

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 1) to 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
- For project details see Reid et al. *Consumer involvement in research using oral history: 'What are people's experiences of health and well-being in Halton?'*, *International Journal of Consumer Studies*, 34(5), 2010, pp. 540–546.
- The volunteers were involved in all aspects the research process:
 - Design of the research question
 - Development of the interview schedule
 - Recruitment of participants
 - Conduction of oral history interviews
 - Analysis of data
 - Dissemination the findings
- An independent evaluation was commissioned to assess this collaborative process
- Data was collected via:
 - ✓ Semi-structured interviews with stakeholders (n=10)
 - ✓ Observation of meetings/ Reflection Workshop
 - ✓ SWOT analysis / Influence Mapping
- Data was transcribed and analysed using Nvivo 9
- Results presented here focus exclusively on the experiences of the lay researcher volunteers

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**.

So the idea of an Oral History, to me, seems wonderful. I never thought I'd be involved myself but I really thought it was a wonderful idea R1

I think, it is important, that you feel that the project is worth doing. And that's what makes it worth doing. R3

It's just when you get older, something new is hard to come by... I was just quite interested in the methodologies and the study techniques. Because how do you measure ideas and concepts? And how do you record that sort of information? And that fascinated me as well... That had interested me and I felt that was good. And I also... I love listening to people talk about their lives and I think that's really fascinating. R2

Well, it interested me because it was called Oral History and it was research, and it was to do with Liverpool University. And so, I felt well I knew very little about Oral History. I knew little about research methods really; I've never really been a serious researcher R3

- All 3 lay researchers were **'persuaded'** to become involved by others- two were experienced activists, one was interested in volunteering post retirement

And I'd just retired and D was saying do you want to get involved? And I said well okay. R2

I was persuaded by D... would I be willing to represent XXX? And I think she said she thought a couple of other members might be willing to go. So that's how I got... I'd no idea what it was about, no idea at all. R1

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.

Volunteers like R3, who is so involved with the community, I would say are essential to the project really. Because she's on a lot of committees and that, so she knows a lot of people. R1

And when we were doing the interviewing, R3 and R1 are very, very good. They're excellent. They've got that empathy. And you need that empathy to get to people, otherwise you can get very closed interviews. R2

I suppose that would have been difficult because many of the people who volunteered may not have volunteered perhaps, I don't know, if they thought that there were academics coming to interview them. I think that people are often a bit worried, aren't they, at that sort of idea? R1

And a lot of the instances that people would talk about from 1964 onwards, I could say oh yes, I remember that and so on. And I could actually prompt questions because I knew what was happening at those times and how the community was developing in those times. R3

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 aiming at. And to steer people around let them tell their story but to steer them to find the detail out about their health aspirations or difficulties or changes in the way they've used health services. R3

I've learnt the processes of recording and talking to people and the skill of doing that. I've learnt the coding and I'm just getting a feel for the interpretation... Also, I've got an insight into the volunteering area, into L and what they do. R2

Yes I would be involved, yes. And then I would also know that beyond the interviews, that the other parts of it, such as coding the transcripts and that sort of thing, were interesting and part of the job. Which I didn't know anything about those at the beginning, you see. R1

At the team level, I was fascinated by R1 and R3. They are lovely people and they're so strong. They're strong characters and I think... I just enjoy their company, if I'm honest. R2

Challenges to Involvement

- As novice researchers, volunteers had some concerns about their **lack of skills and 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**.

So I was still very diffident really. I was still extremely worried because at the time I was also... 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 pressurised as I thought it was going to be. R1

But on the other hand, I think the frustration perhaps for the volunteers is that the technical part of the analysis was slower and frustrating I'm sure for X as well as all of us. And maybe it would have been helpful had we been able to get it all lined up, to make it happen in a logical sequence. R3

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 means 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 I wonder who it is. So it really made it difficult if it was going to be a man you were wanting to go and interview them. 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 any more researching, they're more experts... they are experts. PCT

Lessons Learned for Effective Public Involvement in Health Research

- Ensure research project is considered worthwhile and provides volunteers with a new learning experience
- Invited participation through key contacts in the community may facilitate recruitment of lay researchers
- Emphasize all the benefits of involvement: educational, social and psychological, transferrable skills and lasting legacy
- Acknowledge and utilise the diverse skills, contacts and experiences volunteers bring to the project
- Adequate training and transparency of process can minimize methodological concerns
- A collaborative research process can engender research capacity in community volunteers