Social research and co-production with older people: Developing age-friendly communities

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ABSTRACT

The aging of the population, together with the need for more inclusive and responsive policies and services, has contributed to a burgeoning interest in co-production and co-research with older people. To date, however, only a limited number of studies have addressed how the participation of older persons as research partners can be practically realized in community-based research. The purpose of this article is to provide insights into the process of co-producing a research project with older residents living in low-income neighborhoods in Manchester, United Kingdom. The project was unique in involving and training eighteen older people as co-researchers who took a leading role in all phases of a study aimed at developing "age-friendly" communities. The co-researchers also completed 68 interviews with residents aged 60 and over who were experiencing social isolation within their neighborhood. This paper describes the methodological approach developed for the study together with a description of the recruitment and training of co-researchers. It then presents findings based upon four reflection meetings with the co-researchers, focusing on their motivations for working on the project and their relationship with the interviewees. The article concludes with a discussion of the implications of the findings for developing co-production work with older people in age-friendly research, policy and practice.

Introduction

Over the past decade, interest has grown in the use of 'co-production' approaches in community-based research (Beebeejaun, Durose, Rees, Richardson, & Richardson, 2015; Buffel, 2018). Co-produced research, Durose et al. (2012, p. 2) argue, 'aims to put principles of empowerment into practice, working "with" communities and offering communities greater control over the research process and providing opportunities to learn and reflect from their experience.' It is used as an umbrella term to encompass a family of approaches, such as 'participatory', 'emancipatory' and 'inclusive' research, that reflect a turn towards involving communities in knowledge creation. Several factors have stimulated discussion in this area, including debates about the opportunities of 'user engagement' to deliver societal impact (Greenhalgh, Jackson, Shaw, & Janamian, 2016), and the potential of working with communities to transform public policies (Durose & Richardson, 2015). In areas such as social and community work, co-production approaches have been linked to the call for a renewed commitment to 'create more inclusive, equitable and responsive services' (Hunter & Ritchie, 2007, p. 14). More specifically, they have been presented as a means of accessing the views of marginalized groups to promote their inclusion and equal treatment in service provision (Ward & Barnes, 2016).

Research on aging has also joined the debate through work conducted in partnership with older people (Bindels, Baur, Cox, & Heijing, 2013; Blair & Minkler, 2009; Buffel, 2018). 'Co-research' in this article refers to research that is conducted 'with' or 'by' older adults rather than 'to', 'about' or 'for' them as research subjects (Fudge, Wolfe, & McKevitt, 2007). A growing body of work suggests that co-research may help to understand some of the complex health and social problems experienced by older people, at the same time as promoting individual and community capacity building (e.g. Bindels et al., 2013; Ward & Barnes, 2016). However, only a limited amount of work is available showing whether or how co-production can be realized, and the ethical and methodological challenges involved (Littlechild, Tanner, & Hall, 2015). Moreover, in respect of aging, co-production is increasingly challenged by inequalities within the older population and power imbalances between different groups (Buffel et al., 2015). Learning from existing projects which have experienced such dilemmas is therefore essential, especially given the emphasis on co-production within funding bodies and policy organizations (Greenhalgh et al., 2016).

This article reports on a project which developed a co-production design working in three inner-city neighborhoods in Manchester (UK) which share a range pressures arising from urban deprivation and

population turnover. The project trained older people as co-researchers to co-lead a study aimed at developing the "age-friendliness" of their communities. This approach was used to gain access and incorporate the views of older residents experiencing isolation within the community. The paper is divided into four main sections: first, the move towards encouraging older people's participation in research is reviewed; second, the methodological approach developed for the study is outlined together with a description of the recruitment and training of participants; third, findings are presented examining the motivations of the co-researchers for working on the project and the relationship between co-researchers and interviewees; finally, the paper reviews the implications of the findings for developing co-production work with older people.

Co-production and co-research with older people[1]

Although research in partnership with older people has been slower to develop compared with other user 'groups', several studies have involved older people as co-investigators in different stages of the research process (e.g. Littlechild et al., 2015; Ward & Gahagan, 2012). Many of these have been in health-related areas such as pain management, stroke, falls, and assistive technology (Fudge et al., 2007). There is also a growing body of work using participatory approaches to enhance culture change in residential and dementia care settings (Fortune, McKeown, Dupuis, & de Witt, 2015; Shura, Siders, & Dannefer, 2011; Van Malderen, De Vriendt, & Mets, 2017). Participatory research, with its focus on engagement and collaboration, is viewed as uniquely suited to engage the expertise of residents (Shura et al., 2011) to promote collective action aimed at improving the quality of life in long-term care facilities (Boelsma, Baur, Woelders, & Abma, 2014; Fortune et al., 2015).

While there is an increasing literature using participatory approaches in residential care environments, co-research in community-based settings has been more limited (Blair & Minkler, 2009; De Donder et al., 2013). This is despite the widespread policy emphasis on 'aging in place', with a variety of initiatives aimed at developing neighborhoods that support people to remain in their homes for as long as possible (Gardner, 2011; Wiles, Liebing, Guberman, Reeve, & Allen, 2012). The World Health Organization's Age-friendly Cities initiative (2007), to take one example, has become a global movement aimed at promoting the inclusion and participation of older people in creating communities that support the needs of people as they age (Buffel, Handler, & Phillipson, 2018; Greenfield, Oberlink, Scharlach, Neal, & Stafford, 2015; Scharlach & Lehning, 2013). The *participation* of older people in this context is referred to as 'both the *goal* of age-friendly environments and important in the *process* of creating them' (Warth, 2016, p. 40). Co-production and collaborative partnerships with older people are considered to have particular potential for this type of work (Black & Lipscomb, 2017; Buffel & Phillipson, 2016, 2018; Rémillard-Boilard, Buffel, & Phillipson, 2017).

They also may provide 'cost-effective mechanisms for producing informed policy in times of austerity' (WHO, 2015, p. 222). However, the value of this approach has yet to be properly assessed in the context of the complexities that beset communities, especially those that arise from inequalities and power differentials within and between different groups (Buffel, 2018).

A range of arguments have been put forward for developing a co-production approach in work with older people. Walker (2007, p. 482)

argues that 'the results of research conducted within a participative framework will be enriched by a dialogue based on older people's interpretations of their own lives and [that of] the researcher's. Bindels et al. (2013, p. 2) suggest that involving older people in research reaffirms their 'rights as citizens to influence decisions which could affect their lives in the long term'. The participatory approach is also seen to have the potential to challenge ageist assumptions, promote the empowerment of marginalized groups of older people, and further social justice in the context of social exclusion and age discrimination (Ray, 2007; Ward & Gahagan, 2012). Blair and Minkler's (2009, p. 661) literature review on participatory research with older adults concludes that:

> '…we may expand, as well, the relevance of our field for studying and addressing not only the complex health and social problems faced by elders but also these individuals' unique strengths and the invaluable knowledge they can offer as coresearchers.

However, Bindels et al. (2013, p. 4) identify several barriers which may inhibit older people from participating in research, including 'lack of competences [among academic researchers] to foster effective research collaborations'; 'stereotypes and negative conceptions about aging'; and 'reservations [among older people] about acting as a co-researcher in a research team'. Littlechild et al. (2015) found that the most common forms of involvement are skewed towards a "tokenistic approach" in which older people have little influence over the research process. Against this, there are few detailed examples of co-production from which lessons can be drawn, in part due to the time-consuming nature of this type of work (Walker, 2007). Moreover, given the small number of studies that have evaluated the process and practicalities of involving older people, little is known about the reasons why some *do* choose to act as a co-researcher (Littlechild et al., 2015). Understanding older people's motivations to participate in research is especially important given the growing interest in, and demands for, user involvement (Greenhalgh et al., 2016). It may also provide valuable insights into how to overcome reported difficulties with recruiting co-researchers (Fudge et al., 2007).

Against this background, the unique contribution of this paper is threefold: first, it provides new insights into the process of recruiting, training and working with older people as co-researchers in community-based research while examining the potential of this approach for engaging with groups experiencing isolation and exclusion. Second, it presents the *first* research project focusing on the issue of developing 'age-friendly' communities which is co-led by older people, providing a direct response to a need identified by the WHO (2015) to develop innovative models for involving older adults in researching and implementing age-friendly initiatives. Finally, the article describes the experiences of older people as they step beyond the traditional role of consultee to that of interviewer and researcher, exploring the co-researchers' motivations for participating in the project as well as the opportunities and dilemmas linked with their involvement. Deepening our understanding of these and related issues may be viewed as crucial to expanding the scope of social gerontology to include research *with,* rather than solely *on* older adults (Estes, Biggs, & Phillipson, 2003).

Methodology of the study

Background to the study

The methodology of the study discussed in this paper was designed to facilitate the active participation of older people in all phases of the research process. The purpose of the approach adopted was to develop the participants' research and interview skills, these subsequently used to engage with socially isolated older people in the community. The

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[1] In this paper, both terms 'co-production' and 'co-research' are used to refer to the participatory approach of the project involving older people. 'Co-research' refers to older people's role in different parts of the research process (formulating research aims and questions; developing the research design and methodology; data collection; data analysis; and dissemination). 'Co-production' comprises a wider set of activities including those following on from the research, such as older people's involvement in impact activities, translating findings into practice and informing local policy.