BRIEF SUMMARY REPORT

Realising the potential of participatory research at Durham University and beyond: Piloting a Participatory Research Innovation and Learning Lab (PRILL)
Durham Community Research Team, September 2022

Durham Community Research Team comprises a group of academic, postgraduate and community-based researchers linked to the Centre for Social Justice and Community Action at Durham University. The team for this project comprised: Sarah Banks, Andrew Russell, Sui-Ting Kong and Andrew Orton (Directors and Deputy Directors of CSJCA); Sue Shaw (Community Chair of CSJCA); Cait Jobson, Zijie Lin and Janelle Rabe (Postgraduate researchers); Gaynor Trueman and Yvonne Hall (community researchers and members of CSJCA steering group); and Nelli Stavropolou (visual facilitator).

Background

The PRILL project ran from March-July 2022, offering a series of workshops for Durham University staff and postgraduate researchers and members of community organisations interested in, or with experience of, participatory research (PR). It was initiated and facilitated by academic and community partner members of the Centre for Social Justice and Community Action – an interdisciplinary research centre that supports and promotes participatory action research for social justice. Funding of £29,613 was awarded by Durham University from its 2021-22 UKRI Research England participatory research funding allocation.

The rationale for the project was that PR is growing in popularity, with funders such as UKRI seeking to support it. However, many researchers and community organisations feel under-confident in using PR, and institutional structures may not always be geared up to support it. PR involves people with lived experience of the issue being studied playing a role in undertaking all of some of the research design, data collection, analysis and interpretation and dissemination.

The aims of PRILL were to:

- build on and chart some of the experiences, expertise, aspirations, good practice and challenges for PR at Durham;
- combine introductory level support and guidance with opportunities for advanced level learning;
- create a space where novel, challenging and complex approaches, methods and problems can be worked on collaboratively by groups of practising participatory researchers.

Activities

Five half-day workshops were offered. The combined number of attendees was 138, comprising 82 university participants and 56 from outside the university. These were followed by additional

workshops to develop a toolkit and meetings to compile a fuller report of the activities and outcomes.

- *Initial gathering* – sharing interests, experiences, challenges, aspirations and learning needs of university researchers and members of community organisations who are involved, or interested in, PR. The issues raised were recorded and informed the design of the following workshops.

- *Participatory Research Learning Labs (two workshops)* – a mixture of presentations and experiential group exercises, the workshops explored the origins and nature of PR, issues of ethics, partnerships and power, the participatory paradigm, participatory methods, collaborative data analysis, co-producing outputs and impact. They also covered the practicalities and processes involved in doing PR – participatory data generation, analysis and interpretation; pathways to co-impact and dissemination; advocacy, lobbying, campaigning and working for changes in policy and practice.

- *Participatory Research Innovation Labs (two workshops)* – building on issues identified from earlier workshops, these workshops used visual methods to explore in more depth ethical, methodological and practical challenges in PR and inspire and distil innovative ideas and good practice. Using metaphors linked to journeying within and between four islands, participants worked online in workshop 1 using the Mural app, and in-person with art materials in workshop 2, to map challenges and responses linked to the terrain of the PR journey. The islands represented: engagement and relationships; shared understanding; inputs and resources; and research process and ownership.

- *Toolkit development* – a small working group met on two occasions to agree plans for a toolkit, and work on preparing the designing the content. This toolkit, *Navigating participatory research: A visual guide*, will be available on the Centre for Social Justice and Community Action website from September 2022.

- *Report writing* – material for the longer report coming out of this project was collated by three postgraduate researchers attached to the project and the final report was developed by the Centre co-directors and the three community facilitators involved in the project.

Themes and issues arising from the workshops and used to frame the toolkit

Five broad themes were identified from the early workshops, the first four of which then framed the activities for the innovation labs and subsequent toolkit. The fifth, ethical challenges, was regarded as underpinning and permeating the other themes.

1. *Initiating engagement and maintaining relationships* - in the development of community-university research teams, thinking about representativeness of different interests and identities, building caring relationships of trust, openness and mutual respect.
2. *Shared understanding* – working together to understand the nature of PR, agree on the aims of PR collaborations, share and value different forms of knowledge and worldviews, and build a sense of identity and community in the research team.
3. *Inputs and resources* – ensuring funders and research organisations are prepared to allow more time for PR, recognising the need to pay community researchers and valuing the essential input of people's motivation, courage and commitment to venture into new territories.
4. *Research process and ownership* – acknowledging and building on diverse skills and forms of knowledge in conducting and disseminating research; working with unpredictability, messiness

and conflict; ensuring research is credible to influence policy and practice change, and agreeing on ownership of data, findings and outputs.

5. ***Ethical challenges and inequalities*** - recognising the uneven distribution of time and capacity of academic and community researchers to participate; navigating the academic hierarchy of knowledge that sometimes treats PR as less credible; addressing ethical concerns in conducting PR projects (e.g. issues of power, control, confidentiality, safeguarding, consent).

Feedback on the activities

After each event, participants completed evaluation forms. Responses were generally very positive, with value given to learning from each other, small group work, use of case studies and exercises. Comments included:

> *Participatory work is hard and lengthy! Developing relationships to encourage people to tell their stories… A key learning point is It IS WORTH THE EFFORT! Keep going!*

> *Making links was like sorting my mind again and it became clearer now.*

> *It was an opportunity to learn and reflect on my own practice.*

Conclusions and recommendations

The workshops reinforced the importance of recognising and valuing PR as a relationship-based practice operating under the umbrella of community-university partnerships. PR requires co-researchers to have flexibility, patience and courage to enter and navigate uncharted and challenging terrains, alongside a commitment to using findings for positive social change. Funders, research organisations and researchers themselves need to acknowledge the complexities and challenges, allowing sufficient resources of time, energy and funding for the practice of meaningful and ethical PR. Recommendations for consideration by various stakeholders in PR are listed below.

University policies, structures and ethos

Many aspects of the university are not geared up for community-university partnerships and need to change:

- *Recognition of the value of community-university research partnerships* - the University should fully acknowledge the importance of community-university research partnerships in its research strategy. The value of building good community-university relationships and working for social change needs to extend beyond academic publications and impact measures for the Research Excellence Framework (REF).
- *Community representation on university committees* – while some university committees have lay members, consideration might be given to appointing members from the community and voluntary sector to appropriate committees, including research ethics committees, which should commit to making meetings accessible and jargon-free.
- *Training and support in PR* - the Centre for Social Justice and Community Action currently functions as a hub for support and training in PR, offering events, courses, a postgraduate research forum and a Masters' module in Participatory Action Research. Consideration should be given to strengthening the training and support for PR across the university.

University systems and procedures

The slower pace of PR (e.g. the additional time to build partnerships and develop roles) needs to be acknowledged and the fact that roles and responsibilities will change over time.

- *Research ethics approval processes* – members of departmental research ethics committees should be briefed about the nature of PR, to ensure relevant questions are asked and appropriate advice given. Application forms might be reviewed to ensure they fit PR projects, which are often designed and revised over time and face particular ethical challenges relating to partnership and power. Committee members should receive copies of the ethical guidelines produced by the Centre for Social Justice and Community Action.
- *Research contracts with community partners* - the standard research contract uses off-putting legal jargon and focusses very much on university interests. Consideration should be given to developing a more flexible template written in ordinary language for use by community-university partnerships. Issues for consideration include shared ownership of outputs, formal and informal rights and obligations, and the proper acknowledgement of all contributions.
- *Payment of community researchers* – when community researchers are to be paid for their time from university-managed funds this should be done speedily, with minimum bureaucracy. This requires contracts to be agreed in a timely fashion, and departmental finance administrators to be familiar with the process and able to expedite payment.

Academic researchers

Academic researchers need to be aware of the complexities and demands of PR before embarking on a project, and ensure they can give the time and commitment required to:

- *Co-build inclusive and democratic partnerships,* taking time to co-create a research team, agreeing roles, responsibilities and ownership of data and findings, and ensuring outputs that speak to collective interests are prioritised.
- *Co-develop realistic research bids*, ensuring sufficient time and resources are allocated for partnerships and participation to grow, building in payment for community organisations' and community members' time, not over-specifying or over-promising outputs and outcomes and ensuring sufficient resources to enable the delivery of academic and community-focused outputs if required.
- *Build in opportunities for 'training' or mutual learning*, ensuring academics receive appropriate training/briefing regarding the methods and approaches of partner organisations, and community partners can access training/support on research methods and approaches.

Community partners

It is important that community partners are aware of the degree of commitment that a community-university partnership may require and are prepared to challenge university systems and relationships.

- *Agreeing aims and objectives* – it is important that community organisations and individual community researchers think through their aims and objectives and that these are understood, negotiated and agreed by academic partners.
- *Ensuring community input is recognised* - community organisations and individual community researchers need to ensure their input is fully costed and acknowledged.
- *Challenging academics and university systems* – it is important that community organisations and individual community researchers are prepared to challenge overuse of academic jargon and university-centric demands.