

Opportunities and challenges
for participatory approaches to
researching social security
benefits

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1. What is participatory research.
2. Challenges of participatory research.
3. Current project – experiences of claimants with a disability or long-term health condition.

1. What is participatory research.

Participatory research methods are geared towards planning and conducting the research process with those people whose life-world and meaningful actions are under study (Bergold and Thomas 2012)

- A cluster of related approaches – participatory research, action research, participatory action research (PAR) and many others.
- In ‘action research’ the emphasis is on action and impact; in ‘participatory research’ it’s on participation ; in PAR it’s on both
- ‘Action research’ does not necessarily include participation, and ‘participatory research’ does not necessarily include ‘action’ (hence the various terms)

- Linked to other terms describing projects/initiatives at the interface of research and practice:
 - Praxis (Freire 1970 [2018]) and praxeological learning
 - Transdisciplinarity (e.g. von Wehrden et al. 2018) Translational research/knowledge translation (e.g. Jull, Giles and Graham 2017)
 - Knowledge **‘co-creation’** and **‘co-production’** (Polk [ed.] 2015)
 - **‘Co-production’** (of services, public policies...) (e.g. Parsfield et al. [eds.] 2015)
- Many of these terms especially prevalent in health research, international development, etc. Relatively newer in social (security) policy.

Participatory research:

- Is an approach to research in which the researcher and the researched **co-develop** research strategies...
- That aim at **address the limits** of traditional research (in terms of knowledge access/impact/power relations)...
- By **transforming the relation** between researcher and researched...
- Through giving a more **active role to the researched population**.

Participatory action research conceptualised as **a means “to replace an ‘extractive’, model of social research** with one in which the benefits of research accrue more directly to the communities involved” (Kindon, Pain and Kesby 2007: 1)

- While PAR is becoming an increasingly established paradigm across the social and environmental sciences. In broad terms, as a cyclical process PAR involves researchers and participants:
 - **Identifying** an issue or situation in need of change;
 - **Initiating** research that draws on capabilities and assets to precipitate relevant action;
 - **Reflecting** on, and learning from, this action and proceeding to a new **cycle of research/action/reflection** ;
 - **Drawing – in a methodologically open and non-prescriptive way –** on both more traditional and more innovative research methodologies to develop context-specific methods to facilitate these cycles (after Kindon, Pain and Kesby 2007: 1-2)

What do participants collaborate on?

Task	
Research Problem	Deciding what needs to be researched
Research Design	Deciding how the research is going to be conducted (methods, cases, sampling...)
Data Collection	Deciding who collects the data
Data Interpretation	Deciding who produces the analysis of the data
Writing/ representation	Deciding who writes the results, and whether other other forms of communication/ representation are used
Dissemination	Deciding who contributes to the dissemination of the research

While within PAR, collaboration at all stages of reflection and action is ideal, it is important to recognise that levels of participation by co-researchers and participants may vary significantly. ([Kindon, Pain and Kesby](#) 2007: 15)

Within context of social security policy research...

“there are particular possibilities that could be realised if more academics consider including participatory research principles within their research designs. At the same time, a greater role could be played by the academic community in creating and supporting opportunities for the voices of those with direct experiences of poverty to be better and more widely heard.” (Patrick, 2019)

- Challenging traditional power dynamics.
- Challenging traditional ideas of ‘expertise’.
- Examples in article describe – credibility of including voices; challenge of achieving influence; complexity of navigating ethics; power and potential to upset taken-for-granted ‘common sense’.

2. Challenges and opportunities of participatory research.

Summary of key areas from multi-disciplinary literature review



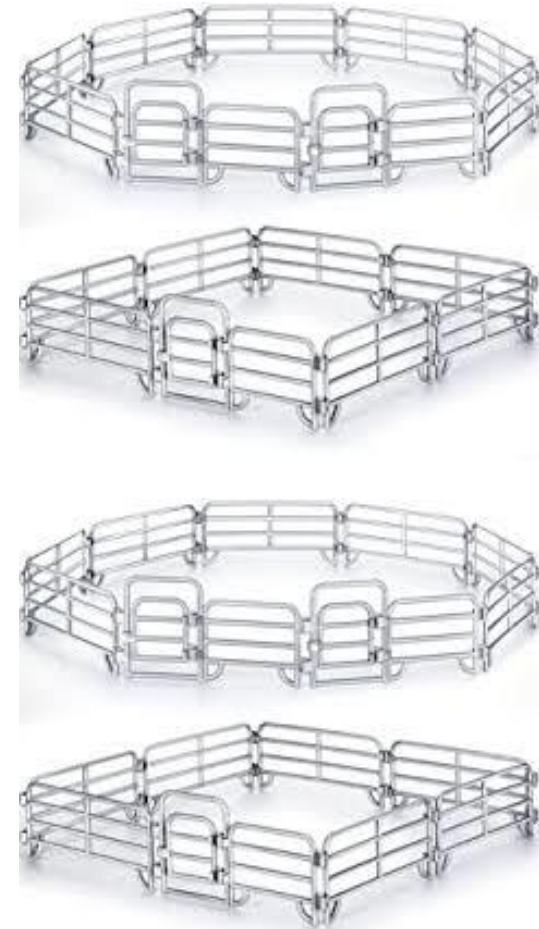
Challenge of 'decoration vs. 'rock bottom truth'



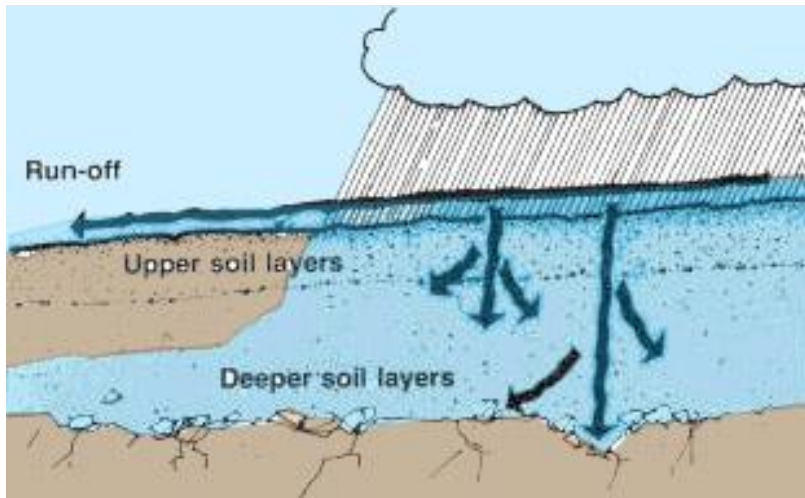
- The challenge – on the one hand lived experience data is taken and presented decoratively alongside other forms of 'hard data'. On the other, it is taken as accessing some unvarnished, essential 'truth'.
- Challenge stems from – epistemological issues (what is prized, prioritised, understood); ecological issues (funding landscape, policy making landscape).

Challenge of successfully challenging power dynamics

- Promise of the ‘participatory turn’.
- Insights from other disciplines – participatory mainstreaming = controlling/ passifying lived experience.
- Problems – epistemological (the need for a developed theory of knowledge); ecological (research funding landscape; research careers).



Challenge of realising imperatives for action



- Realising imperatives for action as an ethical imperative and participant demand.
 - Embedded in participatory thinking.
- Challenges? Epistemological – grounding lived experience insights within wider, more pluralistic use of research evidence.
- Challenges? Ecological – making progress on defining change; and on ‘bottom up’ vs. ‘top down’ theories of change.

3. Current project

Experiences of claimants with a disability or long-term health condition.

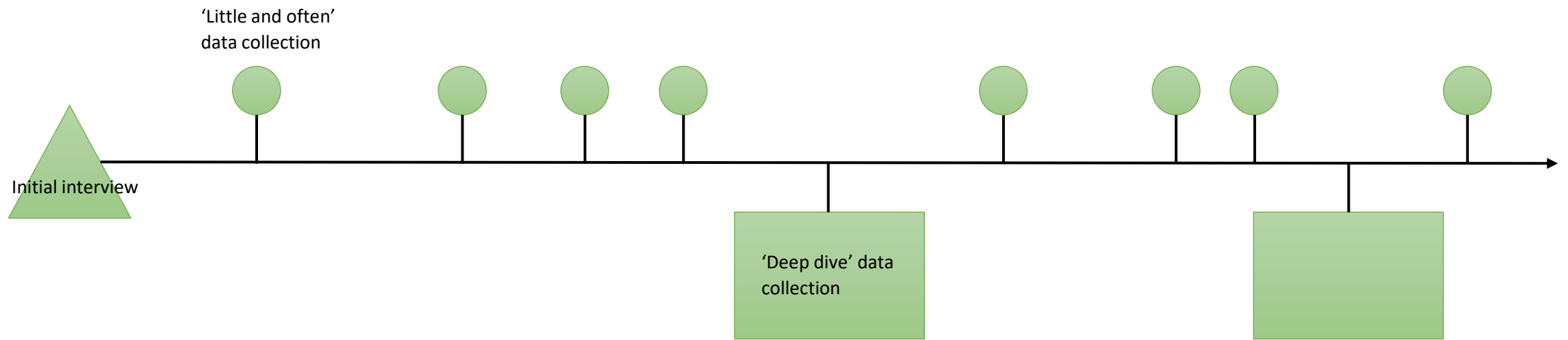
My current research has two interrelated aims:

- (1) create new qualitative research methods fit for our post-pandemic era, and
- (2) produce new insights and solutions on the (dis)functioning of the working-age social security system for key claimant groups.

Commitment to participatory ways of working across the project.

- Small group of working-age social security claimants. Disability or long-term health condition.
- Preliminary phase of participatory methods development. Groups workshops and 1:1 discussions.
- Longitudinal qualitative methods, aimed at gaining depth of insight over time.
- Foreground inclusive practice.
- Substantive and methodological focus developed iteratively across project through participatory means.
- Initial thematic focus (next c. 3-6 months): Cost of living – food shopping; Cost of living – utilities; Navigating the claims process (forms, information, support, etc.); Assessments (for health related benefits); Technology and claiming; Family life and claiming (including caring responsibilities); DWP and trust.

Data collection design



Thank you for your time and attention.

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