

Peer Research Methodology

This leaflet offers a comprehensive guide to conducting peer research - 'the ultimate in participatory research'. It draws on the extensive experience of the SOVA led project 'Women into Work' to outline the key benefits and pitfalls of this innovatory approach and a good practice guidance. A key aspect of the Women into Work programme was to conduct peer research in order to identify barriers to employment, training and education (hereafter referred to as ETE) for women (ex)offenders. Although the information in this leaflet has a specific focus upon ex-offenders as peer researchers, it is equally applicable to any peer research scenario.

What is Peer Research?

- Developed from the traditions of 'participatory', 'action' and 'empowerment' research
- Members of the research target group (in this case ex offenders) adopt the role of active researchers, interviewing their peer group about their experiences - the ultimate in participatory research.
- Adopts a 'bottom up' approach where those individuals who are going to be directly affected by the research play an active role in the process
- Adopts standpoint that peers are 'experts' within their field of experience.

Why use this approach as opposed to 'traditional' research?

This approach may be suitable for you if you want to:

- Shift the power base and ownership of the research process to 'non experts' thus reduce the 'academicism' of research
- Make use of an interactive methodology which lends itself to a qualitative approach
- Ensure that participation is real not token
- Move away from the positivist notion of objectivity as a key criteria of 'quality' research
- Reduce hierarchies within the research environment (between researcher and researched but also between 'academic' and 'peer' researcher)
- Use research as a tool of empowerment
- Make real attempts to transform the material conditions of existence for marginalised groups, not merely to describe the world but to change it
- Be involved in a research process which is innovative, rewarding and exciting

What might the benefits be?

- Can greatly assist with recruitment of research participants and also reduces gatekeeping if peer researchers are also service users
- Interview situations can have multiple functions which can be empowering
- Supportive and relaxed interview situations enhancing high quality data
- Peer researchers may offer a positive role model for participants who may begin to think 'if someone gave them a chance they may give me one too'
- Peers have extensive knowledge about the subject being researched - can positively influence research design and provide valuable learning
- Peers have extensive experience of the subject being researched - willingness to share personal experiences and difficulties enable research to be conducted in a sensitive and informed manner.
- Training opportunities and work experience can be made available for peer researchers in a field which is relevant and important to them
- Peer researchers are enabled to develop new skills and knowledge which may improve self concept, increase confidence and enhance life chances

And the pitfalls....?

- Can be time consuming (and expensive) to work with peer researchers who have little/no experience of conducting research
- Peer researchers may be more likely to have own agendas and ask questions in a leading manner
- Potential tensions between the wants and desires of 'peer researchers' and the perceived need for academic rigour
- Difficult to keep peer researchers engaged in programmes when they may have difficult and chaotic lives
- For women in prison, it may prove problematic to make the necessary arrangements to enable them to attend training courses and meetings
- Due to shared experience and increased rapport, interviews may be more emotive than in traditional research. This needs to be carefully managed!
- There are particular implications around the acquisition of knowledge where women live in a confined and potentially hostile environment
- Peer researchers may find it daunting to go back into prisons where they once resided
- Peer involvement may raise concerns with those people working with a particular client group (i.e. workers involved in drugs work may feel concerned about someone who has been convicted of a drugs offence in the past coming in to interview one of their clients)

Good practice

- Peer researchers should be fully involved in the initial research design in order to increase 'ownership' and also ensure that wording of interview schedules etc. is 'pitched' appropriately
- Where possible, peer researchers should be actively involved with all stages of the research including data analysis and writing up
- Peer researchers should be encouraged to impose their own expertise, experiences and emotions on the process
- If an 'academic' researcher is overseeing the research process they should consider themselves to have a facilitative rather than 'expert' role
- If attempting to conduct peer research in prisons a protocol should be drawn up and agreed between the prison and research team
- Considerable 'groundwork' must be undertaken in early stages of a project in order to cultivate relationships with prison staff
- When researching in prison participants must attend interviews because they want to not because someone in authority has told them to
- The research team should acknowledge that it is impossible to collect data that is untainted by our own values, beliefs and involvements, particular when using a peer approach
- The research team should acknowledge that results of peer research will inevitably reflect the views of the interviewers as well as the participants
- Ask peer researchers to keep a detailed diary of their experiences to help assess whether the process is empowering
- When recruiting, peer researcher posts should be widely advertised to ensure that a diverse group of peers have the opportunity to be involved
- It should be made explicit from the start what the role of peer researcher involves and expectations need to be carefully managed
- Peer researchers should be able to choose how they define themselves and their role within the project
- Peer researchers should be advised about the implications of disclosing their own circumstances to both participants and organisations
- Staff team should be aware that conducting interviews with peers may raise potentially sensitive issues for peer researchers about their own background and experiences.
- Support must be available if problems arise.