CO-INQUIRY **TOOLKIT**

Community-university participatory research partnerships: co-inquiry and related approaches

Who has been using this method?

Staff, students and community partners linked to Durham and Newcastle Universities have been exploring the development of co-inquiry as an approach to community-university research partnerships. This work has taken place under the auspices of Beacon North East – a Beacon for Public Engagement comprising the two universities and the Centre for Life (operating from January 2008 to December 2011). Beacon NE has been using the term 'co-inquiry' in a very broad sense to refer to cooperation in research between a range of participants from different backgrounds. The key feature of this approach is the value given to everyone's experience, expertise and full participation, with an emphasis on active partnership.

beacons for public engagement

Durham University
Centre for Social Justice and Community Action

Collaborating in research for social justice

BEACON North East

Method description

The Beacon North East approach to community-university participatory research partnerships draws on a number of traditions and methods – particularly co-inquiry and participatory action research. Co-inquiry (or cooperative inquiry as it was originally known) was conceived by John Heron (1971, 1981) and extended by Peter Reason (1988, 2002; see also Reason and Heron, 1995; Heron and Reason, 2006, 2008). Co-inquiry is different to traditional research approaches that create clear distinctions between the 'researcher' and the 'subject', and where research is carried out **on** the subject. The co-inquiry approach involves working **with** people throughout the research stages and there is an attempt to achieve equality between participants regarding their input to the research focus, design, methods and results. All participants, whether from the university or community, are 'co-researchers'. Participatory action research (PAR, see Fals-Borda and Rahman, 1991; Kindon *et al*, 2007) involves the same principle of 'co-research' and has origins in development contexts where researchers work collaboratively with vulnerable and marginalised communities. Those who use PAR as an approach are in general more committed to social change and transformation.

The core methodological principles of the Beacon North East approach to community-university research partnerships are:

Cooperation: The idea of 'working **with** rather than **on** people'. This means some form of meaningful collaboration – a two-way conversation – between participants working together on a research issue that is of interest and importance to those involved.

Participation: A participatory worldview. This means a worldview based on participation and cooperation rather than separation and competition. It is based on the idea that all aspects of life are connected and that humans are active subjects.

Equality: Equality in the research process. This entails mutual respect and appreciation between all participants and valuing all contributions, including expertise by experience.

Co-production: New research knowledge is 'co-produced'. This means that all participants work together on a research issue without privileging one type of knowledge over another, and they produce the research together.

Social Justice: The research has social justice outcomes. This means that the research is for a social purpose, has a real impact for those involved and goes some way to reducing inequalities and improving lives.

Skills required

Although some specific skills may be helpful, many are gained or developed through doing collaborative research. The key to a successful community-university participatory research partnership often lies more in the motivation, attitudes and personal qualities of the participants.

There are, however, **generic** skills which are particularly useful to university participants during a collaborative research process, including the ability to adapt, communicate clearly, manage and meet expectations and negotiate and assess group and partnership dynamics and processes.

Generic research skills applicable to co-inquiry research

Ability to adapt: The collaboration may not progress as initially expected, especially when a number of individuals and groups are involved with different agendas and issues. Therefore, the ability to adapt to the 'unexpected' is a key skill in order to respond to the changes that may occur during any stage of the research.

Ability to communicate clearly: It is important to be able to communicate clearly to a wide variety of people and groups that may comprise people from different backgrounds who are used to different terminology and jargon. The ability to speak and write – as communication may be by email or letters – in a jargon-free manner is a key skill so as to include all participants. The ability to listen to other participants and take on board their perspectives is also a key skill so as not to privilege some voices over others.

Ability to manage and meet expectations: In most co-inquiry research there will be someone, most likely from the University, who is the main facilitator. Each of the participants will have entered into the collaboration with expectations, therefore a key skill is to be able to manage expectations by making sure the aims, objectives and outcomes are clearly identified at the beginning to reduce the risk of disappointment and/or disillusionment. If clear aims, objectives and outcomes have been established at the start of the research collaboration and they are adapted if necessary (due to unexpected changes) with full cooperation and agreement of participants, it should be possible to meet expectations.

Ability to negotiate and assess group/partnership dynamics and processes: The ability to work with people from different backgrounds and often with different interests and agendas is another key skill. The important components of group/partnership working as university participants in a collaborative research project are detailed above, but, in addition, it is important to be able to think of others – to empathise with their perspectives (even if you disagree) and be respectful.

Specific co-inquiry skills:

There are **specific** skills we have identified and overall these contribute to an ability to work collaboratively:

- Some skills in the participatory research methodology to be used. For students and others new to the process, this may initially require access to texts and exemplars and to good supervision from a tutor.
- Ability to assess commonalities and differences in values and interests.
- Ability to maintain a professional yet friendly and approachable persona.
- Ability to recognise and deal with emotional responses such as distress, anger.
- Ability to recognise and deal with chaotic situations such as disruptive, loud or overbearing personalities.
- Ability to encourage the involvement of people who tend to be more passive or quiet. It is helpful to use various techniques other than spoken dialogue, e.g. small group or pair working, post-it notes or participatory diagramming.
- Ability to negotiate institutional research ethics procedures and to work with the unique ethical challenges that can arise in participatory research (see Manzo and Brightbill, 2001).
- Ability to analyse and interpret data in different formats in collaboration with other participants. This may include not only interview transcripts, but also charts, photos, diagrams or video.

How to do it

There is not one way to do co-inquiry. However, the approach does have some core components that are common in community-university participatory research partnerships:

Building a co-inquiry partnership

Find a community partner: Community partners may be already known to you as you may have an existing research relationship or know someone or an organisation with whom you would like to work collaboratively. Community partners may approach the university with research ideas. Individuals or units within the university that have a role to facilitate these links are useful for connecting the 'right' academic with community partners. This facilitation role might be performed by 'engagement leads' in departments or specialist research centres committed to community-university participatory research partnerships, such as the Centre for Social Justice and Community Action at Durham University.

Identify a research topic: Identify an area or issue of common interest that you want to research together. This could be a particular issue – for example, a local food network, older person friendly neighbourhoods, low-carbon communities or a range of issues around a common theme such as social justice. Some of the case studies that were developed as part of this co-inquiry project offer examples. These can be viewed at **www.beaconnortheast.com**.

Establish the research aims and objectives: In collaboration with your research partner(s), establish the research aims, objectives and possible outcomes early on. By being open and clear in the early stages (and throughout), it reduces the risk of ambiguity and overly high and ambitious expectations.

Identify beneficial outcomes: Establish desired outcomes that are mutually beneficial to the community and university – ensuring these are designed to bring about positive change and are as realistic as possible.

Establish clear roles for those involved: It is useful to consider what are the different area of skills, knowledge and expertise in the partnership and how each role will add value to the research. It is usually helpful for one or two people to take on the role of chair(s) or facilitator(s) of the group to ensure smooth running. Having co-chairs (one from the university and one from the community) helps ensure greater collaboration. It can be useful for another person to take on the role of coordinating meetings, booking venues, catering and generally being the liaison person.

Doing the research

Co-designing the research: The research design should be agreed by all parties and include agreement about who will manage and carry out the research.

Seeking funding: If funding is required for the research, because it is a partnership between the community and university this may open up the possibility of seeking funding from trusts and foundations as well as UK Research Councils or other organisations that fund research.

Seeking ethics approval: There will be specific university/departmental ethical guidelines and procedures to follow in order to achieve ethics approval. This may also include another body if the research is health-related, for example.

Setting up research training: If people are new to research it may be necessary to set up research training and support.

Establishing regular progress meetings: Set up processes to reflect periodically on the progress of the research and to establish action points collaboratively.

Analysing and interpreting the data: It is ideal if all participants are involved in analysing and interpreting the data. It is helpful to have an experienced researcher to facilitate this and record the group efforts.

Writing up the findings: Often it is easier for one person to write up the findings in the first instance and then circulate to all the participants for comments/editing ideas. This process can be repeated as many times as necessary, so that all parties involved are happy with the final version. Another way is to divide up the sections so that those with the most experience in a particular area write up the findings and then circulate to all participants.

Sustaining the co-inquiry partnership

Once the research is underway, there are a few ways to help sustain the momentum of all those involved. This is especially important if the research is meant to last for several years, but is equally important for shorter projects.

Keeping focused: It is inevitable that participatory research partnerships involve a number of meetings in order to discuss progress and next steps. It is useful to produce an agenda for each meeting to demonstrate clearly to all partners the focus and direction. This also ensures that each partner's input is acknowledged.

Opening spaces of communication: Maintain communication with and between all the participants by face-to-face meetings, email and phone to keep the momentum going – for example, send written notes (including any action points) shortly after the meeting; ensure the venues suit most people; use online tools to arrange times (e.g. doodle calendar, which is free); provide clear information about the venues; and include travel and parking details as well as telephone numbers.

Meeting expectations: Establish what the participants' expectations are and at intervals during the research process reflect upon these to find out if they have changed. Keep promises!

Disseminating the research

Research produced as part of a community-university participatory research partnership has the potential to be disseminated more widely than through the usual academic fora (although these are equally important).

Academic audiences: The traditional academic channels for disseminating research include conferences, journal articles, workshops and seminars. Where possible, these are also opportunities for non-academic participants to offer presentations – enabling the sharing of learning across boundaries and the hearing of voices that might otherwise be absent.

Non-academic audiences: The non-academic partners will have their own networks for dissemination in their particular field. This provides an opportunity to spread the research findings in a variety of formats – for example, case studies, short guides, reports – each written in an accessible style, perhaps published on the web.

Co-authoring: It is important to acknowledge all the participants in published materials and name all the contributing authors.

What it can be used for

The co-inquiry approach to community-based research can be used to explore themes of common interest by a variety of groups such as community and voluntary organisations, universities, public sector bodies and professional, academic and practitioner organisations.

In particular, it can be used for disseminating information, working towards transformative social change and widening networks/broadening horizons as outlined below.

Information

The co-inquiry approach can be useful for gathering and sharing knowledge, expertise and experiences relating to a particular topic or issue. In this way, the research and the results themselves are useful in providing information about the approach **and** a topic/ issue. This approach ensures that the research draws on a wide range of knowledge, which involves experts by experience – that is, there is appreciation of people's experience and their life world, which is not tokenistic.

Transformation

The co-inquiry approach can be 'transformational'. This may comprise internal transformations of the individuals and/or groups involved, and/or external transformation of the broader community, as outlined below:

Internal transformations: The co-inquiry approach can be used as a way of developing empowerment amongst participants (as a group or individuals). It can change relationships by challenging and reconfiguring participants' perceptions of themselves and others. It can help people gain an appreciation of their own knowledge, which can lead to greater self-esteem.

External transformations: The co-inquiry approach can help communities if there are positive outcomes for those involved. As the research aims are aligned with issues/topics of interest and importance to community groups, these can strengthen the practical and social change outcomes. This approach can also help in altering perceptions of university research, as it changes the way people do business – avoiding the 'big circus comes to town' research ethos. Therefore, it can improve the image and reputation of university students and staff.

Widening networks/broadening horizons

This approach can provide an opportunity to work with new people and organisations (or existing ones) in an innovative way. Thus it provides an opportunity for students and academics to widen the 'traditional' academic networks and share learning with a variety of sectors (e.g. voluntary, charitable, policy, local authorities, community groups). Common ground (shared interests and values) is an excellent starting point and this approach can lead to mutual benefits and expanded horizons for all parties involved.

Cost and time requirements

In addition to the usual costs of a research project, which might include the researchers' and supervisors' or project managers' salaries, additional costs need to be factored in for community partners' time and expenses, venues (if outside the university), catering, travel to and from meetings and the cost of transcription if required. Organising venues, catering and keeping all the participants informed can take time. It may be best (if funding allows) to appoint an administrative/ secretarial assistant. If applying for funding, it is important to build in the costs of the time and expenses of community participants for whom engagement with the research is not part of a paid job.

Things to bear in mind – top tips

Build on existing relationships: Getting a co-inquiry community-based research project off the ground can be difficult – it requires funding, partners and commitment. Therefore, it is much easier and often has mutual benefits if participants can build upon an existing relationship. Not only do people know each other but they have probably worked together before because of a mutual interest in an issue and may share common values and principles.

Time and energy: Building relational networks and seeking connectedness between what may be disparate groups in the community requires researchers to have significant time and energy, as the co-inquiry approach includes many one-to-one conversations and group meetings.

Dynamics of group/partnership working: Working in a group/partnership on a research project that involves community partners and the university can result in mutually beneficial, supportive partnerships. Yet it is helpful to consider the dynamic nature of working in groups and partnerships, as these are often complex, change over time and may involve multiple community partners (e.g. residents' associations, local authorities, local organisations). Diversity is good, but for researchers it can be difficult to meet and manage the hopes and expectations of all parties involved (and different agendas/issues). Furthermore, research partnerships can be limited by practical matters such as funding, as well as issues of multiple identities and trust.

'Researcher' identity: It is important to recognise the role of an 'academic researcher' may be more fluid when engaged in co-inquiry research, and at times academics may have to move between roles and become, for example, community activists, teachers or learners. There is the need for flexibility to move between roles according to the situation, but there are also issues of academic researchers 'going native' or community partners becoming 'too academic'.

Spaces of communication: Communication is vital in co-inquiry research and this involves making universities and academics accessible to facilitate free-flowing communication both ways. This can mean designating a person, place, phone number, email address, website, blog and so on to encourage exchanges. Making the university and academics accessible is a good way of challenging stereotypes. At meetings (and in any communication exchanges) the University and community partners must be aware that the partners may have different ways of talking and operating. In particular, it is best to set ground rules about the use of jargon early on. Find common interests, then engage with clarity and ensure that people feel empowered to speak up and hold each other to account if necessary.

Defining and refining research objectives: It is useful to establish a working agreement and define clear objectives from the start of the project. It is also helpful to be clear about expectations of each partner and to refine or renew the working agreement regularly.

Ethical challenges: It is important to consider how you are going to share power and leadership roles fairly and respect different expertise (including expertise by experience). Institutional ethical guidelines assume that research is predictable and view knowledge as a commodity with the aim of 'doing no harm' rather than 'doing good'. With co-inquiry and related participatory approaches to research there are issues of confidentiality and anonymity to consider – for example, anonymity may not be possible or even desired, especially if the research results in controversial social action.

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Resources

The co-inquiry case studies can be downloaded from the Beacon North East (Beacon NE) website **www.beaconnortheast.com**.

A co-inquiry literature review can be downloaded from the Beacon North East (Beacon NE) website **www.beaconnortheast.com**.

John Heron: South Pacific Centre for Human Inquiry
www.human-inquiry.com/jhcvpubl.htm

Peter Reason: Home Page
www.peterreason.eu

NCCPE Guide: Working with local communities
www.publicengagement.ac.uk/how/guides/working-with-local-communities

NCCPE Guide: working in partnership with others
www.publicengagement.ac.uk/how/guides/working-partnership

NCCPE Guide: Easy ways to get started
www.publicengagement.ac.uk/how/guides/easy-ways-get-started

Newcastle City Council 'Open Minds': a Guide to Engaging Communities
www.newcastle.gov.uk/wwwfileroot/cxo/consultation/Engagementtoolkit.pdf

This is a useful and clear guide and although the focus is on engagement rather than co-inquiry research there are sections which most co-inquiry projects would find useful:

- What is engagement?
- Why engage?
- Using this guide
- First things first
- Planning
- Including people
- Making contact
- Engagement techniques
- Devolving decision-making to communities
- Some practicalities
- After the consultation
- Engagement checklist

www.researchtoolkit.org
This is a useful USA-based website comprising 'better tools for multi-site research'.

Acknowledgements

We are grateful to members of the Beacon NE Co-inquiry Action Research (CAR) group (comprising academics from Newcastle and Durham Universities and community partners) for their contribution to the ideas expressed in this guide: Sarah Aldridge, Andrea Armstrong, Sarah Banks, Mark Booth, Greg Brown, Kathleen Carter, Maurice Clarkson, Lynne Corner, Audley Genus, Rose Gilroy, Tom Henfrey, Kate Hudson, Norman Mackie, Catherine Purvis-Mawson, Robert Moss, Dermot Roddy, Andrew Russell and Anna Wraith.

The Beacons for Public Engagement are funded by the Higher Education Funding Council for England and Research Councils UK, in association with the Wellcome Trust, the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales and the Scottish Funding Council.