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**Title: Using Community based research within regeneration. The role of the researcher within community based approaches; exploring experiences within Objective 1 South Yorkshire**

**Abstract**

Much attention has been given in recent years to involving community members in research within a number of fields including community development. Indeed, there is a large amount of literature outlining what this process involves and describing the benefits and problems of doing such research across a range of contexts. There has also been some discussion of the different approaches that can be applied under the umbrella of community based research and their relationship to the outcomes associated with both successful and positive community development. Yet very little attention has been paid to the actual experiences of these lay researchers involved in community based research in relation to their roles. The nature of the researcher role as work thus requires critical consideration. This article examines the role of lay researchers within four different approaches to community based research used for the development of community action plans within the Objective 1, South Yorkshire context. This article reports upon differential roles and types of work in relation to both experiences and outcomes. The article therefore addresses what these different researcher roles tell us about community based research and outlines the implications in relation to community development.

**Introduction**

Since the 1960s, when community development work was recognized as a tool to address social problems (Community Development Project 1969), through to current times, governments have often highlighted the need for public participation (Jones and Jones 2002). The previous New Labour government employed the policy discourse of

citizen involvement by promoting 'bottom-up' approaches (Waddington 2003), leading to individuals from economically and socially disadvantaged neighbourhoods actively researching their areas and conducting service evaluations (see Neighbourhood Renewal Unit 2002, Brodie 2003). Indeed, the current coalition government is also emphasizing the concept of 'Big Society' in which participation and volunteering in any form are viewed as inherently positive. The concept of Big Society links to community based research via lay people contributing to their own communities through research processes and findings in a voluntary capacity and as a result of research findings from such approaches feeding into service changes and delivery. Furthermore, given that traditional research approaches have faced critique when applied in community settings (Holman 1987, Boutilier, Mason and Rootman 1997) and lay research has gained more currency and respectability (Entwistle et al 1998), community based research as an approach fits within contemporary policy discourses in that it is used to recognize and draw upon local knowledge via the involvement of community members (Flicker et al 2007).

Other discussions within the contemporary policy arena have focused upon addressing both social inequities and health inequalities, creating the space for the use of lay research because globally there is a large amount of literature arguing that such approaches are an important strategy to effectively address social disparities (Ansley and Gaventa 1997; Flicker 2005). In simple terms community based research as an approach is rooted within the community, serves the interests of the community, encourages community participants to be involved and finally is geared towards achieving social change (Green et al 1997, Schlove 1997). This emphasis upon social change fits clearly with the ethos of community development work, which is also about collectively bringing about such change and promoting social justice via working with communities. Both community development and community based research are

concerned with identifying the needs of communities and then taking specific action in relation to these needs. Hence, community based research can be described as an important part of the process of doing community development work (Barr 2005).

Community researchers have been afforded attention in the literature in many ways, with existing discussions focusing upon community based research approaches showing how they are defined (see Sclove 1997, Minkler and Wallerstein 2003, Hills and Mullett 2000), the context and rationale for their usage (see Israel et al 1998) and both the benefits and problems of their application (see Flicker et al 2007). Community based researcher roles have also been linked to empowerment in that the approach rests upon the principle of empowerment; builds upon strengths and resources within communities and promotes a co-learning and empowering process. Thus, participants adopting community researcher roles arguably gain knowledge, skills, capacity and power (Israel et al 1998). However, there has been little discussion of the variety of researcher roles adopted and the resulting impact at the level of the individual despite recognition that as a tool community based research is varied in how it is applied (Hills and Mullett 2000, Israel et al 1998). Those working within lay researcher roles need to be considered in terms of the nature of the work that they perform. Hence, there is a need for research to pay attention to 'the experiences of and impact on the community researchers themselves' (Newall & South 2009: 70). Carlisle and Cropper (2009) highlight the role of community researchers as demanding, intense and difficult to separate from everyday life. South et al (2012) also call for attention to be given to the difference between formal and informal roles, as well as spectrums of participation along which researcher roles are located. Thus, more analysis is needed particularly in relation to the unquestioned assumptions reported about the positive experiences of lay researchers within numerous studies (Newall & South 2009, see Rowe 2006, Kai and Hedges 1999, Rhodes et al 2000). It may also be the case that there has

simply been a lack of consideration of the issues associated with the personal implications of working within a lay researcher role (Newall and South 2009).

Hence, this article will discuss the experiences of those working as community researchers community within the context of the Objective 1 regeneration programme based in South Yorkshire from 2002-2008, focusing upon the different researcher roles adopted across several areas and the reported outcomes of this process articulated through the accounts of the researchers themselves.

Objective 1 was a programme set up by the European Union to provide investment funds to help reduce inequalities in social and economic conditions, within and between member countries. The context for its development was the continuing pace of globalization and the growth of weightless economies, the enlargement of the European Union and consolidation of its agenda; and changing UK policies. Objective 1 South Yorkshire was one of three such programmes in the UK alongside Cornwall and Merseyside. All programmes were targeted at areas where the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) per head of the population was seventy five per cent or less of the European average at the time of the programme. South Yorkshire qualified for Objective 1 funding because it had a weak and under-performing economy. Therefore, Objective 1 was established with the aim of tackling this decline in the economy through regeneration activity. The scope of the Objective 1 Programme was to deliver social and economic regeneration in order to reverse these trends. The effectiveness of the programme was demonstrated through economic improvements, the creation of new jobs and an improved regional image. However, it must be noted that Objective 1 came at the right time, as the intervention was during a period of economic growth (Georgiou 2008).

### **The Objective 1 Study: Context**

This article is based upon the regeneration activities encompassed within the South Yorkshire Programme under Priority Four, the investment made in people, skills and communities to build neighbourhood strength and reintegration. The programme team implemented a measure of 'tools for integration' which aimed to give people the skills needed to participate in and lead local economic renewal. This was achieved in a number of ways including through the provision of opportunities for communities to commission innovative training and development opportunities, including research and evaluation. Secondly, the measure of 'building neighbourhood strength' was used to give local communities the capacity to contribute to their own development. These aims, that were reflective of the social inclusion discourse of the time, were primarily met by the development of local action plans and partnerships, enabling local people to be actively involved in regeneration. Thus, community partnerships developed action plans detailing their own local development priorities. These plans were informed and evidenced via community based research. Thus the action plans drew upon community based research findings gathered through a variety of approaches to document local issues, potential solutions and maps of community need. Thus community researchers had specific roles to perform within the context of objective 1 South Yorkshire, working to meet the aims of the organisation itself whilst serving the interests of their communities as directed through local partnerships. Completion of an action plan was the key to unlocking ring-fenced money for each geographically defined community partnership, to facilitate both community and economic development. Researchers engaged in this process were included in the study to explore their experiences and give voice to their perceptions.

## **Methods**

The overall research aim of this study was to examine the pitfalls and benefits of applying community based research and evaluation within social regeneration, specifically focusing upon the context of Objective 1 South Yorkshire. A qualitative research approach was adopted for this study as it is appropriate for capturing people's views, feelings and practice as well as their experience and the kind of atmosphere and context in which they act and respond (Wisker 2001). This approach is most appropriate for examining researcher's perceptions about their roles for a number of reasons. Firstly, the very principles that underpin community based research as an approach recognise the multiple and socially constructed realities that constitute research findings (Hills and Mullet 2000). A qualitative approach is thus most likely to capture a range of realities and experiences. Secondly, as community based approaches aim to reflect individual experiences, understandings and meanings of the world (Hills and Mullet 2000), qualitative research is more suited to gaining access to people's understandings through the narrative descriptions which they provide. Hence, the adoption of a qualitative approach here facilitated an in depth exploration of the researcher roles and their personal experiences (Legard, Keegan and Ward 2003) via individual interviews. Creating the space for researchers to discuss their roles in depth is important as little is currently known in relation to the individual impacts of assuming a researcher role within one's own community (Newall and South 2009).

There were 40 community partnerships across South Yorkshire involved in developing action plans and within each of these areas researchers were working to gather data to develop the plans. 8 areas were sampled as detailed case studies from which to illustrate and compare researcher experiences by gathering information from those directly involved in community based research, with key researchers and support workers in each case study area identified and then interviewed. 25 semi-structured interviews were conducted which explored differential researcher roles across the 8 sampled areas. The interview schedule included the following questions:

1. Tell me about the consultation carried out within the community action plan process – give me a general overview
2. Tell me about your involvement within the research process
3. Do you think that being involved in such a research project had any effect on your community spirit?
4. Tell me about how you were supported through the process of the research
5. Let's discuss other areas in terms of the research that they have done and how this had an effect on your area
6. Tell me about how the research findings were disseminated
7. Talk to me about the impact that the research has had locally
8. Tell me about any problems that you faced within the research
9. Is there anything else that you would like to add?

These questions were used within all 8 case study areas. Indeed, detailed case studies are useful for researchers wishing to explore (Stake 2000) hence this examination of several cases facilitates detail, perspective and comparison. Qualitative researchers use comparison as a means to analyze findings (Mason 1996) and several commentators argue that comparative analysis is often the basis for developing sound theoretical conclusions (Hammersley, Gomm and Foster 2000) hence this methodological approach. However, a participatory research approach was not adopted with the researcher positioned as an initiator, consultant or collaborator with community members within their research fields. Community based research was



simply independently studied to both gain understanding and explore researcher experiences.

In personal terms I am connected to this research topic as both a former coalfield community resident and volunteer who worked for a community development project (although not within the geographical locality of the Objective 1 context.) My class background and experience of living in a former mining community left me with the question of whether my status left me as an insider or outsider relative to those being studied. In some interviews my background may have helped with data generation but in others it may have hindered.

### **Types of community research within the Objective 1 context**

There were four different types of community based research used within the Objective 1 context, when the action plans were being developed. Therefore, a continuum of community based research approaches was developed to facilitate the investigation of these approaches. The continuum was based upon control, involvement and participation within the empirical work of community based research. There were four clear types of research existing along this continuum within this context. There are no boundaries existing between the different types of community based research and they are interrelated. Given that four types of community based research are evident within this study, it is arguable that there may be other types of community based research occurring within different contexts. The four approaches discussed here are not exclusive to the Objective 1 context and are not the only approaches available for use in practice.

These types of research consist of type 1, a grass roots research approach characterized by local community members controlling the entire research process and fully participating in the empirical work. Type 2, the grass roots contract approach, involved local community members simply carrying out the data collection aspect of the research process, therefore, volunteers controlled less and participated less in the empirical aspect of the work. Type 3, the in house contract approach, consisted of staff actually carrying out the research so there was less control by volunteers and no

empirical participation by volunteers. Finally, type 4, the out sourcing contract approach, was made up of hired external professional help brought into the local area to undertake the required consultation. Again there was less control and no participation in the empirical side of the work. These four types of community based research are derived from working with the literature and specifically paying attention to control and participation within community based research as well as the initial exploratory stages of the fieldwork. Table 1 provides an overview of the researcher roles that relate to each of these research types.

### **Working in a researcher role**

This study found that exploring researcher roles means gaining an understanding of what these actually involve. Discussions of researcher roles within the current literature refer to these as if they are uniform however, across the community partnerships sampled in this study, four different types of roles were adopted. These differential roles were defined in relation to the level of control held by lay researchers as well as the type of participation they had within the empirical work. Typologies of community participation have been long developed (see Arnstein 1969) but have not been used to analyse researcher roles. In this context there were clear differences in researcher roles and the type of empirical work conducted.

These four researcher roles are broadly described in the following table.

**Table 1. Working as a community based researcher; differential roles**

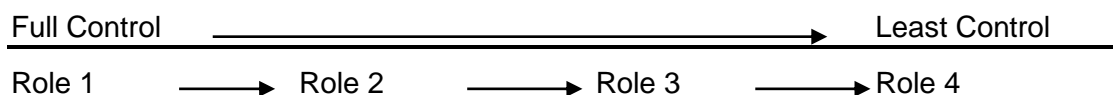
| <b>Type of Research</b>                      | <b>Characteristics of the approach</b>  | <b>Researcher role</b>  |
|--|---|---|
| <b>Type 1<br/>Grassroots volunteer model</b> | <b>Control:</b> Locals<br><b>Design:</b> Locals<br><b>Data Collection:</b> Locals<br><b>Analysis:</b> Locals<br><b>Writing Up:</b> Locals | The researcher role involved complete control over the empirical work and the process by local researchers who designed research, carried it out, analysed the data, wrote the report and |

|  |   |  |
|--|---|--|
|  |   | disseminated the findings. Those adopting role 1 maintained full control over the entire research process from its inception to its completion   |
| <b>Type 2<br/>Grassroots contract model</b>  | <b>Control:</b> Workers/Consultant<br><b>Design:</b> Workers/Consultant<br><b>Data Collection:</b> Locals<br><b>Analysis:</b> Locals, Workers/Consultant<br><b>Writing Up:</b> Workers/Consultant | The role of local researchers was to complete the data collection aspect of the research, in either a voluntary capacity or as paid workers. Paid workers and consultants designed the process, analysed the findings, wrote reports and retained overall control. The researcher role here involved data collection, and in some instances some basic analysis. Role 2 participants had less control because they only carried out the data collection aspect of the research but did not organise or design the overall research strategy.   |
| <b>Type 3<br/>in-house contract model</b>    | <b>Control:</b> Workers<br><b>Design:</b> Workers<br><b>Data Collection:</b> Workers<br><b>Analysis:</b> Workers<br><b>Writing Up:</b> Workers  | Researchers in this approach were paid workers employed within the local area carried. They were lay researchers in most cases with little experience and their role involved carrying out consultation and controlling the research process, often with limited volunteer input. Those adopting role 3 were paid professionals carrying out research on behalf of the community but they were still lay researchers, having little or no research knowledge or experience despite their positions. They had less control as they were tasked as employees of partnerships to conduct the necessary research to facilitate the development of the community action plan. |
| <b>Type 4<br/>Out sourced contract model</b> | <b>Control:</b> Locals, existing staff and consultancy staff<br><b>Design:</b> Consultant<br><b>Data Collection:</b> Consultant   | External professional help was brought into the area to undertake the data collection. Local people paid the   |

|  |  |  |
|--|--|--|
|  | <p><b>Analysis:</b> Consultant<br/> <b>Writing Up:</b> Consultant, locals and existing staff</p> | <p>consultants and were in effect their employer but they had limited control in terms of the actual research; assuming a managerial role rather than a researcher role. Those adopting role 4 had the least control in relation to the empirical work because although they contracted and managed consultants and as such were stakeholders, the consultants designed the research process, carried out data collection and were external to the area.</p> |
|--|--|--|

The typology below is a diagrammatic representation of the continuum of researcher control and participation within the empirical process and so represents the different researcher roles found within the Objective 1 context.

**Figure 1. The continuum of researcher roles**



**Different approaches and different outcomes; implications for community development**

Unsurprisingly undertaking different types of research and adopting differential roles resulted in a variety of experiences reported by participants. Thus, role 1 (the grass-

roots role) created individual benefits such as research experience, higher levels of involvement in the process from the beginning until completion and specific skills development in relation to research.

“For me it has been an individual learning curve from my point of view so it has been well worthwhile for me and I wanted to do it and it gave me insight”  
**Volunteer, grassroots volunteer role (interview 10)**

“For me...I mean it helped with my confidence and I got good reactions from others so people now know who I am in the area.....I mean they are shouting me and waving and I think who are you and I did the questions in their house so it is good cos I have not been in this area long....” **Paid data collector, grassroots contract role (interview 14)**

“And the skills involved in being a researcher, in writing the questions in learning how to talk to people, the way they answer you know, in the courtesies you need to observe and the way you need to think about your safety and the ethics of it and then the techy bit when you analyse it and when you write it up. All that, to be involved in the whole process, the bag of skills involved is massive....” **Volunteer, grassroots volunteer role (interview 12)**

Comparatively, role 4 (the out-sourced contract role) gave participants contract and management skills. So in relation to community development, all of the approaches result in skills enhancement of some description. However, the partnerships that were most successful at relating community based research to community development work were those who used the researcher role to also build capacity as an outcome of the research in addition to the requirements of the action plan document itself (data gathering).

“That was an interesting process because it was actually the partnership, which was involved with really their first employees. So there were some important processes they went through in terms of interviewing, recruitment and selection. So the consultation actually had lots of other positive things built in... For me the research process was much more, it was integral really I suppose in terms of my work but also the partnership and in terms of the engagement process that was happening between groups, groups working together.”  
**Worker, grassroots volunteer role (interview 22)**

“...was quite positive, it brought together the directors of the organisation and got them working together and thinking together.....it raised our profile if you like because we were out there doing research....” **Worker, grassroots contract role (interview 8)**

This was particularly true of the newly emerging partnerships in which community based research and capacity building were entwined. Community based researchers were employed as part of a capacity building exercise to develop skills amongst partnership members and to enhance partnership structures.

“Well, the partnership gets stronger, its part of the process, partnership members acquire skills.....I know NAME community partnership were walking around with their chests sticking out and saying we did this, the Mayor came, you know, they were all coming out of the woodwork saying can we have a copy of your research, Oh yeah, it was brilliant, wonderful, sense of achievement. .... it is positive strokes, positive strokes...” **Worker supporting all areas (interview 11)**

For example, both areas that employed the grass-roots role (approach 1) used the research process to gain specific skills and experience of development work which resulted in different experiences for those working in researcher roles. This mirrors Carlisle and Cropper’s (2009) analysis of lay researchers which recognises the multiple functions involved in assuming such work. Working as a researcher is not necessarily just about conducting research, even in a lay capacity. It also requires high levels of commitment and is involved.

The different roles and workloads reported in this study reflect varying levels and types of involvement. Across all of the sampled areas a core group of dedicated individuals reported doing the majority of the work whether this was data collection or the recruitment and management of external consultants. Difficulties with involvement were similarly reported across all areas with levels being lower than desired. People were less interested in becoming involved within the out-sourced contract roles than in the grass-roots volunteer roles. This may not necessarily be linked to the differential types of work involved or indeed the roles adopted; it may simply be the case that fewer people were always involved in the activities of the community partnerships in which the research was taking place (see Warwick-Booth, 2007). South et al (2012)

call for analyses of participation to account for its different dimensions especially focusing upon the roles and relationships between different actors. Indeed, this lack of involvement cited here has implications for those working within researcher roles in that they were more onerous as fewer fellow researchers' results in a higher individual workload. Despite this, those who worked as researchers reported positive perceptions about their own involvement acting as a stepping stone to further engagement with community partnerships.

“...but then there are other things that have come up from...once you are involved in one thing you soon get drawn into other things that you see happening and because a lot of the groups and things that are happening all link into each other.” **Volunteer, grass-roots volunteer role (interview 23)**

“First of all, all of those volunteers still volunteer for ORGANISATION.....”  
**Worker, grass-roots contract role (interview 8)**

“Oh absolutely, at least three quarters of my workers are former volunteers. They have gone on to the management, they have been vice chairs and they now have jobs, which is wonderful.” **Worker, in house contract role (interview 4)**

Moreover, working as a researcher brought benefits according to those who occupied such roles.

### **Benefits associated with working as a researcher**

The literature already describes a range of benefits resulting from the use of community based research (see Kai and Hedges 1999, Rhodes et al 2002, Rowe 2006) and many were similarly reported here.

“.....positive consequences for personal development...confidence.... time management...assertiveness...skills that are transferable...jobs from skills...empowerment...and then the other aspect is ownership, they own the projects. Here are local people being involved in these projects...they can turn around and say they have done it, this is what I have done, it is ours, our village...” **Worker supporting all areas (interview 11)**

“...and if all you have ever done before is clocked on and been told what to do, you know if you treat people with a bit of respect and they call themselves a researcher there is something in there that might give people a little bit of aspiration...There’s something very much about finding a purpose for me, so finding something you are good at, starting to feel good about yourself, being a researcher is quite a, well it is a very responsible job...” **Volunteer, grassroots volunteer role (interview 12)**

“Oh, there are loads! Well for the individual there are benefits in terms of increased confidence, increases in knowledge, often skills that employers are looking for as well. .... And the networking and the sharing of good practice that goes on in between different organisations so you are building capacity for individual groups and organisations so that they can participate in wider regeneration.....I think you do see a lot of examples of progress. I mean I know people who used to sit in meetings and never speak and you see them at meetings now and they are articulate, they make decisions for their organisations, now they are community leaders, a lot of them have gone into employment, they are different people....” **Objective 1 Stakeholder (interview 16)**

Furthermore, many researchers described the positive aspects of adopting such a role at the level of the community.

“.....quite a few people feel that they are more informed about what is going on in the area and that they know more people, you know walking down the street they talk to more people as they have seen these people when interviewed.” **Worker, grassroots contract role (interview 8)**

“About a third of the cost of the project goes back into the community and it is just one way of an organisation getting money into the community in a practical way and people getting training and references and all sorts of stuff.” **Consultant, grassroots contract role (interview 13)**

Furthermore, the process of carrying out community based research also had an impact upon the development of community work;

“Positive in terms of targets, long-term targets and short-term targets and medium term targets.” **Volunteer Chair, in-house contract role (interview 3)**

“Without the local action plan we wouldn’t have such a clear path in terms of where we are going and what we are trying to do in our community. Certainly it has been a good mechanism to focus this organisation and of course we are a community organisation.” **Worker, in-house contract role (interview 4)**



Adopting a researcher role also facilitated the involvement of individuals in community networks, thus potentially developing social capital.

“.....and I think the fact that we had a couple of quick wins helped us to win over local people and to get them to trust us...Yeah, looking at the bigger picture.....they do.....people’s trust does grow but it is a slow process and you need to build relationships and word of mouth....people want quick wins so they are visible and build onto a bigger picture .they need faith.” **Worker, outsourced contract approach (interview 18)**

“Within the South Yorkshire areas examined, community based research did have a positive impact upon networking and therefore contributed to both the development and continuation of different associational linkages primarily bonding and bridging thus, fostering social capital” (Warwick-Booth 2008; 60). Despite such positive outcomes researchers also highlighted a range of difficulties that they experienced as a result of working within such a capacity.

### **Problems associated with working as a researcher**

Community based research is not a magic solution within local settings because in adopting it as an approach, problems are likely to occur, many of which are already reported in the literature (see . Stringer 1996, Israel et al 1998, Taylor 2000 Schroes et al 2000). The interview data from this study revealed numerous problems faced by individuals working as lay researchers within the Objective 1 setting. Irrespective of the differential roles already highlighted, problems were encountered.

In contrast to the perceptions of increased empowerment reported earlier, some researchers reported feeling that they were lacking in control and that their own lack of experience in terms of using research also compounded the situation.

“Obviously there were things, as I have said that that we realised afterwards that we had done wrong and perhaps if we had more advice and support we

might not have done those things..." **Volunteer, grassroots volunteer role (interview 23)**

"Perhaps they should have done more but in sense where do you stop..... Whatever you do is never ideal, I mean you have got to sort of say this is the best with what we have got..." **Worker, in-house contract role (interview 7)**

Furthermore, in most of the areas those working researchers were new to such roles and consequently described a lack of confidence and experience in their research approaches.

"

"And really agreeing the questionnaire was the most frustrating and hardest bit, it took at least 6 months... They debated the questions and talked about the wording" **Worker, grassroots volunteer role (interview 9)**

This lack of research and regeneration experience created a number of problems.

"Like we might have done a pilot first like that but there was nothing that was insurmountable and I think sometimes you have got to make your own mistakes to learn your own way anyway." **Volunteer, grassroots volunteer role (interview 23)**

"Yeah..if we were doing it again, we would do it differently cos don't forget we were still green and naive when we did this. (name) was a dinner lady and I'd been a shop assistant so all this was new to us." **Volunteer, in house contract role (interview 1)**

"So at that stage we were all very green, we knew nothing.....we had quite a few skills between us as a group but we had no regeneration knowledge." **Volunteer Chair, grassroots volunteer role (interview 24)**

Those who had previously worked within a lay researcher capacity articulated less worries and concerns as they were able to draw upon their existing knowledge and experiences. Many researchers were also faced with practical difficulties in terms of organising the research especially as some of the community partnerships were still at a very early stage of development.

"Really it was a very large area to cover and we didn't have any contact points or premises, which is not really good." **Worker, grassroots volunteer role (interview 9)**

Some of the difficulties associated with implementing community based research could have been minimized if more time had been available for those carrying out the research.

“I think in the end it was, time was a major constraint in terms of a variety of consultation methods..... I think that the short time scale restricted the types of consultation that we were able to do, we would have like to have opportunity to get people together. We would have liked to do some sort of planning for real exercise but basically the time scales just, you know, made it impossible for us to have a range of consultation methods. So I think that in the end restricted the responses....” **Worker, grassroots contract role (interview 8)**

Individuals also discussed the lack of money available to support community based research as a barrier to the process. Researchers also discussed problems in terms of the expectations that were held by funders;

“I think that sort of thing is sometimes down to targets that it is based upon and expectations.” **Worker, in-house contract role (interview 7)**

“The reality was that Objective 1 felt that they had to fix tighter deadlines in order to get the process moved forward and at very short notice we were faced with a deadline of April, right.” **Worker, outsourced contract role (interview 8)**

“In terms of Objective 1.... They would tell us what they wanted and we wouldn't understand, well we thought we had done it you know so there was a lot you know in the early days misunderstandings and fallings out like that...At one point we got to the point where Objective 1 were dictating exactly what they wanted to see in this local action plan...because they were so powerful and because they had the purse strings I think some of the action plan..it has just been done for funders.” **Worker, in-house contract role (interview 4)**

Carlisle and Cropper (2009) discuss how individuals working in researcher roles need to operate as translators between different social worlds as well as balancing the demands of working for an organization and working both with and for their community. This was reflected within the Objective 1 context in comments about partnership working, which was also perceived as difficult by the researchers.

“...and there are other things like you know all of the issues are to do with working together so you have to get all of the partners all involved, community and everything else working together .....because part of this idea of partnership is that more and more they want community to be involved so we all want a rep for this...Although you have got this responsibility you haven't got the power so it is all about that...so you are running around to all of these partnership meetings...and whether that is just for you know community cover...” **Worker, in house contract role (interview 7)**

Finally many researchers reported that there was a lack of impact following their work especially in terms of the wider community's awareness. This was seen as a barrier to success because both individuals and communities were conceptualised as needing to see results by the lay researchers.

“Its like, you know things are on the back burner and nothings actually happening, people get frustrated and downhearted but sometimes it does take time. People who are actually on board with their involvement don't realise sometimes, some of these projects it might take perhaps a fortnight to deliver it but it might take nine months to actually organise it.” **Volunteer Chair, in-house contract role(interview 3)**

“No, not a large impact in terms of the results..I mean there are issues about expectations being raised by consultation and then no real impact. Consultation is fine but people want results.” **Local Vicar, outsourced contract role (interview 20)**

Carlisle and Cropper (2009) similarly report lay researchers working in communities whom themselves were sceptical about the impact of such research. This raises the question of long term impact, which was asked by some of the researchers in this study. Whilst many areas had successfully used lay researchers to gather data and inform their local action plans and had begun to access funding to achieve some of their goals, the funding itself was time limited and therefore left a fundamental question unanswered,

“....how is this process going to be sustained?” Worker, **grass-roots volunteer role (interview 22)**

Whilst the process of maintaining groups of people working in researcher roles on a large scale (as was seen within the Objective 1 context) is not sustainable within a time-limited funding stream, it can be argued that the skills and networks created by those adopting researcher roles are the sustainable legacy and outcome of such work (Carlisle and Cropper 2009). Those working within researcher roles also reported on the creation of bonding social capital through people working together to develop and conduct community based research; social capital is also part of a sustainable legacy.

“...in terms of the engagement process that was happening between groups, groups working together.” Worker, grass-roots volunteer role (interview 22)

“...you get that whole group of people working together.” Worker, grassroots contract role (interview 8)

“I think it was bringing people together, groups together and all working together. I think individually we all would not have got anywhere but through the partnership we did get somewhere...” Volunteer, outsourced contract role (interview 21)

Furthermore, if policy-makers and funding agencies are aware of the difficulties of assuming a lay researcher role when commissioning such approaches they can at least attempt to mitigate against these to improve the experience for those who choose to work in such capacities.

## **Discussion**

Participatory research within the literature is either championed as a positive tool (see Schlove 1997) or questioned because it is problematic and does not meet its ultimate aims of addressing power imbalances (see Wallerstein 1999). This research gives further insight into the adoption of researcher roles and what participating means for those who actually do it. This exploration of the Objective 1 setting found that a number of different researcher roles were adopted and this resulted in a variety of perceived benefits, similarly reported by Newell and South (2009). Problems were also reported, akin to those already described in much of the literature and these were experienced

irrespective of the level of participation of individuals and their differential roles. The reports from the lay researchers also demonstrate that being a researcher within a community development work context is about much more than just research. So the researchers within the Objective 1 context were much more than their label simply suggests. Finally, despite the different roles adopted by the researchers hugely differential outcomes were not articulated by those interviewed. Thus, different types of involvement and work carried out by the lay researchers in this study simply resulted in a differential array of skills being gained, with all developing some level of knowledge and personal development from the adoption of their role. Ultimately this capacity building is an aspect of community development. Thus, the legacy of working within a lay researcher role is both skill development and experience of research and community development work processes. Adopting a researcher role may lead to a legacy of sustainability in community development, as highlighted by a worker;

“Oh yeah, yes, it is part of how community partnerships themselves can become sustainable, and generate income.....When Objective 1, SRB, Coalfield Regeneration Trust, Community Fund etc stop giving us .... It is certainly part of it for community partnerships to set up businesses that will generate funds to sustain the partnership and part of that might be community research, I am sure it can be.” Worker supporting all areas (interview 11).

There may also be a legacy in terms of the quality of the research data gained, and the depth of analysis achieved dependent upon the type of researcher role adopted.

“And I think a community based approach from the point of the people doing the research can be extremely empowering, you know, a real learning experience, but also for the people who are you know participants. I just think you get better results because people are more likely to talk to somebody that they can relate to, that lives in the area than maybe a consultant in a grey suit and a briefcase who has just parachuted in.” Objective 1 Stakeholder (interview 15)

## **Conclusion**

The literature has tended to overlook the links between community based research and social regeneration particularly with regards to exploring researcher roles in such contexts. Indeed there has been limited research, particularly on lay perceptions of

roles (South et al 2012) hence the focus of this article. As this article illustrates, community based research has much to offer social regeneration programmes in terms of being both a useful research and evaluation tool and a mechanism from which to build skills amongst local community members and groups. Indeed, community based research, despite its problems has been argued to help integrate knowledge into strategies to provide both community and social change within marginalised sections of the population (Israel et al 1998). Holman (1987) argues that research is associated with power because it can be the key to information which others do not possess and because the publication of such information can influence decisions about both resources and services. This study in qualitatively exploring community based researcher roles found that several different researcher roles were adopted within the Objective 1 context but that overall working as a community researcher leads to a number of perceived benefits with a clear personal impact for many. However, there were also a number of problems commonly experienced demonstrating the difficulties associated with lay researching. Indeed in adopting researcher roles individuals have to learn about much more than simply researching with power dynamics between a variety of social actors remaining complex.

Despite this many working as lay researchers were positive in their reports about using such approaches. Certainly the approach, irrespective of the role adopted fits with the ethos and the basic goals of community development work because it facilitates involvement. The objective 1 researcher's reported that their involvement in a variety of roles assisted then with the development of numerous skills and self-determination. The approach encourages community members to both work and learn together, although as a process it is complex and often difficult. Certainly involvement as a grassroots researcher was recognised as important in relation to community development work practice by those who had worked in such a capacity.

“I think if you are going to be serious about regenerating communities and taking community development approach to that I think that this is one of the best tools you can use to get people involved in that..... I can't think of anything else apart from community research that will get people involved in that way cos you have to give something of yourself to participate in any way you know, even if it is saying I am worried about drugs on our street you have still got to give something of yourself...and I just think that is really really important..” **Volunteer, grassroots volunteer role (interview 12)**

Here community based research was seen as facilitating active participation and was recognised as a legitimate and useful activity within communities (see Newall and South 2009). The work of lay researchers can develop individual practical skills in community development, gather information and potentially influence social change (Carlisle & Cropper 2009).

Lay researchers also reported that this approach is useful for community development work practice in relation to the creation of goals and targets as well as community level impact such as improved networks. Community based research also encourages active citizenship through gaining involvement, raising interest and allowing research for development work purposes to be driven actively by community members. Community based research can act as a vehicle for individual participation in the life of the community and allow for those working in such roles to build their skills and knowledge, therefore increasing their potential. There is something intrinsically good about using community based research in terms of adding more value for both individuals working in such a capacity and the communities in which they operate. Fundamentally the process allows people to actively do regeneration by working in a capacity which contributes to development rather than being passive recipients.

Indeed, further research in other settings will facilitate more detailed understandings of the impact of adopting a researcher role because there are many countries and contexts in which individuals work as lay researchers. For example, despite most research in this field seeking to involve marginalised communities (Bauld and Judge



2002, Brodie 2003) the role of community researchers in relation to potentially addressing health inequalities is an area under-explored within the literature. Further research should explore this area, as well as the impact that using community researchers has upon the quality of data gained and the depth of analysis achieved; do different researcher roles ultimately result in differential outcomes in relation to the quality of the research?

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