

Biol, B., Clayton, V., Mbayi, G., Gitamvu, L., Sadaf, S., Casas Tortoledo, L., Al Zaidi, W., Coyle, J., Owens-Crossman, L., & Garnham, L. M. (2024). 'It Will Start With Me': a documentary film exploring the benefits and challenges of participatory research. *Sociological Research Online*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1177/13607804241238067>

**“It will start with me”:
a documentary film exploring the benefits and challenges of participatory research**

Participatory research methodologies

Research in migration studies has historically been undertaken on displaced and marginalised communities by Western researchers, yielding minimal tangible benefits for participants (Clark-Kazak, 2022; Van Liempt and Bilger, 2009). To address these concerns and pursue more meaningful and ethical research, there is a growing shift towards participatory research methodologies in this, as well as other, areas of sociological research. These approaches prioritise conducting research ‘with and for’ individuals under study, actively involving them in the research process (Clark et al., 2021; Clark-Kazak, 2022; Yang and Dibb, 2020; Kindon, Pain, and Kesby, 2007).

One such approach is the utilisation of peer researchers, who typically belong to the community under study and are, therefore, have expertise on the topic being studied by virtue of their lived experience. Peer research aims to centre the voices and knowledge of those who have been more traditionally excluded from academic research practice, and can be particularly effective where research is co-produced or community-led; this provides peer researchers with decision-making power and recognises them as capable agents in the research process (Lushey and Munro, 2015; Yang and Dibb, 2020; Roche, Guta and Flicker, 2010).

Despite these potential benefits, however, there is relatively little critical discussion or evaluation of peer research methodology, and even less that attempts to understand the experiences and perspectives of peer researchers themselves (Beresford, 2002; Guta, Flicker and Roche, 2013; Goodson and Phillimore, 2012; Thomas-Hughes, 2018; Kothari, 2001). Moreover, peer research is still not commonly utilised with refugee and migrant communities in the UK (Yang and Dibb, 2020), which makes it difficult to assess the appropriateness and value of such a methodology for this group in particular.

“It will start with me”

This film recounts the experiences of a team of New Scots¹ women peer researchers, who came together to evaluate the Our Rights, Our Communities (OROC) community-based advocacy project in Glasgow, Scotland, in 2022. With some skill-sharing, mentoring and administrative support from a professional researcher from Glasgow Centre for Population Health (GCPH) and a post-graduate research intern from the University of Glasgow, the peer researchers decided on their evaluation design, carried out interviews with participants in OROC, analysed their interview data and wrote an evaluation findings report: “Knowledge is Power”. Other outputs, including a poster, an animation in

¹ ‘New Scots’ are people living in and settled in Scotland, who originate from outside Scotland. The Scottish Government primarily uses the term to describe those who have made an application to the UK Home Office for asylum, whether that application has been approved, is pending or has been declined.

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six languages and several [blogs about the peer research experience](#), as well as more information about the project, can be found on the [GCPH project website](#).

Throughout the project, the peer researchers discussed how this research was different from any other they had undertaken or been exposed to before, in that it was fully within their control, designed to serve their purposes and the findings were being communicated in their own voice. It was the impact of this methodological approach on the peer researchers themselves that we sought to capture in creating this film, which was funded by GCPH and produced by film-maker [Bircan Biroł](#).

Making the film

We began by sitting together and (re-)telling each other the story of the year-long evaluation. This conversation was audio recorded by sound engineer Heather Andrews and used to construct the narrative for the film. After a workshop about the key themes and moments we wanted to highlight, our 90-minute conversation was re-arranged and condensed into a 6-minute narrative, which was used as the voiceover to lead the audience through our journey.

Over four workshops, we used this narrative to plan how to visually represent each stage and aspect of our story. Filming took place over a further four workshops, during which every member of the team was either in front of the camera or behind it, making directorial decisions about lighting, positioning, re-takes and so on. The finished film was screened (in April 2023) to an audience of local community groups and researchers, who gathered at GCPH to reflect upon the value of peer research.

'Holding space' for collaboration and meaningful participation

The aim of this research project was to create and 'hold space' (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh et al, 2022; Hearn et al, 2022; Chan, 2023) for the peer researchers to learn and self-reflect, by carrying out their own evaluation. The hope was that this would better equip them and their community of New Scots women to more effectively uphold and enhance their rights, by developing community-based tools and networks for advocacy. Two aspects of the peer research methodology emerged as pivotal in creating and maintaining this space.

Firstly, the research questions and the evaluation design were proposed and controlled by the peer researchers themselves. At first, this created a somewhat uncomfortable dynamic between the professional and peer researchers, which is described in the opening scenes of the film as the "well, what do you want me to do?" problem. This was resolved by spending significant amounts of time building relationships during the early stages of the project, which allowed us to "build the bond" within the team, ultimately creating a space in which we could share and reflect upon our knowledge and expertise, but also our hopes, fears and expectations of one another. This subsequently allowed us to safely explore topics and issues with which we had little expertise (such as research methods or experience of forced migration) in order to make informed decisions about the evaluation.

Secondly, the peer researchers authored the project's outputs in their own voices and we worked hard to co-produce our written and spoken outputs (including the film) in English, as a team. This was very challenging and time-consuming as almost everyone in the team had English as an additional language and most also needed to learn a significant amount of new vocabulary related to

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research (e.g. "when I started, the word 'report' was scary to me"). Our co-writing process involved the peer researchers dictating the text to the professional researcher, which (once typed) was then discussed, critiqued and improved collectively, in order to ease the writing process.

The result was that the project outputs encapsulated the voices, passion and backgrounds of the peer researchers, forming a much closer representation of their "unedited truth" than would have been the case had they been written-up by solely the team's supporting professional researcher. Moreover, the writing process was not simply a process of documenting and communicating findings; it was where the substance and detail of the peer researchers' analysis was thrashed out and made real. This process of collaborative writing therefore shaped not only what was included in the final report and how it was framed but also, crucially, how the peer researchers came to understand and process the import of the findings for themselves.

Implications for sociological research

The space created through this project was one in which peer researchers could gather, organise, reflect upon, be motivated and inspired by, and write about various perspectives from within their own community, with technical support from a professional researcher. It was, therefore, the co-production and community-led nature of our utilisation of peer research methodology, and the space that created to apply the findings of the project, that brought to greatest benefit to the peer researchers themselves.

This enabled the peer researchers to develop a plan of action to improve advocacy resources within their community, as well as improving communication and analysis skills and boosting confidence (Dowling, 2016; Burns and Schubotz, 2009). It has also inspired further, community-led action (Boyd, 2020; Kindon, Pain and Kesby, 2007; Vaughn *et al.*, 2017; Yang and Dibb, 2020; Hodge, 2005), as highlighted in the closing segment of the film:

"This has ignited the passion in me to do more and I want to do more. I'd like to be that ambassador. It will start with me."

Ethical procedures followed during this project

GCPH's involvement in the OROC project evaluation was formalised through a Memorandum of Understanding co-signed by managers from the three community organizations. The post-graduate research intern's participation was established through an internship agreement with Govanhill Baths Community Trust and the University of Glasgow. Prior to film production, each group member signed a GDPR-compliant consent form, which included choices about whether they wanted their image or voice to appear on film (or neither). Community-based researchers controlled the film narrative, filming, editing and had with final approval of the finished product.

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