Keep Talking: Messy Research in Times of Lockdown

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Notes on Contributors

Nicola Gratton is the Lead for Civic Engagement and Evaluation at Staffordshire University. Nicola has an extensive background in youth work, community development, higher education, and participatory action research. Ryan Fox is research assistant and Teri Elder is project assistant for Keep Talking, a UKRI Enhancing Partnerships for Place-based Engagement funded project delivered in partnership between Staffordshire University and Expert Citizens CIC, which aims to develop a sustainable model of place-based participatory action research by strengthening partnerships between universities and community-based organisations.

Introduction

Shared experiences, informal conversations, and team activities, through which community researchers navigate the research process as a team, lie at the heart of participatory action research (PAR) (McIntyre, 2008; Gratton and Beddows, 2018). However, as the Covid-19 pandemic shocked communities around the globe and introduced periods of ‘lockdown’ and physical distancing, many community-based projects were forced to adjust to new, remote ways of working or temporarily pause their engagement.

This chapter outlines how a participatory research project adjusted to the Covid-19 lockdown and imposed physical distancing regulations. We show how the initial ambitions to replace face to face meetings with remote research activities were re-evaluated and replaced with creative and less structured activities designed to promote wellbeing and connect the group during unprecedented times. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the benefits of the adapted approaches, drawing on a small number of interviews with the community research team, and identifies how moving to a messier approach to research resulted in unexpected outcomes for the group.

Keep Talking

Keep Talking is a research project funded by UKRI’s Enhancing Partnerships for Place-based Engagement fund in 2020, led by Staffordshire University in partnership with Expert Citizens CIC. The project aims to develop a model for sustainable structures for community research to engage members of the public with meaningful, place-based research. Staffordshire University has a long history of working in partnership with communities to better understand the issues affecting communities through the Get Talking approach to PAR (Emadi-Coffin, 2008; Hetherington, 2015; Gratton and Beddows, 2018; Gratton, 2019). Get Talking supports a team of community researchers, often made up of people most impacted by the topic of research, to take a full and active role in the research process. The approach also embraces creativity, utilising creative techniques in planning, consultation and dissemination of findings to ‘remove many of the challenges of engaging wider communities as research participants and generate deliberative dialogue around the topics being explored.’ (Gratton and Beddows, 2018, p. 247).

Keep Talking builds on our learning from previous Get Talking projects. Community researchers from Get Talking Hardship (Gratton et al, 2019), a PAR project to understand the experiences and challenges of people living with hardship in Stoke-on-Trent, and members of Expert Citizen CIC, a team of people with lived experience of multiple disadvantage, who support services to improve care for citizens, formed a new group of coresearchers for Keep Talking. Keep Talking was supported by a small project team: a lead researcher with overall management responsibility for the project, a research assistant with responsibility for data gathering and analysis, and a project assistant, who played the role of ‘connector’, ensuring community researchers were able to access all aspects of the research project.

Impacts of Covid-19

With the introduction of UK physical distancing regulations and lockdown measures in March 2020, significant adjustments were made to Keep Talking. Before this both Expert Citizens and Get Talking community researchers had met, once a week, to contribute to the research data. All sessions had been face-to-face, participatory and had utilised creative engagement techniques to explore the core research questions. Community researchers were paid for their time on the project. At the time of lockdown, each community researcher had a total of 15 outstanding hours for the project. Although the funding body offered either extensions or temporary suspension of projects, the financial implications of Covid-19 were becoming increasingly clear and the project team felt a moral obligation to continue the project and offer community researchers an active role within it.

Initially, we aspired to continue gathering data for the research questions in a remote way. The community research team were asked their preference for contact with the project. Three said they were unable to continue with the project due to pressures of their existing family, work or study commitments, combined with the anxieties surrounding Covid-19. While they temporarily stepped away from the project, the project team made it clear they could return at any time. Seven people said they would prefer to engage with the project by telephone interviews and four said they would like to take part in group video calls.

For the first two weeks of lockdown, the project team collected data using telephone and video calls. However, both posed challenges for the project team and the group. Telephone interviews proved useful for research, allowing for semi-structured individual conversations and recording of the interviews. They also supported the wellbeing of some members of the group who were feeling anxious or isolated. However, telephone calls were time-consuming and with limited staff capacity, we were unable to sustain the volume of calls. Equally, conducting individual interviews with community researchers was contradictory to the collegiate approach underpinning PAR (Aldridge, 2016) and while members were in contact with the project team, they were no longer in contact with each other.

Digital technologies hold great potential for communication (CEBR, 2015) and ‘digital spaces have switched from an amenity to a necessity’ during the pandemic (Beaunoyer et al, 2020, p. 2). For Keep Talking, video calls negated the time-consuming elements of telephone interviews and allowed for the group to connect through the screen. Although four people initially indicated a preference for group video calls, nine responded to the first call for participants and fifteen to the second, indicating that the need to connect with other members of the group was strong. However, each video call shone a spotlight on those with outdated hardware, poorer bandwidth or low levels of IT literacy and confidence (Beaunoyer et al, 2020), causing frustrations within the group and threatening to fracture research relationships which had thrived during face to face contact. Equally, the need to mute microphones and the ability to see only a few people on the screen at any one time was contradictory to the inclusive principles underpinning Keep Talking.

At the same time, Covid-19 was dominating. The emotional impact of Covid-19 and its negative impact on wellbeing across the globe was already being noted (Rajkuma, 2020, Smith et al, 2020). Many of the team were anxious, concerned about the health, family and financial implications of the virus while others were managing loneliness or addictions. Given these personal challenges and inequalities in digital access, an ethical decision was taken by the project team to cease all formal data collection from the community research team and focus on cohesion and wellbeing for the group. We reflected that, while we had research data to produce some useful outcomes for the project, the future ability of the community research team to support the post Covid-19 recovery would be dependent on their strength and resilience as a team and their wellbeing, defined as ‘feeling good and functioning well,’ (New Economics Foundation, 2008, p. 1) as individuals.

The five ways to wellbeing report (New Economic Foundation, 2008) outlines five, everyday actions that promote wellbeing: connect, be active, take notice, keep learning and give. Equally, the benefits of creativity on wellbeing and connecting communities has been identified (All-parliamentary Group on Arts, Health and Wellbeing, 2017). We considered ways in which we could encourage creativity while supporting the group to engage in the five ways of wellbeing. The result was a series of communication mechanisms and activities which, before lockdown, we would have considered as falling outside the remit of Keep Talking.

Despite the difficulties experienced with video calls, the group and project team were keen to continue findings ways of creating connections between the group. All community researchers had some access to a basic smartphone and so using more accessible digital technologies to strengthen group cohesion and wellbeing became the focus of the project. The group were already communicating via a WhatsApp group. During the first month of lockdown, this became the social space for the group to have informal conversations, in the same way they would over a hot drink or lunch during our face to face meetings.

The period of lockdown posed unprecedented challenges for the group and was at the forefront of the community researchers’ minds. While for many, it brought intense anxiety and heightened stress, it presented an opportunity to record the unique period and the value of community in supporting each other through it. We encouraged the group to take notice by setting a series of tasks so they could record their experiences of lockdown, their environment, their emotions and ideas to promote wellbeing. We also supported each member of the group to explore their own creative means of expression. Weber (2008 in Furman et al. 2019) identifies that such creative methods aid discussion, by capturing things which may be hard to put into words. The result was a diverse range of creative methods illustrating the groups’ collective experience of lockdown, including photographs, blogs and diaries, poems, a lockdown recipe book, a ‘lockdown survival kit’ and podcasts.

Engagement with Keep Talking also provided the group with a means to continue learning by maintaining contact with each other, conducting desk research for the project, and exploring and testing new creative techniques. The group were also encouraged to record their daily walks either by photographs or using a steps counter, where this was possible, and both group and individual contact with the project team meant the group remained actively involved in the project. Finally, the activities encouraged each member to share, or give, something of themselves to the group, whether insight into their experience or suggestions for improving wellbeing during the pandemic.

Benefits of Deprioritising Research and Prioritising Wellbeing

Reprioritising the research questions and refocusing on creativity, connection and wellbeing has had a positive impact on wellbeing and cohesion within the community research group. In a series of video and telephone interviews, community researchers reflected on their creative engagement with the project, their creative outputs and the benefits of adopting this alternative approach. The adapted approach had positive impacts on both their relationships with each other and on their individual mental health and wellbeing.

The WhatsApp group became a strong and constant support network for members, a place not only to share their creative outputs but to also offer support and encouragement, especially where people were feeling isolated or anxious. As one community researcher notes, “We were all throwing things out in the WhatsApp group and trying to sense when people weren't doing well. There was a sense of wanting to make sure everyone is doing well… throwing out the odd nice word when you can tell someone is struggling.” By sharing their own experiences of lockdown in different ways, community researchers felt they had a valuable role to play in the group, “sharing these [poems] with people has made me feel like I wasn’t alone, and it was comforting with all the support and encouragement which I have had from the group.” Equally, others benefited from the community sharing creative outputs as these acted as a catalyst for innovative ideas, “Taking part and seeing other people be involved with [creative methods] has inspired me to think about what other things I could do.”

Food was often used to aid conversations in Keep Talking. Sessions were scheduled around mealtimes to provide time for the group bond and discuss community research while eating together. The absence of this after the introduction of lockdown restrictions was stark. Over time, some of the team started to share photos of their meals or recipes on the WhatsApp group which organically developed into a ‘lockdown recipe book’. For the group, this continued discussion about food helped to “bring people together” and illustrated the development of skills and confidence over time, “I enjoyed seeing people’s cookery progress, from throwing it all in a pot to look at them two quality Sunday dinners!”

The podcasts captured community researchers’ experiences of lockdown, their strategies for dealing with isolation, the role of creativity in connecting communities and the value of friendship in dealing with unprecedented times. The series in its entirety highlights the importance of community for the group. Although podcast recording was an individual activity, engagement with the podcast was one way in which community researchers were able to build confidence and feel connected to a larger community. “[Being involved with the podcast] has shown that as a group we can still do things with other people…It’s important that we can still make those connections between each other in the group, but then also wider than that, in the community. It’s made me more positive and confident that I can still use my skills and put my voice out there, without physically having to be with people.”

Bickerstaff, Barragan and Rucks-Ahidiana (2017) argue that confidence levels continually shift depending on interactions with peers, staff, and other members of the community. The shift to contactless creative methods built friendships which reaffirmed confidence levels through constant but remote casual engagement. One community researcher stated, “A sense of camaraderie developed…we were all in the deep end together but have all come through the other side stronger.” Friendships have developed during the period, along with a better understanding of each other. “It’s helped me make new friends and helped me to understand ‘normal people’, who haven’t suffered mental health and an alternative lifestyle, and it has helped me to appreciate their lives too.”

Community researchers also noted the positive impact engaging in creativity had on their mental health and wellbeing. Some were able to combine creativity and exercise by documenting their daily walks. This not only helped one community researcher to “see things [they] wouldn’t usually see”, and take notice of their emotions but the photographic documentation of the walks have also been a way to look back and reflect on the experience in a more positive way as lockdown restrictions were eased: “I didn’t really think anything about the photographs when I had taken them on the walks, but when I look back now I remember how I felt and the experiences of the walks.”

Using creative methods to engage the community research team in an adapted version of the Keep Talking project also helped to give hope to the community researchers during a challenging and stressful time. One community researcher commented that creativity was a “reminder that things can be nice and that things will get better.” Similarly, both the community researchers and the project team embraced new ways of engaging with the project and, despite the shift away from some of the research aims, the resulting outcomes are a diverse and rich bank of resources that centre around the issues of community, relationships, inclusivity, flexibility and connectedness, which are important principles for developing strong and resilient community research teams. As one community researcher summarises, “Don’t ever assume that there is only one way of doing something, we’ve proved this as a group that you don’t just need to stop [when faced with problems]. We’ve found ways to keep going and to reach out to each other and keep making an impact in the community.”

Conclusion

The advent of Covid-19 presented a unique opportunity to adopt a creative approach to Keep Talking that would not have been considered had face-to-face sessions continued. The resulting research project was messy, shifting focus and methods of data collection several times during its lifespan. However, the research also provided insight into the importance of community, relationships, and creativity for both enhancing wellbeing during stressful times and for community research more broadly. In this way, our learning about the needs of community researchers, sustaining a team of community researchers and creating resilience, far exceeded our original expectations. Moreover, the community researcher team has remained a cohesive group and indeed strengthened the support network from within by engaging in creative forms of expression through which experiences, emotions and strategies were shared and support offered. As we emerge from the immediate crisis of the worldwide pandemic, the recovery period will undoubtedly present further economic and social challenges. It is now that the team of community researchers will have a vital role to play in supporting the communities they are a part of in navigating and influencing this recovery.

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