Public Involvement in the Oral History in Halton Project: Lessons Learned from the Front Line

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Introduction

The Oral History of Health in Halton Project

- A unique collaboration involving community members, academic researchers, Halton Primary Care Trust, Halton Borough Council and Halton Voluntary Association.
- Study aimed to 1) explore the local community’s historical perspectives of health and well being and 2) to increase local voluntary groups research capacity through active involvement in research.
- Volunteers (lay researchers) supported by an academic researcher from the University of Liverpool conducted and analysed 15 interviews, using a life history approach between August 2007 and September 2008 in the borough of Halton, North Cheshire.

Rationale for involvement

- Volunteers generally became involved for similar reasons. They were interested in the project and felt it was a worthwhile endeavour, an experience that provided opportunity for new learning.
- For project details see Reid et al.
- A collaborative research process can engender research capacity in community volunteers.
- Emphasis all the benefits of involvement: educational, social and psychological, transferrable skills and lasting legacy.

Contribution to the project

- The volunteers were a valuable resource, bringing with them local knowledge and skills and well established links to community networks. Their lay perspective and shared experience with participants facilitated the research process.

Benefits from involvement

- Volunteers felt there was considerable benefit to involvement. There was social benefit in collaborating with others, educational benefit with increased knowledge and understanding and substantial skill acquisition of the research process and psychological benefit with improved confidence. Involvement has created a strong research legacy which could be applied in future projects.
- I think yes, I now feel confident about the interviewing and what we’re doing. And to steer people around let them tell their story but to steer them to find the detail out about their health experiences or difficulties and changes in the way they’ve used health services.

Challenges to Involvement

- As novice researchers, volunteers had some concerns about their lack of experience in conducting the field work. All were frustrated at the pace of the project. There was some misconception about the scale of the project which led to anxiety about the demand on time.

Conclusions

- So I was still very diffident really. I was still extremely worried because at the time I was... I do a lot of things.... And I thought I don’t really know how I’m going to find some extra time..... But anyway we went along and it turned out to be not as pressured as I thought I was going to be. R1

The Research Team

At this stage, to look at it now, it’s been a real success and the level of involvement from the lay researchers... well, they’re not really lay people anymore researching, they’re more experts... they are experts. PCT

When I first arrived and I hadn’t finished work long, and I was a project manager in terms of things, and so I was quite driven..... well we’ve got 30 people to do, that maybe we’ve got to do this, we’ve got to do that, you see. And, of course, X was saying well no, hang on a bit. So, that was a difference, I think. R2

And at the time, I think I was worried about going to people’s houses on my own, thinking well it could be both ways, it could be they were a bit worried, saying who’s this person coming into my house, or I could be thinking who is it. So it really made it difficult if it was going to be a man you were wanting to go and interview them. R1