Preconceptions, power and position: researcher reflections on public involvement in research

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bettertogether

Public involvement in UK health and social care (H&SC) research

- DH (2005) – service users/carers/public should be actively involved in 'design, conduct, analysis and reporting of research'
- NIHR increasingly requires evidence of active public involvement when commissioning research
- INVOLVE – established in 1996 to promote public involvement in H&SC research (renamed in 2003)

Public involvement in H&SC research at UWE

Service Users and Carers in Research committee (SUCIR) in the Faculty of Health and Life Sciences:

- Established in September 2008
- Formal launch in June 2009

Three examples of UWE projects with public involvement

- National evaluation of Pacesetters local initiatives for improving health status
- Engagement in the co-production of knowledge for knowledge exchange in health and social care
- Development of an attitude scale to measure user-responsiveness in an interprofessional context

Researcher attitudes to public involvement in H&SC research

- Some health and social care professionals generally opposed to public involvement in H&SC delivery (Campbell 2001, Rowe & Shepherd 2002, Florin & Dixon 2004, Nathan et al 2006)
- Limited research about public involvement in HSC research (Staley 2009)
- Little known about underlying researcher attitudes - found to be complex in 1 study (Thompson et al 2009)

UWE researchers' reflections

- Six UWE researchers provided written answers to three questions concerning:
  - their own preconceptions about the topic
  - their perceptions of relevant power issues
  - the positions they adopt to optimise research outputs

- Other issues also identified in their replies

Preconceptions

- Extent of public involvement
  - Lack of awareness of spectrum of involvement, thinking in terms of consultation
  - Issues of control; who makes decisions?

- What is research?
  - Understanding of issues
  - Assumption of superior knowledge; whose knowledge base is valued?
  - Research as a defined process

Power

- Complexity
  - Traditional power balance
  - Status and hierarchies
  - Enabling power

- Limited power of academics
  - Wider political agendas
  - Organisational priorities/constraints

Positions

- Personal level
  - More likely to ensure own contribution
  - Tailor things to service users
  - Line of least resistance

- Organisational level
  - Focus on institutional systems
  - Creating opportunities for involvement

Logistics

- Added layer of complexity
- Hard work
- Time consuming
- Resource issues
- Is involvement sustainable?

Other key points

- Researcher self-awareness
  - gap between commitment and practice
  - not taking things for granted, e.g. access to resources
- Representativeness – what does this mean?
- Use of narrative methods

Conclusions

- Need to question assumptions:
  - what does involvement actually entail?
  - whose knowledge matters?
  - what is research?
- Power balance
- Logistics
- Need for reflection and self-awareness

End note

- One reflection on the experience of working with *SU1* and *C1* is that it was fun, enjoyable, enlightening. (R3)

References

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