Margin's* approach to co-production was grounded in the public service tradition and economist Elinor Ostrom's understanding of 'social goods' as necessarily 'co-produced' between publics and professionals with the experiences, actions and contributions of citizens serving as an important foundation for understanding how to produce better public services (cited in Facer & Enright, 2016, p. 87; also see: Durose et al., 2011 & original works Ostrom, 2015; Ostrom, 1996). Co-production in the programme was underpinned by two principles: academics and community organisations are equal partners in the design and delivery of the research programme; and that new understandings arise when we reflect what we think we know against others who bring to the field

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<sup>1</sup> ESRC Grant No. ES/K002716/1

different perspectives (McDermont, 2018). Expertise was understood as multiplicitous, constituted through 'embodied ensembles of political, institutional and relational knowledge' (Newman, 2017, p.94).

## Co-Production as a Methodological Approach

Co-producing research between universities and communities to facilitate grass-root solutions to the complex and amorphous issues facing our contemporary world has come to a timely fore, with research that brings different social actors together framed as a means of aligning the production of new knowledge with the expectations, needs and values of a diverse society (Xavier Grau et al., 2017). Co-produced research has a value-base of democracy, social justice, and human rights. It explicitly recognises and brings forward 'previously hidden or marginalised perspectives and experiences' (Beebeejaun et al., 2015), as such, it is a methodology which resonates with those who are concerned that these forms of knowledge have 'traditionally been excluded from academic research' (Bell & Pahl, 2018). Co-production aims to facilitate social change from outside of the influence of powerful majority perspectives (Beebeejaun et al., 2015; Kesby, 2007), facilitating 'individual and collective empowerment' and inspiring transformative social change in communities (Banks & Armstrong, 2014 also see Heron & Reason, 2008). As such, co-production has a distinctly utopian orientation (Bell & Pahl, 2018; Levitas, 2013).

Co-production is argued to bring 'greater representation of marginalized groups in research, data that are more representative of community needs, and increased opportunities for local capacity- building and empowerment' (Guta, Flicker & Roche, 2013). Co-production can be considered an 'entirely necessary response to the demands of (overly-) research(ed) subjects: 'nothing about us without us' and 'research with, not on' ' (Bell & Pahl, 2018, p.107 also see Canadian HIV/AIDS Legal Network, 2008; Charlton, 2000; International Sex Worker Harm Reduction Caucus, 2008; Mirga-Kruszelnicka, 2015). Co-production's acknowledgement of differentiated experiences and expertise (Facer & Enright, 2016) proposes that the knowledge and understanding critical to effecting social change are dispersed throughout society, as such, co-production destabilizes academia as the privileged site for the production and dissemination of knowledge, (Bell & Pahl, 2018). The past five years have seen a revitalisation of interest in co-productive methodologies in the UK (Bell & Pahl, 2018, Durose & Richardson, 2016; Welsh Government, 2014). This is part of a much wider contemporary inclination towards 'participatory practices in areas ranging from the arts, to industry, to "open" government in which [publics] are invited to take on more active roles in shaping the knowledge, policies and practices of the world around them' (Facer & Enright, 2016, p. 144). In public services (for example), co-production is frequently argued to be a means through which higher quality, more effective services can be designed and executed (Boyle et al., 2010, Boyle & Harris, 2009; Pestoff, 2012, 2008, 2006).

It is important to recognise that there are also significant concerns about the ways that the 'techniques and rhetoric' of co-production are utilised as normative and instrumental tools to invoke desired collaborative action (Innes et al., 2018, p.17) in ways that serve to maintain existing inequalities (Facer & Enright, 2016). Two recent critical literature reviews (Brigstocke & Noorani, n.d.; Horner, 2016) warned that co-produced and participatory approaches are being co-opted as 'buzzwords' for neo-liberalism (Horner, 2016) whereby the language of transformation and social change are used to obscure power inequalities (Bell & Pahl, 2018, p.107/8; Horner, 2016; Brigstocke & Noorani, n.d.). While co-production is often theoretically cast in 'relatively unproblematic ways', in practise it tends to significantly depart from its 'core precepts' (Innes et al., 2018, p.18-19). In the UK, co-production has become a 'catch-all' term for numerous participatory, community-based and collaborative

research approaches so it sits in a contradictory position as both the connector between the competing traditions, logics, rationales and methods of these heterogeneous research traditions and an emergent variant from those same sources (Facer & Enright, 2016; Noorani, 2013). Consequently, co-production is a vague concept used to refer to a myriad of different forms and practices (Bell & Pahl, 2018, pg. 106-107; Facer & Enright, 2016, p.89). This means that partners in a co-produced project are likely to have different understandings of what the methodology should look like, each informed by their own disciplinary/theoretical influences, histories, and normative practises (Horner, 2016, p. 16; Thomas-Hughes, 2017). As a result, co-production is highly susceptible to diversion, distraction and 'conceptual stretching' (Innes et al., 2018, p.15; Flinders et al., 2015, p.263) whereby it is continually reimaged in order to meet the beliefs, needs and wants of those involved in individual research projects (Thomas-Hughes, 2017).

Innes et al. (2018), in their writing on how co-production regulates<sup>2</sup> argue that co-production is a 'dirty concept' which, as it moves from 'books' to 'practical action...becomes tarnished and distanced from its 'pure' conceptual origin...often depart[ing] in some significant respects from the core precepts' (p.18). They illustrate how, on the one hand, the logics and practises of co-production are used to mask regulatory work through 'techniques of framing and persuasion' (p.21). While on the other (and echoing the argument of Jo Freeman's seminal piece *The Tyranny of Structurelessness*), co-production as a practise with its 'multiple actors, organisations and interests, interpretations and practices' (p.17) demands 'some form of regulation [as] a necessary condition for co-productive arrangements to be sustained' (p.20). They recognise that, for co-production to happen, regulatory influences - generally in 'soft' or 'interactive' forms, through interactions and encounters with people and the discourses and rationalities they draw upon in negotiating these encounters - must be absorbed or integrated into its working processes (pg.20). Though this may be considered an 'anathema' by co-productive traditionalists, they contend that this 'tarnishing' and 'muddying' of co-production as a concept is rooted in a 'pragmatism and compromise' that is necessary if ideas are to be 'implemented and working within the situated contingencies of social, political and economic lives' (p.4).

## Community Researchers within Co-Production

The involvement of community or 'peer' researchers within the research process is a relatively typical feature of co-produced research projects (Salway et al., 2015) and can be seen as a practical embodiment of the approach's attempt to radically re-distribute power within the research process. The definition of 'community' or 'peer' researchers is contested and shifts in meaning over time and between contexts and research designs (Logie et al., 2012; Flicker, Roche & Guta, 2010). Generally, 'community researcher' refers to a layperson without any prior recognised research training and with minimal knowledge of, or experience with, the research process (Mosavel & Sanders, 2014; Mosavel et al., 2011). Community researchers are normally also 'peer-researchers' in that they are individuals who are 'peers' to a project's research participants sharing at least one shared 'lived experience' (Logie et al., 2012). Community researchers can have substantially different roles and responsibilities across different research settings. Most community researchers work on a voluntary basis and some with some alternative form of remuneration for contributed time although some are paid employees of an organisation or university. In a minority of cases, community researchers partner in all facets of a research project and are members of the core research team. Most frequently, they are instrumental in one or more specific aspects of fieldwork or recruitment or, consulting/reviewing project design, data and findings in a more advisory capacity (Guta, Flicker & Roche, 2013).

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<sup>2</sup> Also writing about the *Productive Margins: Regulating for Engagement* Programme.



Community researchers are often utilised because their proximity and/or identification with a targeted group enables them to have 'privileged' access to communities and groups that are marginalised and considered 'hard to reach' (Elliot et al., 2002). They can minimise the power differentials reported between traditional academic researchers and communities who have been marginalised and stigmatised by previous research (Ibid.; Flicker, Roche & Guta, 2010; Muhammad et al., 2014) and reduce the 'blind spots' experienced by researchers who are insulated from the realities that they are studying (Devotta et al., 2016 also see Elliot et al., 2002). Most importantly, the involvement of community researchers is argued to lend cultural relevance to research projects resulting in findings that are more applicable to community contexts (Christopher et al., 2008; Mosavel & Sanders, 2014).

However, the overlapping identities and proximities of community researchers to research participants presents complex moral and ethical considerations, not least due to the well-documented challenges in maintaining ethical integrity when working in one's own community (Bean & Silva 2010; Dwyer & Buckle, 2009; Constantine, 2010; Muhammad et al., 2014; Sieber & Tolich, 2013; Simon & Mosavel, 2010). For example, community researchers may want to present overtly positive images of their communities, particularly if that community typically experiences stigma (Devotta et al., 2016; Edwards & Alexander, 2011). Community researchers are often positioned as community advocates and representatives as well as community researchers (Anderson et al., 2012; Dwyer & Buckle, 2009; Mosavel et al., 2011) resulting in complicated intersections of positionality and identity that can shape the scope and type of data obtained (Simon & Mosavel, 2010). There are examples of peer researchers from religious communities whose strong views on religion and the observance of religious practices made them uncomfortable and unwilling to ask certain questions, limiting the scope of the research in unexpected ways (Ryan et al., 2011), and examples from drug using communities where peer researchers felt their expert knowledge justified the refusal to use tape-recorders to document interviews which was later felt to have limited the data-set (Elliot et al., 2002). Community researchers can invoke fear in participants around confidentiality and the risk of 'gossip' (Salway et al., 2015; Ryan et al., 2011), this has been shown to have a significant influence on the themes that emerge in data collected by community researchers (Elliott et al., 2002). The presence of community researchers inevitably shapes research questions and project data in unanticipated ways and the way that community researchers navigate their unique positionality within a research process can significantly impact on the quality, integrity and 'usefulness' of data collected (Richman et al., 2012).

## Training for Community Researchers

It is generally recognised that training community researchers is essential in enabling them to undertake research ethically and appropriately (eg. Garnett et al., 2009). The need for 'proper' (Devotta, 2016), 'comprehensive' (Kilpatrick et al., 2007) training for community researchers alongside extensive support in the research field is a frequent call in the research literature (See for example: Devotta, 2016; Elliot et al., 2002; Greene et al., 2009; Greene, 2016; Mosavel & Sanders, 2014). It is recognised that, while the lived experience of community researchers may create a positive rapport with participants, this does not necessarily mean that they have the confidence and expertise needed to conduct research activity (Devotta, 2016; Power, 1994). Some argue that, for certain aspects of the research process, the short-term training that is typically offered to community researchers does not sufficiently cover the essential skills and knowledges needed to conduct research effectively (Mosavel & Sanders, 2014; Richman et al., 2012) and there are stark warnings against allowing methodological desires for equitable research processes to take precedence over selection processes which identify 'peer researchers who have the skill and capability (with appropriate support and training) to contribute to the process' (Lushey & Munro, 2015, p.525).

What ‘appropriate training and support’ looks like in practise can be difficult to garner as, beyond recognising that there is generally a need for someone with a formal academic background to both work with community researchers and deliver training in order to ensure quality data collection and ethical principles (Benoit et al., 2005), it is relatively rare to find an account of how training and support was designed and delivered included in literature on community researchers (Elliot, 2002; Naughton-Doe, 2015). As community researchers are typically primarily involved in the field-work aspects of a research project; conducting interviews, running focus groups etc (Devotta, 2016; Elliot et al., 2002; Mosavel & Sanders, 2015), the training accounts that exist tend to be focused in these areas for example: Kilpatrick et al. (2007) describe training which was heavily focused on role play and research ‘props’ (such as research logs) with topics including: teaming-building, research aims, ethics and responsibilities/techniques for telephone interviews (drawing on resources from Kirby, 2001 and Save the Children); Mosavel & Sanders (2015) describe a ‘successful’ pilot of ‘research buddies’ (pairing community researchers for all fieldwork) and ‘co-ordinators’ to manage administrative and logistical issues; Devotta et al. (2016) provide a detailed account of their training curriculum (including interviewer neutrality, bias, interviewer safety, interviewing skills, principles of ethical research, strategies for probing and maintaining participant engagement and, training specific to the substantive content of the study) and directly consider where they had felt it to be most effective; While Logie et al. (2012) discuss how the skills-based training they provided did not adequately prepare their community researchers for the required task of facilitating research focus groups.

While there is a strong argument to be made around the essential nature of training for community researchers in co-production (Facer & Enright, 2016, p.148/9), there is also an uneasy balance to be struck between co-production’s destabilization of academia as the privileged site for the production and dissemination of knowledge (Bell & Pahl, 2018) through acknowledging differentiated experiences and expertise (Facer & Enright, 2016), and the delivery of training which demands that someone with a ‘formal academic background’ (Benoit et al., 2015) teaches community members so that they can take part in research ‘appropriately’ (Garnett et al., 2009). This is made more complicated by the fact that, for community researchers, training can be one of the most substantive interactions they have with the wider research project they are working on, as most of their involvement is limited to field-work activities. Community researchers often do not benefit from being embedded in the collaborative process of co-producing the design and governance of the projects they work on (a role which tends to be the reserve of representatives from community organisations). Consequently, the extent to which the personal experience and expertise of community researchers themselves are integrated into the metalevel of a project can be negligible.

## A Brief Overview of Community Researchers and Community Researcher Training in the *Productive Margins: Regulating for Engagement Programme*

The Productive Margins programme co-produced seven distinct research projects each with a different primary focus and research design. Community researchers were a primary feature of three of these projects and one additional spin-off project which was developed following an approach by a neighbourhood-based organisation who had heard about and wanted to build on the programme’s work with community researchers. In the following sections we draw directly from on our work within these four projects to examine the pragmatic and ideological complexities that projects working with community researchers can encounter. We describe in detail the training that was delivered in each project and then draw on evaluative data from each project as well as sessional evaluative data



collected during the delivery of research training to reflect on the role and effectiveness of the training.

## Project 1: 'Who Decides What's in my Fridge'

### Overview

This project brought three community organisations in Bristol<sup>3</sup> together with academics specialising in human geography to examine what factors were influencing and regulating food decisions across two localities in Bristol. There was an additional focus on developing community-led advocacy and action around local access to affordable, nutritious food.

### Who were the community researchers?

There were fifteen community researchers working on the project all of whom came to the project via their membership of a Somali Women's lunch-club which met regularly at one of the organisations involved. The community researcher's prior education ranged from degree-educated to no formal qualifications and there were significant support or access needs across the group in terms of literacy and spoken English. Most of the community researchers had had no previous involvement in research projects but a small minority had undertaken some independent research as part of their undergraduate studies. Community researchers were unpaid, but a free crèche and shared lunch were provided as part of each training session.

### Training

Research activities were primarily peer-to-peer interviewing, surveying and mapping fast-food outlets in the locality, and planning and executing a localised campaign. Training was developed co-productively with the community organisation which hosted the women's group, an organisation which had a long history of delivering adult education in the locality. Training was delivered in weekly three-hour workshops over a ten-week period. Each workshop was followed by a shared lunch, informal Q and A and a conversation space which aimed to reflect on and develop the workshop content. A translator from within the organisation was embedded within each session. Workshops focused on research ethics, how to formulate and ask questions, participatory mapping, and peer interviewing. This was followed by two half-day workshops focused on campaigning and 'getting your voice heard' in public spaces.

Training emphasised the local knowledge, cultural and community expertise of the group. Delivery was primarily through interactive presentations, small group activities, role-play and topical debate. Training related very specifically to the tasks the group were going to carry out and most research activities were conducted within or just after workshops with the trainer's direct support and supervision. For example, the interview schedule was designed through small-group and debate-based activities, interviews were then role-played in groups of three (interviewer/interviewee/observer) during workshops and were finally conducted during workshop time and over lunch with community researchers interviewing each other and wider members of the Somali Women's group.

### Research Outcomes

Community researchers mapped the local area for fast food outlets and; through comparison with other local wards, could demonstrate a disproportionate prevalence in the area. Community researchers met with local-authority councillors to discuss ways to curb excessive exposure to

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<sup>3</sup> Coexist: <https://www.hamiltonhouse.org/>; Knowle West Media Centre: <http://KWMC.org.uk>; Single Parent Action Network: <http://spanuk.org.uk/>

unhealthy food, guest appeared on a local radio station to raise awareness of the issue and, are in the process of setting up a spin off social-enterprise focused on healthy take-away alternatives called Somali Kitchen.

### Reflections on Training

Training was reflected upon as part of two focus groups. Community researchers reflected on the training as part of a process of empowerment for community activism and economic independence: *“that’s a really empowering thing... A business...the pop-up...I think if we can have the training first. Understand more”* and creating meaningful local change: *“this is the start of something powerful. We’ve been wanting to change things in our community, and I think this is the start of that”*.

Training was discussed in terms of personal development *“I’ve valued myself more”, “I feel more confident sharing my experience”* There were many requests for *“more training and practical skills”*, although it is unclear whether this was research specific or reflective of a broader desire for more learning opportunities. The partner organisations considered that a significant value to the research training was its affiliation to the University and that this was an engine for facilitating community researchers view of themselves as a group of community activists (See overview in Webster et al., 2016).

Training in this project had to negotiate three key issues. First, the partner organisation was keen that the training ‘fit in’ with their existing ESOL education provision and wanted community researchers to take notes during training to support and evidence their ESOL learning. This created confusion and slowed training down significantly. Training had deliberately been designed to accommodate low levels of English literacy and so note-taking was an additional task to fit into a packed training schedule. Over-time it became clear that there were some women who had been asked to join the community researcher team by their ESOL tutors but did not understand that the training was not a condition of their ESOL qualification. Other community researchers were frustrated by the change in pace that note-taking dictated, finding it arduous and unnecessary to the training. Additionally, and despite significant planning, the mixed English-language abilities in the group presented a significant challenge to training. Most of the community researchers could converse in a common tongue (not English) so conversation and debate would develop fluidly only to then be halted for translation back to the trainer, this interrupted flow and at times important nuances in debate-based activities were later found to have been missed.

Second, attendance at training was variable, some sessions had only six community researchers in attendance while others had new individuals who had dropped in to find out what was going on (this was quite normal within the day-to-day working-practises of the community organisation). This challenged continuity and the consistent development of knowledge and skills across the course of training. Many community researchers required significant one-to-one support from the trainer outside of sessions to bring them up to speed, this may have demonstrated that community researchers were not particularly enthused or committed to the research activities and or project topic.

Third, peer-interviewing proved to be a problematic research activity. Designing interview schedules, training in and rehearsing interview techniques were popular training topics but when it came to the actual interviews not one of the community researchers or women’s group wanted to be

interviewed. This opened an impromptu conversation where community researchers discussed personal and 'community' experiences of being interviewed by the Home Office, Social Services or the Police and reflected that there were negative associations which came forth at the prospect of 'actual' interviewing which had not been experienced during role-play activities. This was unexpected given that the interview schedule had been written by the community researchers and rehearsed in full through role-play exercises with no apparent issues. But, it does echo wider observations that in culture's where high value is placed on self-containment, personal enquiry can be seen as intrusive (Harris, 2004, Philips-Mundy, 2011) and, that research interviewees from refugee backgrounds (as most of the community researchers were) can align the research interview with experiences of agencies such as the police or immigration (Harris, 2004).

## Project 2: 'Understanding Wellbeing through Community Research in Easton and Lawrence Hill'

### Overview

Up Our Street (UOS)<sup>4</sup> are a neighbourhood-based organisation who, having heard about Productive Margin's work with community researchers, approached the programme to support them in delivering research training as part of an action-research project co-produced with local people to design a new '*academically rigorous and robust*' (Interim UOS manager) consultation process for their locality. UOS wanted to create a comprehensive and representative dataset on what wellbeing meant to local residents. UOS aimed to recruit community researchers who would be representative of the cultural and socio-economic profiles of the two wards within their remit, both of which are ethnically diverse<sup>5</sup> and economically disadvantaged<sup>6</sup>.

### Who were the community researchers?

UOS recruited and directly employed four community researchers and a project manager who were initially contracted for a 7.5month project. Community researchers were salaried and directly employed by UOS with the job title 'trainee community researchers'. Community researchers were highly qualified and experienced, all but one had post-graduate level qualifications, and all had had some loose experience of research projects. CRs were all of BAME background which UOS felt embodied their commitment to inclusivity and attempted the redress the lack of BAME resident responses in existing survey data on their localities.

The community research team were central, along with the Interim Manager at UOS, in shaping the project design and research activities. The research was designed in three-stages. Vox-pop style interviews were conducted with residents in public locations, these were then analysed and developed into project's guiding themes: services, environment, livelihoods, connections and emotions. Data from the vox-pop interviews was then used to inform the design of a survey

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<sup>4</sup> <https://eastonandlawrencehill.org.uk/>

<sup>5</sup> Bristol City Council (2016) Easton and Lawrence Hill Statistical Ward Profiles. See <https://www.bristol.gov.uk/documents/20182/436737/Easton.pdf/a27d08ae-9a03-405f-a96f-a41018364763> and <https://www.bristol.gov.uk/documents/20182/436737/Lawrence+Hill.pdf/bec15541-2bf1-4702-9d70-c9f5d54f8bb2>

<sup>6</sup> Bristol City Council (2015) Deprivation in Bristol 2015: The Mapping of Deprivation within Bristol Local Authority Area. See <https://www.bristol.gov.uk/documents/20182/32951/Deprivation+in+Bristol+2015/429b2004-eeff-44c5-8044-9e7dcd002faf> accessed on 9 January 2017

questionnaire which targeted local people online, through stalls in public spaces and a door-to-door campaign. A third stage was planned to involve a series of focus groups with local stakeholders around key issues identified in the survey. However, a combination of funding/timing limitations and a change to the city's neighbourhood's strategy meant that the third stage has not been undertaken at this time.

### Training

Training took an asset-based approach drawing on the significant education and community development experience/skills of the community researchers. Training was delivered in full and half-day blocks intermittently throughout the course of the research project. Training was designed for the specific research activities the group planned to carry out. Sessions covered co-production/action research approaches, interview schedules, interviewing, surveys and survey design, focus groups: design and implementation, qualitative and quantitative data analysis. Training was predominantly delivered through interactive lectures, role-play and facilitated group activities. The intermittent delivery model meant that training was iterative, shaping and informing the research design as well as (inadvertently) offering supervision to the researchers and their activities.

### Research Outcomes

Community researchers produced a research report<sup>7</sup> which was locally distributed and have held several local events showcasing their research. The team have been widely recognised as a community research team and were subsequently awarded a contract to conduct a piece of widening participation research for the University of Bristol and have partnered in other co-produced research project within the same university.

### Reflections on Training

Training was reflected upon using the trainer's reflexive diaries and notes from training sessions. Training in this project presented tensions between preparing the community researchers to carry out research in a very time-restricted frame and, having the time and opportunity to be reflexive and explore research training in more general terms. The iterative way that training fit into the research project meant that there was often very little time to plan training in accordance with where the project and community researchers training needs were developing. This was exacerbated by the fact that, when planning the project and recruiting community researchers, UOS had felt it likely that community researchers would experience language and literacy barriers which the training design would have to address. As this was not the case, the training outlines drawn up prior to the project commencing were largely inappropriate and training content and materials had to be produced in real-time – in tandem with the project's development. This required considerable flexibility and time-commitment on behalf of the trainer.

There were not mechanisms in place to accredit training and this became a key issue for the project. Community researchers felt some frustration that the job title of 'trainee community researchers' did not have a mechanism through which they could 'graduate' onto be 'community researchers'. This brought the question of how community researcher training can be aligned with existing university-based research training accreditation matrices to a timely fore. The training delivered to this team was largely vocational and operated as on-the-job training for a series of context-specific research tasks.

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<sup>7</sup> Available at:

<https://eastonandlawrencehill.org.uk/sites/default/files/project/files/Understanding%20wellbeing%20through%20community%20research%20in%20Easton%20and%20Lawrence%20Hill%20-%20March%202017%20%28web%29.pdf> Accessed: 12/07/2012

Where and how this relates to the traditional training model for researchers who receive in-depth, theoretically informed research training which typically incorporates significant independent research study in the form of a PhD (or, to a lesser extent, an MRes), requires some detailed consideration.

## Project 3: Life Chances: Low Income Families in Modern Urban Settings

### Overview

This project brought two community organisations<sup>8</sup> from Bristol and Cardiff together with academics from both Bristol and Cardiff Universities with specialisms in social policy, health and regeneration, childhood studies and arts-practise-as-research to explore family life on a low income and the regulatory services that families encounter in two urban settings. The project broadly aimed to challenge how regulatory systems frame and manage people's lives, and simultaneously re-imagine what a welfare state might be like if children and families were at the centre of decisions. The project commissioned artists<sup>9</sup> to co-facilitate workshops and inform the project design.

### Who were the community researchers?

Twelve individuals were recruited across the two organisational sites to take part in the project. Described as 'community volunteers' the description of the role these individuals would play within the project intersected volunteering, activism and community research while emphasising the experimental arts-based nature of the research project. Community volunteers were unpaid, but crèche and lunch were provided during all workshops.

### Training

Twenty-two full and half-day workshops were held across the two sites with training designed to sit alongside the art-based activities. The aim was for training to focus on: ethics, critical analysis, interpreting data, research reporting and group dynamics, communication and facilitation in participatory research. Training had been a fundamental feature in the project's design due to both partner organisations having a wider focus on adult-education in their day-to-day work. Following the initial workshops, a two-day 'campaigns and media' workshop and a single-day 'introduction to literary analysis techniques' workshop were delivered.

### Research Outcomes

Alongside co-writing a work of sociological fiction, making jewellery and attempting to setting up a jewellery co-op the project devised an interactive 'Game of Life Chances' activity. Two of the community volunteers from the project have subsequently set up a Community Interest Company called 'Creating Life Chances' which aims to tackle social and economic inequalities through creative education workshops.

### Reflections on Training

The group reflected on training through individual interviews and focus group activities. This was a project with multiple intersecting ambitions and an extensive programme of arts-based activities. Though training for community researchers had been a central feature of the project's vision, the community volunteers did not see themselves as community researchers but rather, as active-participants in a community-arts project. As they did not identify as 'community researchers' there was not a recognised need or want for research specific training and with a project schedule packed

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<sup>8</sup> Single Parent Action Network: <http://spanuk.org.uk/>; South Riverside Community Development Centre: <http://www.brgcardiff.com/>

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.closeandremote.net/>

with arts-activities training became a time-consuming add-on. However, there was significant reluctance to 'let go' of the opportunity for training.

The trainer felt that while the community volunteers were willing to participate in training, this was because they did not feel they had an option not to. In this context 'teaching' research skills as part of workshops felt like an imposed embodiment of knowledge hierarchies, interfering with the workshop's culture of experiential recognition: *"I see it like a therapy ...it's kind of like...person centred counselling you allow the person to speak what's in their heart or whatever."* ... *"Sharing experience...more support...when any person talking about their experience"*. Consequently, most of the planned training was not delivered. However, sessional feedback demonstrated that 'learning about research', 'learning something new' and 'improving job prospects' remained a high priority for the entire duration of workshops for nearly all community volunteers. Most reported that, through their participation, they had felt they had learning about: *"The whole process of co-production."* and/or *"meaningful research."* There was clearly a desire from some for a more explicit research training package to enable certain marginalised groups to research issues within their own communities: *"the people should train [marginalised groups] and [marginalised groups] should probably tell us about [the problems they experience]"*. There was an expressed need for more clarity and perhaps an integrated learning process around the way the research project had used different approaches and methods: *"For the education... You see...when I completed this [research project] I don't know how it works."* ... *"I didn't understand some of the work, like how you say data-ing"*. This was particularly in relation to how jewellery-making as an arts-practice was part of the research:

*"I didn't get the making of, the jewellery. I didn't know what was the purpose of that but I've enjoyed doing it ...for me it's been used as a vehicle to connect people whilst they are sort of like talking to each other"*

*"I was more confused how this jewellery is related to my problems and my life, and how everything is interrelated. Though I am still confused how it is related I have full faith in you guys"*.

On reflection, the project's ambition to incorporate, arts-as-research activities, research training, story-sharing and activism across two sites was too much for the time-scale.

## Project 4: Alonely: Isolation, Loneliness and Older People

### Overview

The project brought two community organisations from Bristol and Merthyr<sup>10</sup> together with academics from Bristol and Cardiff Universities with specialisms in education, psychology, arts practice, aging and regeneration to explore the loneliness of older people in their local communities. The project approach differed across the two sites; in Merthyr research was co-produced with a group of artists and service providers. In Bristol the research was co-produced with community researchers.

### Who were the community researchers?

In Bristol, eight community researchers aged over fifty-five were recruited to explore loneliness in the local community and consider possible solutions. Community researchers had an extremely wide

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<sup>10</sup> Southville Community Development Association: <http://www.southvillecentre.org.uk/the-centre/about-the-scda.html> ; 3Gs Development Trust: <http://www.3gs.org.uk/>



existing set of expertise, skills and experience relating to previous professional roles (including counselling, social work and broadcasting backgrounds), their age and their experience of the world.

### Training

Training took an asset-based approach and drew on the skills of those involved in the project. Training moved away from a sense of 'teaching' people how to research and more focused on drawing on the expertise within the group to explore the issues that there needed to be a common/shared understanding of to conduct the research (Barke 2016). A series of 3-hour sessions once a week over 6 weeks covered research ethics, interview schedules, interviewing and analysis. Training related very specifically to the tasks the group planned to carry out, for example during training on how to create a research schedule community, researchers put together the research schedule that they subsequently used in their research interviews.

### Research Outcomes

Community researchers ran engagement events in local high street cafes to identify local older participants with whom they then conducted interviews and focus groups (see Barke, 2017). They used this fieldwork to co-write a series of monologues which were performed in a local theatre and at events across the city with the aim of starting conversations about loneliness and starting to consider solutions. A report and academic paper have been published and research findings have been presented by community researchers at a number of academic conferences. The community researchers have secured funding to implement one of their recommendations and are working on further funding bids.

### Reflections on Training

The group reflected on the training they had received in a focus group. It was clear that this was a group of proactive community researchers who were motivated to partake in the project by the research focus: *"I think the main thing is, for me, the topic. If the topic didn't interest me, I wouldn't be here."* Training needed to be practical and pragmatic and clearly related to the project's aim and research activity and took a problem solving 'learn by sharing' approach. The community researchers felt that the role of training in this context was to prepare them to do a specific task:

*'I think the training has definitely taken me from here to there. So I am not totally prepared, like you say, but it has moved me from one place to another. So there was a point in having it. And things like talking about ethics and some of the theory was interesting'*

*'I think, if you are taking anything on and you are thinking about it, you know you are never totally prepared. I mean, I am not just being glib saying that; everything I go into, I suppose, for me there is always worry; there is always the unknown. So, if we are awake, we can't be totally prepared and, if we were trying to get totally prepared, we would never get the damn thing done'*

Community researchers training in the project emphasised the importance of starting from the expertise that they brought to the project and using this to build a supportive atmosphere of mutual-learning in which research-specific content (such as ethics) can be introduced.

### Concluding Discussion

As a physical manifestation of an ideology there is a symbolic weight to getting the role of community researcher 'right' and this has significant ethical and practical implications for community researchers themselves as well as for those who seek to train and work with them. We are mindful that community

researchers' general absence from the actual 'co-production' of projects risks inscribing new forms of 'dominant power relations' (Fonow & Cook, 2005, p. 2222 also see Thomas-Hughes, 2017) and exemplifies some of the paradoxes of power and representation in co-produced research more generally (Pain, Kesby, & Askins, 2012, p. 121 also cited in Beebeejaun et al., 2015, p. 553).

We argue that well-designed training which is grounded: in the theory of co-production, the principles of andragogy (Knowles, 1984); which advocate learning environments which draw on the life experience of adult learners, take a problem-solving approach, and situate responsibility for learning in the hands of the adult learner (see Barke, 2017; Burholt et al., 2010), and uses reflexive-practises to examine the hybridity of the insider-outsider position (Muhammad et al., 2015) and operationalise experiential perspectives, experiences and emotions of community researchers within the context of the research field (Couture, Zaidi & Maticka-Tyndale, 2012), can make visible and redress some of the power-imbalances and issues of representation that we have just described. When designed in this way, training for community researchers can be a distinct mode of community capacity building (Facer & Enright, 2016; Greene, 2016; Guta, Flicker & Roche, 2013) which can create additional sites of engagement and knowledge transfer within the research process (Garnett et al., 2009), facilitate personal enrichment (Devotta, 2016), and raise consciousness in ways that empowers individuals in taking positive action for social change (Kilpatrick et al., 2007). It values lived experience and recognises that, while the skills and knowledges that enable traditional knowledge production and transfer within academia are important, the infusion of rich experiential knowledge that community researchers bring into a research project is also essential (Devotta, 2016) if we are to produce knowledge that has resonance in the contemporary social world. Training spaces can be places of co-learning where reflexivity is practiced through animating the everyday, professional and academic experiences of community researchers, research-trainers, and project-based researchers, to shape the teaching of research specific skills in ways that inform new intellectual perspectives and modes of practise (Pain, 2015). In this way training spaces can become their own unique sites of co-production within research projects operating at a distance from and 'under the radar' (Ines, 2018, p.20) of larger co-producing project teams. The educational focus of these sites makes them both an expression of and a commitment to life-long learning as a fundamental principle in the transformation of society (Aspin & Chapman, 2000) which lays some groundwork for alternative forms of higher education which are accessible to those outside traditional university boundaries (Bell & Pahl, 2018).

We recognise that there are concerns about the appropriateness of the skills, expertise and capabilities that community researchers can be expected to bring to a research process (Devotta, 2016; Lushey & Munro, 2015; Mosavel & Sanders, 2015; Power, 1994; Richman et al., 2012). But, our experience with community researchers on the Productive Margins programme leads us to wonder whether these concerns are influenced by an inability to recognise that community researchers have a unique role within a research project, an entity entirely distinct from the academically framed conception of 'researcher'. There is a risk that, in co-production's attempt to create a terrain of equitability which redresses traditional hierarchies and values varied sources of experiential expertise, we lose sight of how to differentially value the diverse skills, knowledges and expertise that community researchers bring to the process. It is possible that we are at risk of attempting to mould all things into the shape of an academic researcher. This is ludicrously unfair, we cannot expect community researchers to be equipped with research skills comparable to the intensely assessed on-the-job research-training that academic researchers undertake through their PhD study within the time-span of a short-lived, labour intense research project. Instead, we need to recognise the phenomenological value that community researchers 'personal subject area expertise' brings to a research project (Devotta, 2016, p.676) and engage our training spaces as dialogic sites of co-

production where the unique positionality of community researchers can intersect with skills-focused training in ways that symbiotically enrich and inform the research capabilities of *all* members of a research team. In this way we embody our commitment to finding approaches which can align the production of new knowledges with the expectations, needs and values of our diverse society (Xavier Grau et al., 2017) while recognising there are diverse ways of knowing and understanding the world.

We argue that transparency and clarity around the roles and responsibilities of community researchers within projects, including the extent to which they are involved in the actual co-production of research as opposed to 'just' the fieldwork, is essential if the role of community researcher is to be meaningfully developed and valued. We also argue that training that is designed and delivered to community researchers should always be clearly detailed in research accounts including content, facilitation/delivery style and reflexive consideration of successes, failures and learnings. We believe that this will shed light onto what can be an opaque part of a research process and go some way to answering calls for research that looks specifically at the practicalities of working with community researchers (Kelaher et al., 2010). The training process is essential in this as space that can both 'teach' the skills needed to work on a research project but also as a site in which the power dynamics that are inherent to co-productive work can be negotiated and supported. To support this we argue that, in future accounting, training for community researchers should be clearly detailed in terms of content, facilitation/delivery style and reflections on successes, failures and learnings. This is not to dictate a 'one size fits all approach' to community researcher training but is a recognition that 'community researcher' as a role, like co-production as a methodology, is necessarily subject to conceptual 'tarnishing' and 'muddying' (Ines et al. 2018, p.4). To ensure that this is driven by a rationality that focuses on making the role of community researcher work for individuals within the 'situated contingencies of social, political and economic lives' (Ibid.) rather than by political co-optation whereby the transformative language and implied social change of the community researcher role is used to obscure power inequalities (Bell & Pahl, 2018, p.107/8; Brigstocke & Noorani, n.d.; Horner, 2016), we need to advocate for absolute transparency in our methodological processes.

For training to be most effective it must begin with the motivations, assets and experiential knowledges of community researchers. These will be widely different across contexts and can change through the course of a project so our expectations of the roles and responsibilities community researchers can play within projects needs to reflect and accommodate this. We need to look carefully at what our research aims to do; who/what does our research aim to speak to and what are the data needs associated with this, what are the research's goals and questions, what are the aims and scope for action or change through the research, what are our community partner organisations needs/wants/motivations, what are our time-frames and scale-limitations? We urgently need to be able to open these conversations with the community researchers themselves. Asking these questions can help inform us of what we need to do in community researcher training and can force us to address limitations to our ambitions/expectations for our community researchers before they can impact the community researchers themselves. Our work across the Productive Margins programme has enabled us to develop three framing questions which, in tandem with the previously discussed grounding in the theory and principles of co-production, andragogy and reflexivity, we suggest, can be used as guiding points in the development of bespoke community researcher training within co-produced, participatory and action-research projects:

1. What are the existing assets of community researchers?
2. What are community researcher's individual motivations for participation?

3. What are the overall research aims?
  - a. For the project
  - b. For the community researcher team

By asking these questions at the earliest possible stage, research teams can identify the most appropriate role and purpose for community researchers and community researcher training within a project.

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