

Legacy in Collaborative Research: Reflections on a Community Research Project

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Abstract

This article reflects on the legacy of a collaborative community research project which explored loneliness amongst older people. Six years after completing the original research, the authors reviewed their learning from the project to consider how impactful legacy can be developed and supported in community/university research partnerships. Three key features are identified within the article. First the importance of talking about legacy from the start of a project. Second, genuine ownership of a project is a gradual and deliberate process, and third, time continuity and funding are needed to support legacy. The authors suggest that a deliberately planned process empowered collaborators to actively engage with and use the research findings to develop interventions and support change in the community.

In 2015, we began collaborating on a community research project exploring older people's experiences of loneliness in South Bristol, UK, as part of the Productive Margins: Regulating *for* Engagement research program, which coproduced research between communities and universities with the goal of finding new ways to engage communities in regulatory processes (McDermont et al., 2020). The "we" here are Simon Hankins, CEO of BS3 Community Development, an organization founded in 1991 to improve the lives of people living in the Greater Bedminster area of Bristol, and Jenny Barke, a researcher at the University of Bristol. For clarity of our shared and individual engagement in the multiple facets and outcomes of the project, we will henceforth refer to ourselves as "the authors." The authors recruited a research group of mainly older people from the local community. All were new to research and had not worked with the university before, although a few people had been previously involved with BS3 Community Development events. The research group met weekly over the duration of a year to spend time reflecting on loneliness while also learning about research design. The outcomes of our research group collaboration included interviews and focus groups, the collection and analysis of data, a cowritten theater piece, and a project report that included recommendations for preventing and reducing loneliness in the community (Barke, 2017a, 2017b). Six years later, most of the research group participants are still working together, and both authors have continued to participate in university/community collaborations.

Over the last few years, our conversations have focused on how to ensure that community/

university collaborations are meaningful for communities, and we have wondered about the legacy of projects for everyone involved. Both authors believe it is essential to understand the legacy of research collaborations between academics and communities so that theories and methods can be developed and academics and communities can understand the value and quality of participatory and collaborative research (Facer & Pahl, 2017). To understand more about the legacy of the Productive Margins loneliness project, Jenny interviewed four of the project's community researchers in person and had email exchanges with two others. Following these interviews, the authors met to reflect on the content of the interviews and the legacy of the project from our own perspectives.

Reflections on Project Legacy

Community researchers were proud of the ways in which the research led to action and new initiatives. Several members of the original research group formed an action group, Local Isolation and Loneliness Action Committee (LILAC), which is supported by BS3 Community Development. LILAC developed two interventions: a community retirement program (funded by the Economic and Social Research Council) and a tech café for older people to learn about technology (funded by Big Lottery Fund). One of the group members also developed a community volunteering and advice project. An additional initiative was *Alonely*, the theater piece cowritten with dramaturge Adam Peck, which has been performed in theaters, community spaces, festivals, care homes, and parliament.

In 2019, the team working on *Alonely* secured funding to employ a producer to support further development. Community researchers explained that *Alonely* is both a way of disseminating findings and an engagement tool that promotes conversations about loneliness with audiences.

Community researchers also reflected on the research group's impacts beyond funded initiatives, including friendships, confidence building, and engagement in new projects and group formations. One of the community researchers explained how being part of *Alonely* and LILAC made her feel more effective and gave her drive and excitement. Others described learning new skills: People chaired meetings for the first time, learned how to take minutes, sat on recruitment panels, contributed to funding bids, presented at conferences, and learned how to work as part of a committee. Several community researchers explained how the project had given them the confidence to engage with other unrelated projects. One person was working as a patient-researcher on a health research project at the time of the interview, and he suggested that he would not have gotten involved in the health research had he not first worked on the loneliness project. Another community researcher felt that the project had encouraged further volunteer opportunities, particularly with mental health organizations. Another community partner who worked on the theater piece stated that his participation had given him more interest and confidence in performing and reignited his passion for performing. Since the original project, he had performed across Europe and regularly attended and participated in local theater groups.

The research also had significant ramifications for the authors' future experiences in community engagement. Jenny began the project less than a year after completing her Ph.D., hoping to develop a career in collaborative research. Working on the project provided her with opportunities to develop skills and to network with community and academic professionals. As the project ended, Jenny was offered employment on a series of follow-on projects within Productive Margins. Her work with Productive Margins both provided her with relevant experience and gave her the time, space, and funding to develop and write funding applications, papers, and book chapters and to present findings at conferences and public engagement events. Simon reflects that there were four ways in which the research project impacted BS3 Community Development. The

first notable effect was that BS3 began to take a more intergenerational approach. Second was the development of a new staff position, a community development member, to focus work in the area of loneliness and intergenerational activity. The third effect related to extending the organization's network into the university, and the final impact related to learning more about coproduction.

Developing Legacy

Reflecting on the interviews with community researchers and our experiences on the project, the authors identified three key features that supported the development of practical and personal legacies for collaborators and the local community.

Talk About Legacy From the Start

The research group discussed what they wanted to achieve and the legacy of the project from day one. The group defined the research question, plan, and product to be disseminated through a series of facilitated activities that explored assets to be drawn on as well as motivations and interests (Manchester et al., 2020). By taking an asset-based approach, which involved reflecting on why community researchers were involved in the project and what they wanted to gain from participating, the authors were able to understand early on what success would look like and could bring to the fore and unpack different assumptions and expectations (Facer & Pahl, 2017). Of importance to the group was that research findings could be applied, would be timely, and would make a genuine difference to the lives of older people in the local community.

By discussing the intended legacy of the research early on, the research group was able to develop a collective vision encompassing the diversity of its members. Having outcomes rooted in the interests and motivations of the group members meant that community researchers sustained their engagement and created practical goals, thus increasing the likely impact of the research.

Genuine Ownership of a Project Is a Gradual and Deliberate Process

The initial framework for the research was coproduced by Simon and Productive Margins, then Jenny was recruited, and together the authors reached out to the community to find people interested in partnering in the research group. In the next stage, Jenny facilitated a process in which the community researchers developed an idea and a research question. Jenny then designed

the asset-based research training that community researchers needed in order to undertake the project. As the research group members completed the research training and started to engage in research activity, they reported feeling a greater sense of ownership of the research. When asked about the training, they explained that the training sessions prepared them for the research and also supported the development of a collective identity and common purpose.

Another way the group gained ownership of the research project was through involvement in data analysis. As a first step, Jenny developed a structure for carrying out a collective thematic analysis of the interview transcripts (Barke, 2017b). The research group then collaborated with a dramaturg, or writer, to explore the identified themes through creative writing. By working through the data analysis process as a group, partners had a clear shared understanding of and ownership of the findings, thus translating the findings into information that could be used to develop interventions and to communicate outcomes. Ownership of the research process was slow and gradual, but also deliberate and carefully planned, as the facilitated process built community researchers' confidence and interest in developing meaningful products.

Time Continuity and Funding Are Needed to Support Future Work

Productive Margins supported the research group by providing time and funding to think about how the research findings could be applied. Jenny both facilitated the brainstorming of community initiatives to reduce loneliness within the research group and secured funding to develop the research projects. Productive Margins' funding directly led to developing the tech cafés, touring *Alonely*, and piloting the retirement program.

Funding from Productive Margins also supported dissemination activities, including time to write and attend conferences. Funding has been precarious at times, and for Jenny, working as an early career researcher on short-term, part-time contracts is not always ideal. As Facer and Enright (2016; Enright & Facer, 2017) suggested, investing in researchers and committing to longer-term employment opportunities is one way to support high-quality collaborative research partnerships. BS3 Community Development has been able to help LILAC develop as a group beyond the research project by providing a small amount of funding, a physical space to meet, and general

advice. Without BS3's support, the partnership would have been unlikely to continue. The authors suggest that collaborative research partnerships should consider specifically dedicating money and time to the development of project outcomes. Considering this stage of the research from the start is likely to enhance the legacy and impact of community-engaged research.

Conclusion

Within coproduced research, legacy can be hard to define and is not guaranteed. The authors suggest attending to the purposeful and deliberate planning and facilitation of collaborative projects and the relationships developed throughout the process, agreeing with Darby (2017) that "the importance of empowering collaborative processes to creating ownership of impact may be the most often-overlooked but broadly relevant aspect of co-produced research" (p. 235). Our project's academic, practical, and personal legacies were achieved by working together at an institutional level to outline a project that people could engage with. The next step involved supporting and carefully facilitating the community research group as members developed the details of the project themselves. A deliberately planned process empowered community researchers to use the research findings to develop interventions and support change in their community.

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About the Authors

Jenny Barke is a psychologist whose research focuses broadly on social connectivity and loneliness. She is interested in the methods and ethics of co-producing research with communities outside of the university, particularly in how new knowledge is produced through collaborative research. Much of her research has been creative and participatory and she has collaborated on projects with writers, actors, illustrators, artists and directors. Simon Hankins is Chief Executive Officer of BS3 Community Development. Simon took up the CEO position with BS3 Community Development in Bristol in 2011. Prior to his appointment at BS3 Simon spent 16 years heading-up research, development and technical support teams for three speciality fertiliser companies in the UK, Norway, and Canada before moving to the charitable sector to lead and manage the Dove Service, a charity based in Stoke-on-Trent that provides counselling and support to those affected by bereavement and loss.