

Working at research: lessons from a participatory research project with young fathers

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The purpose of this paper is to reflect on and critically evaluate the use of participatory research methods as used in a small qualitative study of the experiences of young fathers (25yrs and under) in a UK city. The Talking Dads Project combined the expertise of young fathers, an NGO and university researchers (with backgrounds in social work, law and sociology) and aimed to deepen our understanding of the everyday lives of young fathers. In accordance with participatory research principles, young fathers (sampled from the participating NGO and through snowballing) took a lead role in developing the content of, and conducting, interviews with peer participants. This paper focuses on five critical processes that emerged during the project that created intense debate and became sites for negotiation of the delicate balance of powers between participants. These included young fathers' initial engagement, the translation of their research ideas into research tools, research ethics such as confidentiality and duty of care, issues around how to facilitate comprehensive, in-depth data collection, and the differential impact of the research on the lives of all involved. This paper examines these critical processes in relation to key features of participatory research identified in the literature: action-orientation, cooperative enquiry, action-reflection cycle, power shift and breadth of epistemology. The learning emerging from this evaluation of the research process contributes to our understanding of the challenges of participatory research such as the distance between the intention and its operationalization, the depth of power sharing achieved, and the various meanings ascribed to participation and desirable outcomes by participants. The Talking Dads Project also demonstrates that it is possible to do research differently and to reach the desired audiences in academic, professional practitioners' and young people's worlds. Flexibility and a capacity to work constructively with constraints were important elements of our experience.

Key words: participatory research, young fathers, power, research methods