

## **'DO WE ALL GET A PHD?' ATTEMPTING EMANCIPATORY RESEARCH RELATING TO DISABILITY IN AN ACADEMIC ENVIRONMENT.**

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The following paper was given as a Conference paper for the British Sociological Association Conference, Edinburgh, in 1998 and reflects work-in-progress at the time, for Dr. Julie Seymour and Ruth Garbutt. Please note that Ruth has now finished her PhD (finished in 2004), entitled: 'Disability and Citizenship: an emancipatory study of professionals' attitudes to disabled people', which is lodged at Hull University library. The methodology section of her PhD further discusses the debates around the issues of ownership in relation to emancipatory research.

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### **ABSTRACT**

Within the model of emancipatory research, the researcher is situated as one member of a team. They are often conceptualised as providing methodological tools and skills to others involved in the research project but the definition of topic, data analysis and dissemination is presented as a joint enterprise. This model of research (deliberately) contradicts with the view of the expert researcher prevalent within higher education establishments and particularly with the individualised construction of research degrees such as PhDs which requires a thesis to be the exclusive product of one individual. The paper discusses attempts which have been made to reconcile the tensions inherent in adopting an emancipatory model within an academic environment including our own experiences of researching and supervising a doctoral thesis on citizenship and disability. The project is led by an advisory panel of disabled people who are involved in the preparation, selection and analysis of the interviews and pragmatic aspects of attempting such an emancipatory model of research from the viewpoint of the entire research team. It raises the question as to whether such models can only be completely adhered to in particular, probably non-academic settings.

### **INTRODUCTION**

In the January 1998 copy of the British Sociology Association (BSA) newsletter Network (p. 5) Nigel Gilbert opened an article reporting on a workshop held by the Heads of Departments of Sociology Council on 'users and beneficiaries' of research with the following (presumably deliberately) provocative quotation:

Are the users of research a nuisance, getting in the way of quality research? Or is the greater danger to research the recent insistence by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) that investigators take more account of users? (p. 5)

The article goes on to show that incorporating users in the setting of research agendas has not arisen simply from the 1993 White Paper 'Realising Our Potential'. Gilbert's report suggests it was a central theme in the establishment of the (then) SSRC in 1965, but the call for individuals to participate in research relevant to them can be traced further back than this to the work of researchers of 50 years ago, such as the social psychologist Kurt Lewin (1946). Indeed, some writers stress that the view implicit in emancipatory research that findings should result in social change can be tracked back much further to the work of Marx (Barnes and Mercer, 1997). However, despite this long and distinguished lineage, a cautionary note about the extent to which such research can be successfully carried out in a university environment was introduced at the HODS meeting by Janet Lewis, Research Director of the Joseph Rowntree Foundation. She considered that the model of users being active participants throughout the research procedure was 'not a process for which the existing short-term research contract culture of UK academic social science was well suited', largely because of the associated demands for time and expertise (Network, p. 5). Although there is considerable evidence that research based on emancipatory / participatory methodology has been carried out in a range of university departments (for example Criminology, Davidson et al, 1997; Development, Hall et al, 1982; Education, Hustler et al, 1986; Health, Kanani 1996; Management, Flood and Romm, 1996; Disability, Booth and Booth, 1997) and indeed incorporated into postgraduate courses (such as education cf. McNiff, 1988), we wish to explore in this paper the extent to which it can be carried out during the writing and submission of a PhD thesis. One can argue that postgraduate researchers have the element of time on their side (particularly in relation to the short length of some research contracts) but when carrying out their doctoral study are usually only in the early stages of developing an expertise in research methodology; hence they may not have all the requirements considered necessary by Lewis to conduct research in this way. More importantly, the way that PhDs are conceptualised within academe may prevent the adoption of an emancipatory model of research. The paper discusses attempts which have been made to reconcile the tensions inherent in adopting such a model for PhD research, including our own experiences of researching and supervising a doctoral thesis on citizenship and disability.

### EMANCIPATORY RESEARCH- THE ROLE OF THE RESEARCHER.

Labelling our research emancipatory is problematic in two ways. First, from a semantic point of view and secondly, when we examine our own project in detail. To first address the question of language, Oliver (1992) rightly points out that the use of the term 'emancipatory' to describe the research process is inappropriate since no-one can empower people but themselves. He suggests that the real issue is how can research facilitate or contribute to the emancipation process? In addition, Zarb (1992) has drawn a distinction between emancipatory research, which seeks to change both the social and material relations of

research production, and participatory research, which he considers deals only with the former and does not address the issue of the funding and resourcing of research. He goes on to say however, that emancipatory research can only take place in a post-capitalist society. Hence, while acknowledging these arguments, we will continue to use the phrase 'emancipatory research' to describe the methodological model which the study seeks to follow, not least because it is the terminology used within the area of disability research, and this distinguishes it from health and welfare studies or development projects which tend to use the phrase 'participatory research'.

Disability research, particularly that associated with academic establishments, has, Oliver (1992) states, been perceived as alienating and oppressing. This is, in part, due to the position of the researcher in such studies as an expert in the field; a role not usually allocated to research subjects who have experiential knowledge of the topic under investigation. In contrast, within the model of emancipatory research, the researcher is situated as (only) one member of a team. They are often conceptualised as providing methodological tools and skills to others involved in the research project but, in its purest form, the definition of topic, data collection, data analysis and dissemination is conceived as a joint enterprise. That is, disabled people are part of the research process, rather than mere subjects.

Reason (1988, p. 2) sees research as a process of:

...establishing a dialogue between research workers and the grass roots people with whom they work, in order to discover and realise the practical and cultural needs of those people. Research here, becomes part of a developmental process, including also education and political actions.

This model of research (deliberately) contradicts with the view of the expert researcher prevalent within higher education establishments, and particularly within the individualised construction of research degrees (such as PhDs), which requires a thesis to be the exclusive product of one individual. It may be that university regulations prevent students from adopting this model of research whereas other settings such as non-academic communities or organisations do not actively discourage a participatory approach.

### REGULATING RESEARCH: REQUIREMENTS OF A PHD THESIS.

To appear to state the obvious, degrees in institutions of higher education are awarded to individuals. Although increasingly at undergraduate level, students produce group projects and may be given a collective mark, their final degree certificate is seen as the property of, and reflecting the effort of, one person. This individualised model of recognition continues with research degrees. The regulations for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy by thesis for our university state that a candidate shall be examined by means of a thesis and 'such a thesis to be the result of *original* research' (our emphasis). For published work, the applicant is 'required to give proof of a significant contribution of scholarship' and if the 'candidate submits work published jointly with others, evidence shall be submitted as to the extent of the

candidate's own contributions to these works' (The University of Hull, 1997). Interestingly, in neither set of regulations is the word 'individual', in relation to the contribution used.

The model of researching in a team but submitting an individual thesis is frequently used in the sciences where researchers work as part of a group project. Usually students are encouraged to concentrate on a specific area of the research topic which can be identified as 'belonging' to that individual. Hence, there is a scientific model of collaborative work, but this involves input from other researchers i.e. other 'acknowledged experts'. Significantly here, one researcher who was familiar with this mode of working mentioned the important role of the technician as a source of advice, which drew attention to the relevance of experience over qualifications. (Of course, as this informant pointed out, in some ways all researchers do participatory research by drawing on other researchers' literature although again, this model remains rooted in the community of scholars.)

When discussing our university regulations with the administrative officer responsible for the submission of PhD theses, an interesting distinction emerged between 'original work', and 'individual work'. It was considered that if a research project followed the emancipatory model and was produced by a group of individuals, this would only be acceptable to the University for the Award of a higher degree if only one person from the group submitted a thesis. The issue that the institution would find problematic would be if several people submitted joint theses and all wanted to be awarded a PhD. (This would be in addition to issues for the University of multiple funding and registration). It would also not be possible for a second individual to submit a thesis based on the findings of the group work as a later date for an individual award- on the principle that you cannot discover gravity more than once.

What emerges from these regulations then, is that the real issue is not doing research work on your own, but that one piece of research can be claimed only by one person for a higher degree and that the findings of the project are only submitted a single time. That is, that the 'originality' of the PhD research comes from one person being awarded the degree (and hence being publicly recognised as 'owning' the idea), not from one person alone producing the research findings. (These attitudes are also reflected in problems the RAE exercise has with joint authored papers; some researchers have argued that such papers would not have existed without people working collaboratively and hence all authors should be given 100% credit.)

In contrast to our university regulations, CNAA guidelines (1994) in the early nineties were much more explicit about their individualised nature of the work in its entirety. They stated that the student's contribution must be 'distinguishable for the purposes of assessment' and then go on to state that '...where a candidate's research programme was part of a collaborative group, the thesis should contain a clear statement of the candidate's *individual contribution* and of the extent of the collaboration' (our emphasis). And again, the researcher should present a thesis...resulting in an independent and original contribution to knowledge (p. 94) (our emphasis). These more specific guidelines suggest that the reward of a higher

degree is for originality throughout the whole research process not just for being the individual whose name is on the thesis.

Both sets of regulations have implications for carrying out emancipatory research with the aim of achieving a PhD qualification. The CNAAG guidelines appear to mitigate against being able to adopt such a model. Although collaborative work is accepted as a common model, it would be interesting to see how far examiners were comfortable with the input of so-called 'non-experts' in the process. The university model in theory does not allow for an emancipatory methodology to be adopted. This however, perversely, also allows for the most potentially exploitative form of research to take place. A group of people may carry out the research but only one person is allowed to enter into the academic community on the strength of it and reap the subsequent benefits. Such potential exploitation could be reduced if multiple outputs of the research are produced, for example, a thesis but also a report for the participants or organisation which is intended for wider dissemination. If we consider Lewin's (1946) model of the cycle of participative research (an iterative circle of plan, act, observe and reflect, Fig. 1), there are several points in the cycle where the researcher can leave the project at a tangent in order to achieve additional outputs.

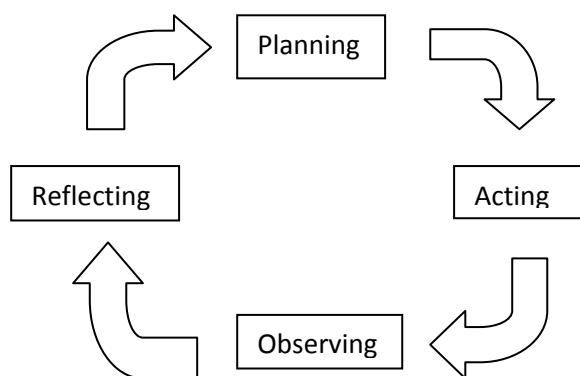


Figure 1: Lewin (1946) model of the cycle of participative research

Thesis writing could be a point in the reflection stage where the researcher writes their personal account of the process, the PhD. Indeed this model has been carried out by researchers in the disability field such as Priestley (1997) and Vernon (1997). Doing emancipatory research does not necessarily mean giving up a PhD (although, as with feminist researchers such as Oakley (1974a, 1974b) it may mean doubling your output) for as Priestley (1997) says when discussing his own work there was, among the disabled groups he worked with:

...much resistance to the idea that emancipatory research should involve a *reversal* of the social relations of research production. Rather, they felt it necessary to stress the importance of a working partnership towards mutually beneficial outcomes. For us

the goal became one of *equalising* power, rather than devolving it (p. 104-5, author's emphasis).

While our university regulations can thus accommodate a model of emancipatory research it is not yet in a position to expand this accommodation to the presentation of degrees to all participants of a project based on a single thesis. The individualised model of reward remains.

### THE DISABILITY AND CITIZENSHIP STUDY

The doctoral study we are involved in as research student and supervisor has attempted to locate disabled people in the research process as active participants rather than merely passive recipients. As the project is ongoing we present the results so far as work in progress. The preliminary aim of the research was to look at the attitudes held by professionals toward disabled people in relation to a model of citizenship (cf. Marshall, 1950). In doing this, the research addresses concepts of attitudes, power and knowledge. The thesis also has a methodological focus which will reflexively examine the process of carrying out research using an emancipatory model in an academic environment. This includes a consideration of areas where conflict arose and compromises had to be made.

### METHODS.

The research was carried out by first setting up an advisory group of disabled people. The purpose of the group has been to take an active role in controlling the research agenda, and to contribute to the analysis of the data. It has provided a forum for debate, and has guided the research process. The data collection consisted of 30 semi-structured interviews with professionals. The advisory group decided who to interview, what questions to ask, and why. The interview transcripts were then discussed and analysed by the group. The interviews were done with the PhD student as the researcher. In terms of the emancipatory research model she was offering her skills and knowledge (including her interviewing skills) for the advisory group to use. In contrast, Northway (1997) used as interviewers, the people with learning disabilities who made up her advisory group. This, therefore involved the researcher in teaching her group about interview skills and could be labelled a purer version of such research. Research which has intended to incorporate members of the study group in the data collection process has sometimes had to abandon this idea due to issues of benefits payments (Roberts, 1981).

The advisory group was recruited by sending out invitations to all voluntary agencies in Hull relating to disability. This included agencies to do with physical disability, learning difficulty, mental health, mild learning difficulties such as dyslexia, and other disability-related support groups, such as those to do with tinnitus and ME. By doing this, the ethos of inclusion was adhered to and also the recognition that much disability research focus on physical disability or learning difficulty as discrete conditions rather than drawing people

together as an oppressed group. However, by focusing on inclusion, problems were encountered in the range of levels and understanding of group members and the extent of their participation which will be discussed later.

### INPUT OF THE ADVISORY GROUP INTO THE RESEARCH.

#### The focus of the research- citizenship of attitudes?

One way in which the research was specifically guided by the group was the focus of enquiry. A literature review was completed before the group was assembled since otherwise, as the PhD was being carried out part-time, the advisory group would have been in existence for four years. The initial direction of enquiry centred on issues of rights and citizenship and a developments of Marshall's tripartite model of citizenship as consisting of civil, political and social rights. In introducing this focus to the advisory group their immediate reaction was one of challenge and disagreement; their reasoning being that, to them, it was the way ordinary people treated them that was important rather than establishing rights in legislation. They considered that a more appropriate focus should be the attitudes that affected their day to day lives. Comments taped during the meeting included:

*Disabled people are not treated equally by the law and we therefore do not regard ourselves as being equal citizens in the same way as a citizen who has his full rights.*

*We don't want any rights as such, we want to get rid of prejudice.*

*I don't think citizenship can cover everything. You've got to change attitudes as well.*

*Research on attitudes is inherently harder than research on rights. That's why people just look at rights.*

*The word citizen grates a bit. I'm a citizen because I was born here.*

Considering the work that had gone into the literature review, this change of focus created a few dilemmas about the direction of enquiry. However, as one member of the group pointed out:

*The danger of participatory research is that we don't all come up with the answers you want!*

Northway (1997) discusses the need for the researcher adopting this methodology to have a tolerance of ambiguity and to reconcile their competing desires of promoting participation and having a clear idea of what they are doing in the research. As she states, the only thing to expect is that the research will take 'unexpected directions' (p. 14)

#### Choice of interviewees.

The original research proposal intended to focus on welfare professionals and their attitudes and responses since the research student's experiences of working in social services and the voluntary sector had raised some pertinent issues around the workers' understanding and

ideologies of disability issues. The advisory group recognised these professionals as potential source of conflict as indicated by the remarks about practitioners:

*Professionals have the power...very rarely does someone sit down and say 'what do you think?' Community Care was supposed to change things but it hasn't.*

*Choice, user consultation and empowerment are just words.*

*There is an imbalance of power in society.*

*Doctors and social workers infringe civil liberties by the way they treat people.*

*Are professionals just victims of social conditioning as much as other people?*

The advisory group also pointed out that other people affected their lives as much as welfare professionals. They therefore drew up a list of those they would like the researcher to interview which included: social services professionals, health professionals, architects, town planners, solicitors, supermarket managers, restaurateurs, leisure centre managers, and organisers of transport systems. These suggestions were followed up in the data collection process and, as one member of the advisory group later reflected, the range of people included had expanded the focus of the research from the (narrowly interpreted) professional viewpoint to a managerial viewpoint.

#### Preliminary analysis of interviews

The interviewing took place over a period of 18 months with continuous feedback and analysis by the advisory group. Some early findings have had implications for affecting change, particularly in relation to attitudes towards disabled people as employees. The data reflect the views that integration, training and consultation with disabled people are the keys to changing attitudes. Interviewees have discussed the concept of citizenship in relation to disabled people as consumers rather than employees. The latter comments began to draw together the original focus of the research on citizenship to the group's interest on attitudes. A model of the consumer citizen emerged presenting disabled peoples rights in terms of a customer/ client/ consumer. This presented a way of using emancipatory research to develop the strong focus in the literature on rights by interpreting the existing literature through the expressed interested of the advisory group. As Stone (1997, p. 224) says of differing epistemological bases in relation to her own doctoral research, 'the point is to make sense of difference, not distort or disregard it'

#### PROBLEMS AND THEIR RESOLUTION

##### Variation within the group- representativeness and abilities

The people who showed an interest in the research and wanted to be involved in the advisory group came from a wide range of backgrounds and included varying types and extent of disability. However, there does seem to be greater prominence of proactive, intellectual, articulate people who have a deep understanding of the issues and a capacity for debate. It



seems natural that proactive intellectuals would be attracted to this type of research but this may lead to a bias in the research.

Another challenge that has arisen from the varying disabilities and abilities within the advisory group is the importance of including people with learning difficulties and some of the difficulties entailed in making the work accessible to all group members. In the advisory group this issue is addressed by using pictures as well as writing on any information given out and by asking more direct questions of relevance to facilitate those with a learning difficulty and to help them be included in the discussion. This need to accommodate the range of capacities within the group was commented on by one group member who compared it with similar interaction in organisations for disabled people.

### The role of the group

As the advisory group progressed, the clarity as to what the role of the group was increased and individual understandings and contributions became more productive. However, there were issues identified throughout the research process as to the type of contribution needed from the advisory group. Frequently the topic of conversation was the experiences of the members of the group. This was particularly pertinent in the early stages of the group's formation but as data were collected the aim of the sessions moved more toward the analysis of the interview transcripts. The emancipatory approach needed the input of the group as co-researchers who could analyse and make comments on the data rather than as sources of experiential data. This is not to devalue the experiences of the disabled people, but to highlight the issue of diverse ideas as to the purpose of the advisory group.

### Sustaining interest

In the last 18 months the advisory group has met 7 times and as the months have progressed the advisory group have made definite contributions to the research. It was unfortunate (but perhaps predictable) that as time went on the numbers dropped considerably, from 15 in the first meeting to a regular group of three or four individuals at any one meeting. The numbers have stayed constant although it is often a different group of 3 or 4. This could have been due to lack of incentive or apathy. One, perhaps more articulate, member of the group pointed out that this may be due to the kind of people that make up the group; their backgrounds and level of skill and understanding. It became clear that without any short-term tangible outcomes, many members were possibly disillusioned by the lack of effect or change they felt the research could achieve. As one person pointed out:

*Research needs to have the will to bring about change.*

It was also pointed out that invariably in the disability movement there are a small number of proactive, independent and forthright individuals who try to promote change, but that there is also a large proportion of people who are disillusioned and apathetic and who don't feel their efforts will make any difference. As one member constantly reminded me:

*There are as many conflicts within the disability movement as there are outside it.*

### Academic attitudes

Throughout the planning stage, the research student came across varying forms of reluctance in accepting an emancipatory model of research by members of the institution due to the problems perceived to arise in relation to ownership of the project. The argument has been advanced that in order to complete a PhD, it is not necessary to follow an emancipatory/participatory model; it is sufficient to address the issues and then merely conduct a survey. The strategy adopted in the face of this response has been to make allies with members of staff and other students who consider this model of research to be valid and to ensure that all arguments and reasoning are well thought out and backed up with references from other disability and feminist researchers. However, it must be remembered that in terms of power in the academy, a part-time, mature, female doctoral student occupies a lowly position and it has been necessary to ensure that carrying out the research in this way will not jeopardise the final award of a higher degree. The role here of a sympathetic external examiner will be vital.

### OWNERSHIP OF THE RESEARCH.

The question of the ownership of the disability and citizenship study is complex. As the research student is largely self-funding (with a bursary for m the University and a small contribution from Northern Foods, a local firm) the research, including the data, does not belong to any funding body. As the research is ultimately being carried out with the aim of one person gaining a PhD, this differs from the work carried out by Priestley (1997) who gained a doctorate while conducting commissioned research for a disability organisation. Our early perceptions of the requirements of a PhD thesis led us to believe that ultimately the research student needed to be the owner of the research and also to be seen to be conducting the fieldwork. Hence while the advisory group guides the process and responds to the interviews, the researcher goes on to analyse the advisory group's responses, relate the findings to academic theory and discuss the methodological issues. Our investigations into the regulation of postgraduate theses may lead to a reconsideration of these initial perceptions.

In addition to a PhD thesis, the research student in this study will produce a shorter, user-friendly report of the findings with the help of the advisory group and make it available for local and national disability groups, educational establishments and workplaces. In this way, some ownership of the research is retained by the advisory group and the results of the research are made accessible to those who may be able to benefit from them. In this way, emancipatory research can become 'a working partnership towards mutually beneficial outcomes' (Priestley, 1997, p. 105).

## CONCLUSION

Although this research attempted to adopt an emancipatory model as its methodological framework, it is recognised that the extent to which this has been achieved is limited. The study could be criticised for the point at which the advisory group became involved, that is, not at the original formation of the research question, but one of the key inputs of the group has been the reconsideration of the focus of the enquiry; in effect they made the researcher restart the project taking their concerns into account. The extent to which the members of the advisory group have been able to be equal partners in the research process has been hindered by the make-up of the group, the declining numbers, the regulations governing research for a PhD (and our own perceptions of these criteria) and the practicalities involved. Compromises have been made because of the overriding aim of securing a PhD which may lead to the consideration that this model of research can only be fully realised in a non-academic community setting.

An alternative viewpoint which recognises institutional restrictions is presented by Maguire (1996, p. 33) who states, 'perhaps we can free ourselves of some unspoken proposal that all research be pure or ideal PR [participatory research]. Instead we might look for ways to move deliberately along the participatory continuum.' Thus other researchers who have attempted to carry out participatory research in limiting institutions such as the NHS have suggested that 'we should be looking for opportunities, no matter how small they may seem, within the research process where participation can take place (Dockery, 1996, p. 169). This author recommends seeking flexible entry points for participation in the research process.

It appears that it may only be possible to adopt a limited version of the emancipatory model of research while studying for a higher degree. It may be that attempting to adopt this methodology at a doctoral level is not the most appropriate way to introduce such models into university research. In order to develop such work in academia, researchers, perversely have to display their expert status. In seeking to find funding for research which adopts an emancipatory methodology, the skills which the researcher aims to make available to the participants are usually judged by professional standards- even funders such as the Joseph Rowntree Foundation ask for a CV. The PhD is one route by which an individual can content funders that they have these skills. Perhaps the issue is what the researcher does with these skills after the PhD has been awarded and how far do you spread the 'reward'?

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