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Introduction to creative and collaborative approaches to research and practice with a social and criminal justice focus

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Abstract

An introduction to creative and collaborative approaches to research and practice, with a social and criminal justice focus.

Keywords

Collaboration, creative, participatory, criminal justice, social justice, collaborative, research, practice, voice, marginalised

This special issue brings together researchers and practitioners to critically examine both creative and collaborative/participatory style approaches to research. The idea for the special issue emerged from an interdisciplinary research residential funded by the Independent Social Research Foundation (ISRF), held at Girton College, Cambridge in August 2017 (see https://collaborations-in-research.org/). The title of the residential was 'mapping the transformative potential of participatory styles of research with vulnerable, marginalised and/or hard to reach groups'. The idea for the residential originated as a result of reflections on the benefits or otherwise of adopting 'participatory style' approaches and brought together a number of researchers who had been similarly engaged in creative and collaborative work, with the aim of giving otherwise marginalised groups a voice. Indeed, the benefits of collaborative/participatory styles of research for engaging marginalised groups have been relatively under explored outside of education and there has been a recent resurgence in interest in participatory approaches, not least in health research, party motivated by an explicit requirement by funding bodies (in the United Kingdom at least) for public and patient involvement (PPI; Cook, 2012). During the residential it was evident, that some of the terminology was problematic, particularly references to 'hard-to-reach' groups, which unwittingly implies that these groups make themselves 'hard-to-reach' (Coomber and Letherby, 2010). Moreover, there was a distancing from the notion of 'participatory' in favour of 'collaborative' forms of research work.

This special issue draws on some of the work from those who participated in the residential, as well as others working in the fields of creative and/or collaborative research (seven in total). Here, it is assumed that both creative and collaborative approaches share attributes in common, notably giving respondents a voice to address, challenge and rebalance power relationships (Clarke et al., 2005; Coad, 2007; Parsons and Pettinger, 2017; Poudrier and Mac-Lean, 2009). Also, that the emphasis on the importance of democracy, equality, flexibility and reflexivity in the research process, changes the nature of the traditional research relationship, and can make the researcher more of 'an outsider in the academic community' (Bergold and Thomas, 2012). Indeed, there are ongoing debates regarding the principles of creative/arts based and/or participatory/collaborative action research methods and these are reflected upon and teased out in the context of some of the research problems referred to here.

In detailing their aims and their methods along with the challenges faced and lessons learned throughout the whole research process, the authors here offer an insight into working creatively and collaboratively: as valuable but not easy, as complex for all of those involved. Such an approach can aid the understandings of all concerned. For example, in *Necessary connections*: '*Feelings photographs*' *in criminal justice research*, Chrissie Rogers argues that 'seeing and imagining' is often how we make connections – to objects and to feelings – and how we interpret stories, paintings, television programmes and photographs is based on our

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'imaginings, biography, culture and history'. She writes of how she asked the participants in her research (offenders and prisoners' mothers), to take photographs between interviews to help them think about and articulate their feelings, and to help her to understand their emotional responses to a fractured and often traumatic past and present experiences. Kay Inckle in 'Poetry in Motion: Qualitative analysis, I-poems and disabled cyclists' presents three I-poems from a larger research project which explored the health, identity and social impacts of cycling for people with physical disabilities. Inckle described how having initially struggling with analysis she found I-poems a creative stimulant for productive engagement with the transcripts and for deepening her critical and reflective insight with the data. In 'Participatory food events as collaborative public engagement opportunities', Clare Pettinger, Julie M Parsons, Gayle Letherby, Miranda Cunningham, Lyndsey Withers and Andrew Whiteford report on two participatory food events run in a local day centre for drug and alcohol rehabilitation. The aim of these events was to bring together key stakeholders (from the service user and provider communities) to exchange food-based knowledge, using collaborative and co-creative participatory approaches. They suggest that the utility of such creative approaches can optimise public engagement activities, not only to enhance research impact but also to inform collaborative developments with and between service users, service providers and other stakeholders.

All the papers here reflect on the opportunities and the challenges of collaboration; on how it begins, how it develops and the ongoing significance of it. For example, Alison Urie and Fergus McNeill in 'Collaboration before Collaborative Research: The development of "Distant Voices"' explore the origins and early development of their ongoing collaborative action research which is concerned to find a way to use criminological research to inform criminal justice reform and enhance public understanding of criminal justice processes. They focus on how and why they developed creative processes and practices as modes of communication, knowledge exchange and public engagement and on how and why these practices came to be seen as constitutive of sites of personal and community development and of knowledge generation. In 'Critical perspectives on collaborative working in prison', Geraldine Brown and Geraldine Brady share their experiences of carrying out two collaborative land-based prison-based evaluations. Detailing some ethical, methodological and moral issues, they highlight how working collaboratively lends itself to a way of engaging, through building a range of relationships with key stakeholders, prisoners, prison staff, and practitioners, a channel to 'knowing differently' and potential for creating humanising spaces within the prison environment. Similarly, Ruth Armstrong and Amy Ludlow 'What's so good about participation? Politics, ethics and love in Learning Together' draw on experiences over the last 5 years of building learning communities involving students from higher education and criminal justice organisations and describe some of our

attempts to provide creative opportunities for participation and voice within research. They also question for whom we think participation 'works', whether participation is always good, or whether it can, rather, sometimes cause harm, and the extent to which participation addresses some of the ethical concerns levelled at more traditional approaches to social science research, including matters of power, purpose, positioning and personhood. Nicola Harding in 'Co-constructing Feminist Research: Ensuring meaningful participation while researching the experiences of criminalised women' examines a participatory action research (PAR) process conducted with criminalised women subject to community punishment and probation supervision in the North West of England. Using a range of creative qualitative research methods, specifically map making, photovoice, and creative writing Harding's research attempts to understand the experience of criminalised women and she proposes that meaningful participation is about more than process management.

Although in this introduction we have highlighted creative practices in some papers and collaborative working, in others it is fair to say that all of the papers contribute to our understanding of what works and similarly what might cause harm when using collaborative and/or creative approaches to research. The rationale for incorporating these approaches remains the same across all accounts and whether the focus is on criminal or social justice, there is an attempt to redress the inherent power imbalance within all research practice in an attempt to give voice to those traditionally marginalised or excluded. We hope that this Special Edition on creative and collaborative approaches to research and practice, with a social and criminal justice focus, will stimulate further debate in the area.

Declaration of conflicting interests

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Author biographies

Julie Parsons is an Associate Professor in Sociology at the University of Plymouth and has three broad inter-related research interests: food/health, social inequalities and methodologies. Since 2015 she has conducted a number of externally funded research projects at a resettlement charity that works with prisoners and those at risk of going to prison. Notably an Independent Social Research Foundation (ISRF) mid-career fellowship (2016–2017), which enabled her to develop a Photographic electronic Narrative (PeN) project working with people released on temporary licence from the local prison and others serving community sentences (https://penprojectlandworks.org/), which is ongoing. She has co-edited and published the *Palgrave Handbook of Auto/Biography* (2020), as well as this special issue, which follows a research residential funded by the ISRF and a website exploring issues of collaboration in research https://collaborations-in-research.org/.

Gayle Letherby is Honorary Professor of Sociology at the University of Plymouth and Visiting Professor at the University of Greenwich. Alongside substantive interests in reproductive and non/parental identities; gender, health and wellbeing; loss and bereavement; travel and transport mobility and working and gender and identity within institutions (including universities and prisons) she has an international reputation in research methodology. Expertise in this area includes feminist and qualitative approaches and in auto/biography and creative reflexivity (with reference to data collection and presentation). Gayle is currently co-editor of the Sage journal Methodological Innovations and is in the process of editing the Handbook of Feminist Research for Routledge. In addition to her own research and writing Gayle has significant experience in research mentoring and consultancy both within academia, for grant funding bodies and for HealthWatch UK. For examples of non-academic writing and pieces written for general readership see http://arwenackcerebrals.blogspot.co.uk/ and https://www.abctales.com/user/gletherby