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Working with community interviewers in social and cultural research

Peter Hopkins¹  | Raksha Pande²  | Nafhesa Ali³ | Claire Chambers⁴ | Richard Phillips⁵ 

¹School of Geography, Politics and Sociology, Newcastle University, UK and Faculty of Islamic Studies, Universiti Kebangsaan, Selangor, Malaysia

²School of Geography, Politics and Sociology, Newcastle University, Newcastle Upon Tyne, UK

³Alliance Manchester Business School, Sustainable Consumption Institute, The University of Manchester, Manchester, UK

⁴Department of English and Related Literature, University of York, York, UK

⁵Department of Geography, University of Sheffield, Sheffield, UK

Correspondence

Peter Hopkins, School of Geography, Politics and Sociology Newcastle Upon Tyne, UK.
Email: peter.hopkins@ncl.ac.uk

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Abstract

Working with community or peer interviewers can provide valuable access to the lived experiences of individuals and communities who researchers are unlikely to reach. However, the ethical and methodological issues involved in working with community interviewers has received relatively little attention in social and cultural geographical research. In this paper, we reflect on our work with community interviewers in qualitative research about the sexual relationship practices of young British Pakistani Muslims. We outline the training we offered to them and consider several ethical and methodological issues, including issues of power and positionality, the politics or remuneration, providing feedback to community interviewers, issues of mental health and wellbeing, and addressing expectations and community relationships. We explore the benefits of working with community interviewers while also highlighting the ethical and political challenges associated with such work.

KEYWORDS

community interviewers, Muslims, peer researchers, relationships, research ethics, UK

1 | INTRODUCTION

Peer or community researchers are “people who live within, and have everyday experiences as a member of, a particular geographical or social ‘community,’ and who use their contacts and detailed lay knowledge in a mediating role, helping to gather and understand information from and about their peers for research purposes” (Edwards & Alexander, 2014, p. 269). This is not to be confused with the use of community interviewers in some forms of health and medical research, where interviews tend to take place in institutional settings and so “community interviewing” is associated with interviewing people in their own homes (Parkman & Bixby, 1996). Working with community interviewers is popular in

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research that focuses on issues of service provision, in evaluation work, or in work with minority communities, such as refugee, black, and minority ethnic communities or studies with disabled people, with children, or with those who are socially and/or economically marginalised (e.g., Lee et al., 2014; Ryan et al., 2011). There is a long history of this being seen as an empowering way to do research (Edwards & Alexander, 2014) with a strong sense that such work builds reciprocity, can lead to positive social change, and can give voice to the marginalised.

Examples of research that works with community or peer interviewers can be found in research about poverty and socio-economic exclusion and includes work that adopts a participatory action research approach. An innovative example of this form of research is van Blerk et al. (2016) participatory work with street children in African cities, where they worked closely with young people to train them as researchers and to consider the complex power relations, politics, and ethics involved. In another example, Warr et al. (2011) explore the challenges and benefits of working with community interviewers in some of the most socially and economically deprived areas of Victoria, Australia. Another area of research where the use of community interviewers can be found more regularly than others is in work with black and minority ethnic, migrant and religious minority, and refugee and asylum-seeking communities. For example, Lee et al. (2014) worked with community interviewers in order to help them explore alcohol and drug service use by migrant women in Western Australia. The research team were concerned that their research would exclude specific culturally and linguistically marginalised communities and so they engaged with bilingual community members to assist them with the administration of a survey to 268 women. In another example, Ryan et al. (2011) worked with community interviewers in two studies about Muslims in North London and critically reflect on issues of access, trust, and relationships with community organisations to consider the multiple and complex relations of power inflected by gender, race, and class that shape fieldwork interactions.

As these examples testify, in work with community interviewers, there is often an interest in deconstructing power relations and making such relationships and tensions apparent (Edwards & Alexander, 2014); there is a sense that this type of research is empowering, enabling, accesses the excluded, and is more ethical and just in its approach. However, there is an opposing view that sees the use of community interviewers as exploitative and repressive. As Edwards and Alexander (2014) observe, the involvement of community or peer researchers does not necessarily lead to the collection of better data, and positive social change is not necessarily an outcome of working in this way either. We now introduce our project, outline the training we engaged in with community interviewers, and then consider some of the key ethical issues we negotiated in this project.

2 | OUR STUDY

We employed community interviewers in our research project about the sexual relationship practices of British Pakistani Muslims (Ali et al., 2020). The aims of this project were to explore both the attitudes and practices of young men and women and to do so through the stories they consume and produce. We focused particularly on the role of stories and storytelling in relationships that were shared in everyday life, such as with friends, on TV or radio, or in fiction. We were particularly interested in focusing on relationship issues that are relevant to the everyday lives of young British Pakistani Muslims, such as those interrelated with culture and religion. The project aims and objectives were already established before we started working with the community interviewers and in this sense we adopted a more traditional qualitative approach to this study rather than one characterised by the tenets of participatory action research. The specific focus of the research was on Tyne and Wear, and Yorkshire – both in northern England – and Glasgow in Scotland. Our research team included members who were to varying extents insiders and outsiders. One of the main methods we used in this project was individual interviews with young British Pakistani Muslims who were growing up in one of these three regions or cities.

We worked closely in partnership with grassroots community and voluntary organisations who support young British Pakistani Muslim men and women in their personal lives and relationships, such as libraries, youth groups, helplines, introduction agencies, and marriage counselling and advice services. We were also keen to encourage young Pakistani Muslims to write and share their experiences and thoughts on relationships through creative writing in mediums such as animation, film, fiction, blogging, and playwriting. Alongside this work, an important method we employed was the use of individual interviews so that young British Pakistani Muslims could share their experiences, tell their own stories, and disclose their relationship practices in their own words. The research team responsible for writing this paper conducted a number of interviews, but we also worked with community interviewers to help us recruit people within the community who we may not have been able to reach.

3 | COMMUNITY INTERVIEWER TRAINING

Through engaging with our community and voluntary sector partners, we advertised to recruit community interviewers to join our team. Full training was provided, paid at £25 per hour (for a training course of 6 hours) with a flat rate of £25 per interview with additional support for public transport travel expenses if needed. We were eager to recruit interviewers who had contacts in the local Pakistani Muslim community, had clear communication skills, and were interested in the research topic. The short application form included the personal details and contact information of the applicant as well as their educational qualifications, employment history, skills and experience, languages spoken, and the groups within the community that they are members of or have contacts with. On the basis of this, and short phone discussions with the applicants, we recruited nine community interviewers, three in each of the study locations.

In devising the training, we consulted other training guides about working with community interviewers (e.g., Shallwani & Mohammed, 2007) while situating this within the research design, aims, and methodology of our project. The training for the community interviews in each location took place from 10 am to 4 pm on a Saturday and was facilitated by the same three members of the team in order to ensure consistency across the three case study locations. In the morning, we outlined the intellectual rationale of the project before going into detail about the use of interviews in research. We discussed our motivations for using interviews and stressed that “successful interviewing is not unlike carrying on an unthreatening, self-controlled, supportive, polite and cordial interaction in everyday life” (Lofland & Lofland, 1995, p. 90). We then outlined the role of the community interviewer and focused in particular on ethical issues and the need to be ethically and morally responsible. We took time to explain and discuss confidentiality, anonymity, the idea of informed consent, and the fact that participants can opt out of the research at any time without having to give a reason. We were eager to emphasise that the ethical contract works both ways and that the research team had an ethical contract with the community interviewers too.

The afternoon session of the training workshop focused on practical matters. Here, we shared a resource pack with the participants, including: a project information leaflet, consent forms, information sheets for respondents, a copy of the training slides, a demographic questionnaire, a checklist for the day of the interview, and a post-interview form for the community interviewer to complete. We paid specific attention to an ethical contract that we asked all community interviewers to sign; this clarified that they understood the key motivations of the research project, were aware of the ethical foundations of the work, and understood the principles associated with confidentiality such as those associated with the non-disclosure of participant information in line with General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) guidelines. All agreed to sign this without hesitation. We also discussed what to do before, during, and after each interview, while sharing an example of an interview transcript from a previous project so they could see a real-life example of what we were hoping to achieve. Workshop attendees participated in a practical exercise of interviewing each other so they could become familiar with using the digital recorder (which we provided for their use during the project) and could gain some insights into interviewing and being interviewed, such as using open rather than closed questions.

We were keen to work in a meaningful way with our partners in the community and voluntary sector and were aware that “multidimensional issues of trust and power weave themselves through the process of working with peer/community researchers” (Edwards & Alexander, 2014, p. 287). We ensured that the community interviewer training sessions were open to anyone within the organisation or community who wanted to participate. As such, we did not simply limit the training to those who were playing an active role as community interviewers. We now critically reflect on some of the key ethical and methodological issues we encountered in our work with community interviewers in this project.

4 | PROBLEMATISING THE ROLE OF “THE INSIDER”

One of the key motivations and benefits in engaging with community or peer researchers is the sense that they are deeply embedded with their local communities. As such, the assumption is that the lay knowledge and in-depth understanding they have as community “insiders” offers them access to potential participants who are unlikely to be recruited by university researchers, who may have restricted access to local people through community gatekeepers or through their limited contacts in the local area. Sanghera and Thapar-Björkert observe that “the gatekeeper is often the first point of contact in the field ... yet it is a relationship that is fraught with inconsistencies and instabilities” (2008, p. 548). Furthermore, many gatekeepers promote the best interests of the groups they work with; these issues – coupled with the pressure of time, resources, and space – mean that many gatekeepers are limited in the extent to which they can provide access to community “insiders”. Also, some gatekeepers may be cautious about assisting researchers given that there is “the more

usual parachute-in-interview-and-escape route to empirical research” (Alexander, 2000, p. 228) with little attention to the needs of the community and little effort to share findings or work collaboratively. This is where community interviewers can play a critical role. Among the many criteria we used to appoint community interviewers, we were interested in those who were embedded with the local Pakistani Muslim community, were connected to local organisations, and perhaps were comfortable conversing in Urdu.

Our approach to community interviewer training was inspired by feminist methodologies that emphasise mutual learning and subjective understanding – in contrast to neat masculinist explanations of people’s life worlds. For over three decades, feminist geographers have argued for methodological interventions that recognise the impact of unequal power relations between the researcher and the research participants by engaging in issues related to insider/outsider debates through a focus on reflexivity (England, 1994; Rose, 1997) and positionality (Fisher, 2015; Mohammad, 2001; Nagar & Ali, 2003; Sultana, 2007). As such, not only were we keenly aware of the need to recognise the situatedness of our own knowledge claims, but we also worked hard to encourage our community interviewer trainees to do the same in a similar vein to ideas of “co-learning” (Heron et al., 2006).

The research team that delivered the training workshops involved three researchers (two women and one man) representing all three (early, mid, and established) academic career stages. The two women researchers, one of British-Pakistani ethnicity and the other of Indian ethnicity, negotiated their status as insiders (on account of Urdu language proficiency and some cultural familiarity with the participants) and outsiders (due to intersectional differences and our lack of knowledge about the individual experiences of the participants) by following Haraway’s injunction for an *affinity politics* which – while recognising “permanently partial identities and contradictory standpoints” (1991, p. 154) – does allow for some common ground from which to speak. For example, early on in the training sessions, it was pointed out by one of the community interviewers that our use of the term “sexual relationships” in the research questions may act as a barrier to recruitment – they were (perhaps rightly) worried that it may prove difficult to engage our research participants in talking about anything with the word “sex” in it. During the training session, we had an open discussion about this issue by examining why this may be a problem as we also mutually recognised the need to ask difficult questions (related to sexual and romantic relationships) that were central to the focus of the research project.

Within the community interviewers, the disagreement over the term “sex” was divided along generational lines – the younger community interviewers were more open to introducing the term gradually in the interview schedule after building a rapport with the research participants, but the older ones were outright opposed to it, primarily owing to their own squeamishness in using it. Finally, we agreed a vocabulary of alternative words (such as love, relations, romance) that our participants could use (if needed) to better suit the sensibilities of the research participants. So, while holding different standpoints (as researchers together with the younger community interviewers with a more liberal standpoint in contrast to the older member of the community interviewer team) about the open use of the term “sexual relationships,” we were able to find common ground in a modified vocabulary. This strategy allowed our community interviewers to approach mutually agreed important issues related to sexual relationships with terms that best suited the context of their interviewees. Interestingly in the end, we found that most of the interviewees were comfortable with discussions about sexual relationships if they were framed sensitively and, in keeping with good interview practice, introduced gradually. As such, the training was also useful for us as researchers in reflecting on our senses of the boundaries and limits for community members in discussing sensitive topics, including alternative approaches to doing so.

Establishing meaningful and positive working relationships with community interviewers requires attentiveness to the issues we discuss above. Not only do issues of positionality frame “social and professional relationships in the research field,” they also set the “tone” of the research” (Sanghera & Thapar-Björkert, 2008). Moreover, as positionality is in and of itself an ethical issue (Hopkins, 2007), it is critical that researchers are attentive to these issues when it comes to working with community interviewers. Two of the community interviewers we appointed were university students. In one case in Yorkshire, the community interviewer was a social science student and lived locally to where he was studying. As such, he had grown up in the local community and was embedded within it. He was also eager to learn social research skills as part of his degree programme and to help with his dissertation research. With the other community interviewer who was a student, he was studying in Glasgow, but was not “local” *per se* but had moved to Glasgow for study. Although he was familiar with some local organisations, he was not necessarily very embedded within the local community. So, he was an “insider” as he was a young Pakistani Muslim; however, in other respects, such as his accent and having moved to Glasgow for study, he was an “outsider” and not as familiar with the local community compared to his counterpart in Yorkshire. As such, the positionality of both of these community interviewers is not simply about being an insider as the extent of their insider status is quite different. In another example, a community interviewer in Glasgow conducted an interview with a participant who has already taken part in this study by participating in an interview with one of the

authors of this paper. This led us to problematise further the ways in which the employment of community interviewers relies on an assumption that locally embedded community interviewers will access local people unknown to, and unreachable by, the research team.

5 | THE POLITICS AND ETHICS OF REMUNERATION

When applying for the funding for this project, we were conscious that there is a “fine line between involving and empowering community members as peer researchers and exploiting their labour and expertise” (Edwards & Alexander, 2014, p. 273). Put differently, on the one hand, some contend that payment is a form of control, but on the other hand, some argue that people should be paid as a matter of respect and to accord them full status as valuable project members (Hall, 2015; Hammett & Sporton, 2012). Sensitive to these issues and in accordance with the perspective that paying people respects their contributions and values their status, we included costs in our funding application to pay community interviewers both for their training and to conduct interviews in the field.

The general trend in this type of research is to pay per interview rather than offer a contract of employment that may involve complex negotiations with university human resources staff and has implications for tax and national insurance. Participants were paid £150 for the training, however, we only paid this after they had completed one interview in the field as we wanted to guard against the risk of community interviewers completing the training and being paid for it without then undertaking any interviews. We recognise that this approach could be seen as “more of a budget-watching instrument rather than well-remunerated empowering approach” (Edwards & Alexander, 2014, p. 273). However, community interviewers reported that they were able to use the training in their work and studies and so this provided them with additional knowledge and skills and not only monetary reward.

6 | COMMUNITY INTERVIEWER FEEDBACK, WELLBEING, AND MENTAL HEALTH

Part of the training we asked community interviewers to participate in after the workshops was to complete one interview and send this to us to be transcribed; we then had a conversation with each community interviewer about their interviewing style and approach. We found this to be a useful mechanism for keeping in touch with the community interviewers and addressing any queries, questions, or concerns that were arising for them as they sought to contact potential interviewees in their community and to subsequently arrange interviews with these people. Furthermore, we were conscious that support may be “needed beyond the end of the research, as community researchers “exit” their role and lose their research identity” (Edwards & Alexander, 2014, p. 275) and so continued to stay in touch with the community interviewers throughout this process, including reflecting back on their experiences once they had completed their interviews.

One of the many motivations for keeping in contact throughout the research process with the community interviewers was about safeguarding, especially in relation to wellbeing, and mental health. We wanted to promote the wellbeing of the community interviewers and the research team (Mullings et al., 2016) and were conscious that, for some, fieldwork can be an ordeal and something that is emotionally challenging and tiring (Tucker & Horton, 2019). We adopted a deliberately ethical and moral approach (Olson, 2016) as we were conscious of “the relative institutional silences around mental health in our discipline” (Peake & Mullings, 2016, p. 254), including among our colleagues and our students. Moreover, these issues are pertinent given the focus of our project on a sensitive and personal topic with a social group that is frequently marginalised, regularly misrepresented, and often stigmatised. In our conversations with the community interviewers, we found there was a shared sense of relief and reciprocity that similarly challenging issues were discussed during interviews; in sharing such challenges and being open with each other about how to manage and work through these, many of the community interviewers felt a sense of relief that they were not alone and that the issues they had encountered – and were thinking through – in the field were shared by the research team. One of the community interviewers in Glasgow was struggling with his mental health at the time of undertaking interviews; in his words, it was a “dark time” and he was returning to his home city after completing the semester at university so was not able to undertake as many interviews as he had planned. We kept in touch with him about this; he latterly said he was feeling much better, was “in a better place,” and was “very grateful for the opportunities”.

7 | EXPECTATIONS AND COMMUNITY RELATIONSHIPS

One of the key challenges of community interviewer training was to forge a positive relationship with the participants so that we could manage expectations and resolve any issues or disputes that arose along the way. Practically, we cannot emphasise how crucial it is to be as clear as possible in your communication with the community interviewers and to make sure you securely keep a record of your correspondence. We thought we had done this by developing open lines of communication, both in our email exchanges with the community interviewers and in the literature advertising the workshop sessions. In keeping with the community engagement ethos of the workshops, we kept the workshop open to anybody who wanted to attend them, either to benefit from the training or to learn more about the project. However, to be recruited as a paid community interviewer on the project, participants had to do more than simply register for attendance; we had asked them to apply for the post by filling in an application form. Despite this, we found that in the session in Yorkshire, one of the workshop participants - who had not applied for the post of community interviewer - was unhappy about not being asked to conduct the interviews. We relied on references to our email exchanges and advertising literature, which clearly mentioned the distinction and the dispute was eventually resolved. On reflection, we should not have merged the engagement aspect of the workshop with the training session, to avoid any confusion or raising unrealistic expectations.

Having emphasised the practical aspect of the communication records, we also want to underscore the importance of addressing community interviewer expectations not in the managerial sense of simply managing them, but by showing flexibility and willingness to adapt the training to suit participant requests where possible. For example, our community interviewers wanted documentary proof of their training in the form of a certificate of participation. We had not factored this into our budget and initially were not sure about the legal status and institutional procedures (at three different participating universities) that would allow us to issue such a document. However, we could see that this was clearly important for the participants (many of whom were university and college students looking to enhance their CVs), so we persevered and were able to issue those certificates of participation without much opposition from university administrators.

8 | CONCLUSIONS

We have considered some of the ethical and methodological issues involved in working with community interviewers in social and cultural research. There are mutual benefits for both researchers and for those employed as community interviewers. In our case, most obviously we have benefited from privileged access to the lived experiences of participants we will have been unlikely to recruit ourselves. Community interviewers have benefited most directly through having access to training and paid research opportunities; this was especially useful for younger community interviewers, some of whom were studying at university. This does not mean that the employment of community interviewers comes without its challenges; there are often complex ethical and methodological issues that require careful consideration and reflexive negotiation. Some of these issues include the nature and format of any training provided, the reflexive negotiation of positionality, the challenges associated with remuneration, interviewer feedback, and attentiveness to promoting a culture of care and wellbeing among those involved.

Having undertaken this study partly through employing community interviewers, we feel that this added a richness to our project and enabled us to establish further positive relationships with the community and with organisations working in the field. However, we would caution against romanticising this approach, especially in a context where research funders are often seen to be eager to support “empowering” research yet are often unaware of the complex ethical, methodological, and political issues involved (Edwards & Alexander, 2014). Added to this is the risk that the pressure to generate research impact (Machen, 2020) could encourage researchers to *use* community interviewers in the hope that this may enhance the likelihood of them achieving social change rather than working *with* community interviewers to generate mutually beneficial outcomes and reciprocal relationships. As Evans (2016) recommends, there is a need to balance such pressures while demonstrating an ethic of care.

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Authors elect to not share data.

ORCID

Peter Hopkins  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0445-9217>

Raksha Pande  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6332-0998>

Richard Phillips  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4630-4555>

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