Real Life Methods

Reflections on users and user involvement in community research

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http://www.reallifemethods.ac.uk/research/connected/

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Outline

- A brief overview of the research and methods used

- Reflections on three areas of user involvement in this community research:

  - User's and researcher's expectations from research

  - The spatial and temporal scales researchers and users work at and use research

  - The position of research users relative to the position of researchers

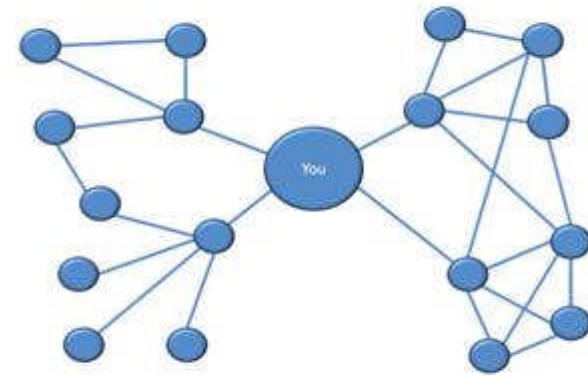# About the Connected Lives Research

A methodological project exploring networks, neighbourhood and communities

- What methods are appropriate for understanding networks, neighbourhoods, and communities? And how can different methods be combined to create different kinds of insights and *real life* accounts of networks, neighbourhoods, and communities?
- How do people understand their networks, neighbourhoods, and communities? And how are networks, neighbourhoods, and communities built, maintained, & disembled in different contexts?
  What are the implications of these findings, particularly for considering interventions to address inequalities, community cohesion, and governance?

Methods & approach

- The traditional way in which we investigate networks: setting the boundaries first and network analysis
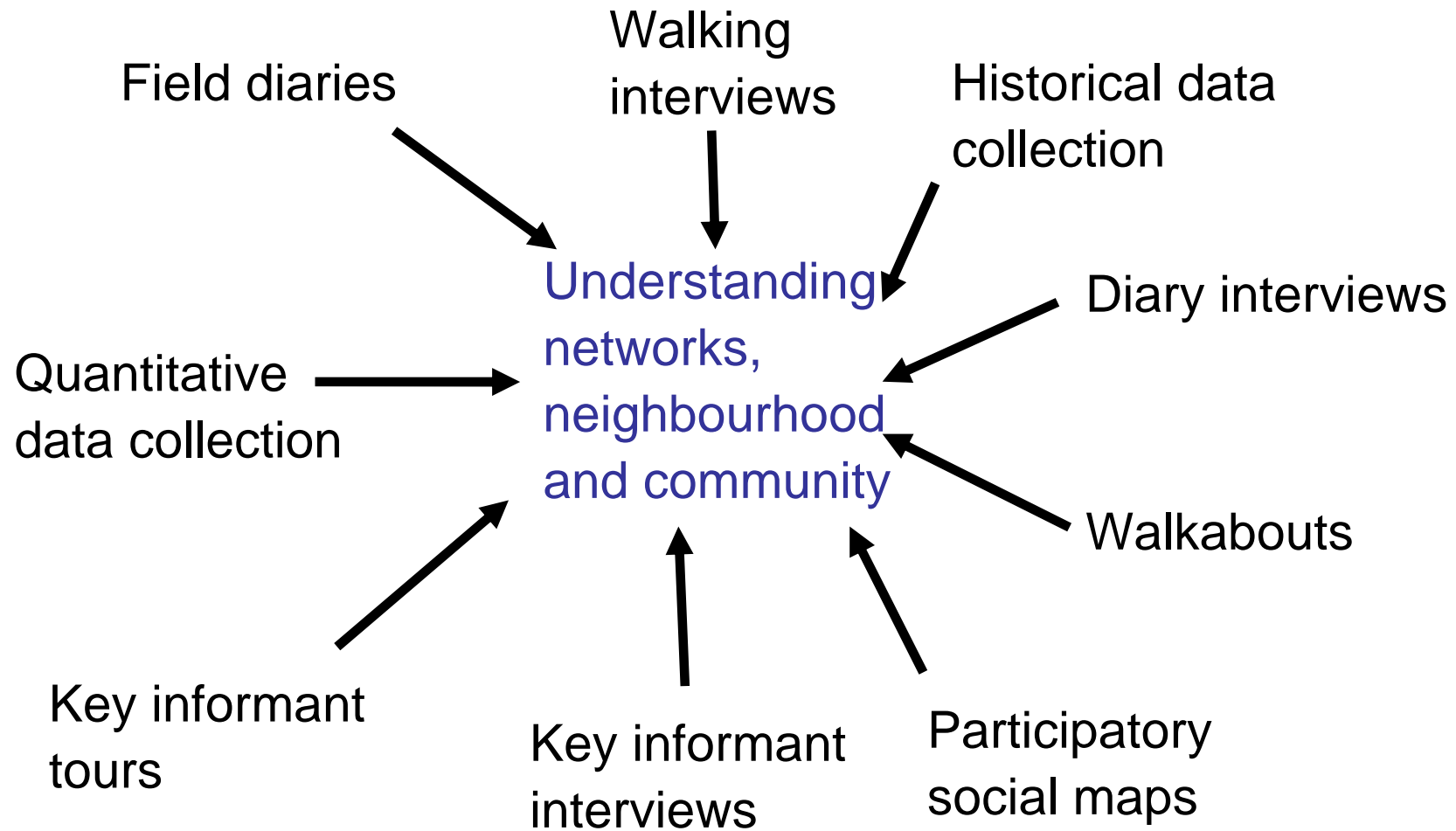
Our method—Qualitatively-driven, mixed-method

- Qualitative methods: visual, narrative, mobile, in place
- Participatory approaches
- Quantitative methods: secondary data, maps

Methods & approach

Walking interviews

Field diaries

Historical data collection

Understanding networks, neighbourhood and community

Diary interviews

Quantitative data collection

Walkabouts

Key informant tours

Key informant interviews

Participatory social maps

The Sample

- We selected the geographical area because of its richly mixed population, evidence of inequality, and other social problems and challenges

- The sample reflects this mixed population of students / BME groups / young professionals / long-term residents

- Methods for accessing hard-to-reach and socially excluded individuals and groups used successfully

- The importance of key-informants

Important features of the method

- A prolonged and deep engagement with people at the research site: residents, community leaders and activists, voluntary and faith organisations

- Interactions with local service providers in the public and voluntary sectors throughout the research

- On-going discussion and dissemination of the research to users at local to national scales.

Examples of our on-going dissemination and user engagement

- Using outputs from the research to support initiatives in the community

- Community exhibitions and policy workshop

- A variety of approaches to working with research users in different contexts and different scales

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Connected Lives: the operational policy implications of research to understand networks, neighbourhoods and communities

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Some observation about our engagement with users

- Our aim was to promote an ongoing conversation with a wide range of users of the research

- Our methods were participatory, although there are limits to the nature of that participation

- We developed particular kinds of relationships with different users. In understanding these we can not say that researchers' and users' positions relative to the research fall into two distinct camps. Rather, we might think of these positions as fuzzy

Interests and expectations

Researchers	Users
Questions about particular topic and method related research questions	Particular and well defined agenda of issues to address
Interest in a particular area and groups to answer research question	See the researchers' focus on them in research as legitimising a particular problem
Collect data to answer research question	Use data to support activities / funding

Scale

Researchers	Users
Concerned to tease out difference / sameness in analysis	Local users have particular stories to tell that relate to their own experience
Aim to make cautiously transferable (generalisable) claims from research	Promote particular positions and viewpoints
Work over protracted time-scales	Looking for immediate (or quick) solutions

Positions

Researchers	Users
Have particular kinds of credibility arising from working for a university	See themselves as representative of particular interests or groups
Take a position in the 'social morality plays' we are investigating	Use findings in particular ways to their own ends, which researchers don't control
Look in on the research problem	Deal with particular problems in practical ways everyday
Obliged to disseminate in particular ways by the university	Often can not access the outputs from research or use these outputs

Some conclusions

- The relationship between researchers and users can not be characterised as 'ivory tower' vs. 'real world'. These relationships are much more fuzzy than that

- There are places of intersection between the researchers intent to implement methodologically rigorous research and users need for evidence

- As researchers we recognise that these intersections between our research and users' use of it requires that we do research differently. This includes applying different skills and placing strategies for user engagement at the centre of our research practice