BIRMINGHAM CITY University

Participatory research with marginalised and vulnerable communities

"Nothing about us, without us."

Robert Lawson, Kirsten Forkert,
Emma Franklin and Emma Craddock

Birmingham City University

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Executive summary

Participatory research, which includes non-professional researchers such as community members or individuals with lived experience, is becoming increasingly popular. It is often seen as a 'gold standard' because participation encourages inclusion for community groups and helps direct research which speaks to their priorities and goals. Working in accompaniment with those with lived experience ensures that their voices influence the research agenda and project design, leading to richer findings that address the real needs and priorities of marginalised groups and communities.

But working with such communities raises several ethical questions, including those of power dynamics, inequalities, exploitation, the adequate compensation of participants, the ownership of data, and a host of other issues. What does 'good practice' look like in participatory research contexts? What kinds of approaches should researchers implement in projects with marginalised and vulnerable communities?

In June 2025, Birmingham City University (BCU) hosted a participatory research workshop to explore these questions, providing a forum to share good practice for conducting research with marginalised and vulnerable communities. This event brought together academics, practitioners, community members and third-sector organisations to discuss access, trust, power relations, ethics and other related issues, to help support researchers in developing their skills in participatory research.

This short guide is the outcome of that event, inspired and informed by the voices of the people who contributed to the discussions and reflections throughout the day. Each section offers a brief overview of key principles for participatory research with marginalised and vulnerable communities, providing practical recommendations from the groups and individuals involved. The recommendations presented here offer a starting point for research with marginalised and vulnerable communities. Importantly, these guidelines are not exhaustive and participatory research requires continual learning and reflection. We encourage researchers to undertake further reading and training in participatory approaches. Nevertheless, we hope that the insights presented in this guidance acts as a useful starting point for conducting participatory in an ethical and informed way, rooted in openness, transparency, and mutual benefit.

– Robert Lawson, Kirsten Forkert, Emma Franklin and Emma Craddock

UN's New Urban Agenda[1] calls for "meaningful participation in decision-making, planning and follow-up processes for all, as well as enhanced civil engagement, co-provision and co-production".

(United Nations, 2016, p14)

[1] United Nations. 2016. https://habitat3.org/wp-content/uploads/NUA-English.pdf

Introduction

Research institutions and academics regularly seek to work with a range of stakeholders and partners, especially organisations and community groups external to the university setting. Such partnerships have become especially important in the context of the impact agenda which underpins much of the research activity in higher education spaces. This agenda seeks to advance research projects which have "an effect on, change or benefit to the economy, society, culture, public policy or services, health, the environment or quality of life, beyond academia"[2]. The ultimate aim of impact, from a policy perspective, has been to encourage academics to pursue projects which have a tangible and material effect on life outside the walls of the university.

Since its introduction in the 2014 Research Excellence Framework (REF), impact has come to be a central pillar of a great deal of contemporary research, especially in the social sciences, healthcare, and the arts and humanities. In doing so, impact has raised questions concerning the processes of partnership building, how the goals and objectives of multiple stakeholders can be achieved, and how universities relate to the broader scope of 'doing good' with their activities.

In the pursuit of collaborative research, however, the power relations between the 'researcher' and the 'researched' are very often unequal. By way of example, in a traditional research project, it is often the academic lead who controls the research questions, recruitment process, interview setting, recording, interpretation, and publication, and who typically reaps the benefits (reputational and otherwise) of the project and its outcomes. Participants may contribute the experiential knowledge on which the research depends, but they often have less control over how that knowledge is framed, circulated, or converted into academic capital. These forms of power can undermine the social justice agenda which university research purports to champion, an outcome which becomes more pronounced in contexts where the partner may come from a disadvantaged socioeconomic background.

Before moving on to the substantive recommendations for participatory research, this guidance first discusses some of the terminology that appears throughout the recommendations below, offering more holistic framing of how this terminology is being used in the guidance. The discussion here also sets out an overarching framework for conceptualising ethical participatory research which is non-extractive and non-exploitative.

The first set of terms we discuss – 'participatory research' and 'co-production' – overlap, but they are not identical. Participatory research is the broader tradition: its defining feature is that research participants shape the research process, with an emphasis on doing research "with" rather than "on" people. It often has an action-oriented aim of creating change that benefits those involved[3].

Co-production, on the other hand, is usually used to describe a more specific form of collaborative working in which researchers and non-academic partners share power, responsibility, knowledge, and decision-making from the beginning to the end of a project[4]. Co-production can be understood as a particular way of putting

[2] UKRI. 2026. "How Research England supports research excellence". Available online: https://www.ukri.org/who-we-are/research-england/research-excellence/ref-impact/.

[3] Siobhan O'Sullivan, Elaine Desmond and Margaret Buckley. 2023. "The ethics of engagement and representation in community-based participatory research". *Ethics and Social Welfare*, 17(2): 159–174. doi: 10.1080/17496535.2023.2211756.

participatory values into practice, although participatory research often carries a stronger emancipatory commitment to challenging existing power relations.

The principle of 'accompaniment'[5] is very much aligned with a participatory research ethos, and may also underpin co-produced research, where participants or community partners have substantive influence over the design, interpretation, and dissemination of the project. More specifically, accompaniment means "making the needs of the most powerless and most oppressed—the people most likely to be left out—into everyone's first priority. It entail[s] asking questions before acting, taking inventory of multiple forms of social exclusion, and learning how to be people who do not succumb to the dominant norms of an acquisitive, aggressive, and antagonistic world".[6]

'Accompaniment' also operates in contradistinction to the more established 'empowerment' discourse common in academia, which can inadvertently reproduce the very hierarchies it seeks to challenge by positioning the researcher or institution as the agent which grants voice, agency, or capacity to participants. Accompaniment takes a different stance and begins from the assumption that participants already possess community-level knowledge, agency, and interpretative authority. Moreover, accompaniment seeks to resist extractive forms of knowledge production, working alongside participants to share control and support knowledge-making activities grounded in their own priorities. The recommendations set out in this guidance are rooted in an accompaniment framework and highlight the productive nature of working in alignment with community groups and organisations, drawing on their skills and expertise.

The next term we unpack is 'vulnerability'. UK Research and Innovation (UKRI), a major public body which funds and governs research in the United Kingdom, defines "vulnerable" as a context-dependent rather than a fixed label[7]. In research, "vulnerability" may relate to factors such as age, disability, abusive relationships, or unequal power relations, but it can also arise through the research context itself. Therefore, vulnerability should be assessed case by case, including both immediate and longer-term consequences of research participation.

It is important to note that terms such as "vulnerable populations", while used widely in research, can be disempowering to participants and unreflective of their lived experiences. Emphasis should always be on how structural conditions marginalise individuals rather than placing responsibility for marginalisation within the individual (for example, by avoiding terminology such as "hard-to-reach")[8]. Care and attention should also be given to how groups and individuals self-define and approaches to this issue are discussed in more detail in the guidance.

Vulnerability also relates to our final term of 'marginalisation', or what occurs 'when a group of people are pushed to the periphery of a society'.[9]

[4] UKRI. 2026. "Coproduction in research". Available online: https://www.ukri.org/manage-your-award/good-research-resource-hub/research-co-production/.

[5] Leisy Abrego. 2020. "Research as accompaniment: Reflections on objectivity, ethics, and emotions", in *Out of Place: Fieldwork and Positionality in Law and Society*, ed. by Lynette J. Chua and Mark Fathi Massoud (Cambridge University Press), pp. 36–56.

[6] Barbara Tomlinson and George Lipsitz. *Insubordinate Spaces: Improvisation and Accompaniment for Social Justice* (Temple University Press, 2019), p. 25.

[7] UKRI. 2026. "Research with potentially vulnerable people". Available online: https://www.ukri.org/councils/esrc/guidance-for-applicants/research-ethics-guidance/research-with-potentially-vulnerable-people/.

[8] Emma Craddock. 2022. "A qualitative UK study exploring counterpublic engagement of marginalized women via a Women's Health Network". *Health Promotion International*, 37(4), doi:10.1093/heapro/daac124.

Very often, what pushes a group of people to the periphery is a concomitant lack of power and broader social status, based on demographic features such as income, education, ethnicity, linguistic competency, gender, sexuality, and social class. Examples of marginalisations include the experience of seeking asylum, being disabled, living in a low-income household and being a person of colour or from a minority ethnic group.[10] Marginalised groups can also include women, children, and members of the LQBTQIA+ communities. What 'marginalised' groups often have in common is a lack of social and political capital, influence, and decision-making powers, and research which engages with marginalised communities can further exacerbate power asymmetries between the 'researcher' and the 'researched'.

While working with marginalised communities can be a valuable social endeavour, researchers should be aware of the underpinning reasons for wanting to pursue fieldwork in these contexts. Is it following prevailing research trends and funding streams or is it because of a desire to address long-standing issues of poverty, exclusion, and other social injustices? These motivations have implications for how a researcher might approach, engage, and work in accompaniment with a marginalised group. As Regina Scheyvens and colleagues remind us, "A danger is that rather than valuing our informants and the knowledge they possess, we pity them if they are marginalised... Our attitude towards people who face economic and other hardships should not be so shrouded by pity that we fail to see things of value in those we study'.[11]

The remainder of this guidance offers workable approaches and strategies for conducting participatory research with marginalised groups, whether that be local charity and community organisations, support services, or other providers who work closely with vulnerable individuals. We hope that they help readers conduct ethical, socially responsible, and non-extractive research which not only develops new knowledge, but also seeks to benefit all parties involved in the research.

[9] Adreanne Ormond, Fiona Cram, and Lyn Carter. 2006. "Researching our relations: Reflections on ethics and marginalisation", *AlterNative: An International Journal of Indigenous Peoples*, 2: 174–192. doi: 10.1177/117718010600200108.

[10] Katta Spiel, Emeline Brulé, Christopher Frauenberger, Gilles Bailly, and Geraldine Fitzpatrick. 2018. "Micro-ethics for participatory design with marginalised children," in *Proceedings of the 15th Participatory Design Conference*, pp.1–12. doi: 10.1145/3210586.3210603.

[11] Regina Scheyvens, Henry Scheyvens, and Warwick E. Murray. 2014. "Working with marginalised, vulnerable or privileged groups," in *Development Fieldwork: A Practical Guide*, 2nd ed., ed. by Regina Scheyvens (SAGE), pp.188–214.

1. Building meaningful relationships from the start

Forming strong and meaningful relationships is central to ethical participatory research, both between academics and organisations, and between researchers on the team. Part of creating meaningful relationships with organisations is developing an understanding of the needs and context for the communities they serve.

Recommendation 1: Engage with communities early

Where possible, researchers should engage with communities before the research process starts and consult with them from the project planning onwards. In contrast, dropping in and out of communities – the 'parachute effect' – and simply 'mining' them for information is unethical and produces distrust. Trust should be established through regular communication, attending community events, and showing genuine interest in community needs and concerns.

> **"We don't just 'engage' communities, we build relationships with them. We create Sangat ('Sangat' is Punjabi for community). We co-design research from the beginning, not just hand over a survey at the end."**
>
> *Neelam Heera-Shergill (Cysters)*

Recommendation 2: Be transparent, clear and honest

Develop trust through clear communication and transparency. To avoid the parachute effect, clear communication and collaboration should take place throughout all stages of the project, including the results and their dissemination.

2. What's in it for them?
Ensuring mutual benefit

Participatory research exists to challenge the traditional power structures of research projects and create mutually beneficial collaborations. Researchers need to bear in mind the potential costs and benefits of participating in research, especially for the vulnerable or marginalised group.

Involving communities in their own research projects – whether through participatory research or peer-research methods – leads to better and more meaningful outcomes, which benefits both the researcher and the target community. The involvement of peer researchers can also lead to more accurate and relevant research outcomes, as well as guiding researchers in better research design. However, depending on the nature of the research, engagement may come at a cost to the participants, and this requires handling the research sensitively.

"We define community peer research as collaborative social research that involves non-researchers and members of communities in meaningful research projects in ways that have practical outcomes and that aim to benefit the people that are often impacted by, rather than benefit from, research."

Professor Laura Caulfield, the Institute for Community Research and Development

Recommendation 3: Provide fair practical benefits to participants and peer researchers

Benefits should be delivered to participants in the form of practical research outcomes, as well as any agreed financial remuneration for participants' time. Other forms of remuneration might include supporting participants in developing skills to improve employability. Whatever form it takes, remuneration must be proportionate to participants' time and energy, and the resulting research should be shared and made accessible to them.

"Publish research results as open access whenever possible and share the results with the participants or third parties working with communities."

Professor Tatiana Grieshofer, BCU

Recommendation 4: Consider how the research process can be designed to benefit individuals

Traditionally, research is thought about in terms of what the researchers can get out of a project. Instead, work with communities and individuals to ask what participants can get out of the research process. Using creative and flexible research methods, such as involving drawing or dance, for example, can be a fulfilling experience for participants.

"Participating in a project that supports members to share their stories through performance may have a direct positive impact on an individual's wellbeing."

Alex Taylor, Journey LGBT Asylum Group

3. Sharing decisions:
Challenging power dynamics

Integrating participatory research methods into a project brings issues to do with power, hierarchy, and equity, especially in cases where research participants are from vulnerable or at-risk populations (see introduction for an overview of these terms). University researchers often occupy a 'powerful' role because of their education, cultural capital, income, and career status, with status being further shaped by factors like age, ethnicity, sexuality, and social class[12].

Vulnerable research participants, on the other hand, often occupy (or are placed in) correspondingly less powerful social positions. In worst case scenarios, this power imbalance results in exploitative research practices, where participants are taken advantage of for their time, effort, and cultural knowledge, while having no say in research design or focus. Here, we outline some of the ways that researchers might rethink and reframe power dynamics between different stakeholders in a project.

"Participatory research should be about power-sharing, not people-pleasing"

Neelam Heera-Shergill, Cysters

Recommendation 5: Promote equity and address power imbalances

Academics are typically responsible for all elements of a research project, from the underpinning research questions through to the choice of methodologies, data collection approaches, and more. This ownership means that researchers have the most power to influence the direction of a research project. When working alongside participants and/or peer researchers, academic researchers should relinquish control to ensure these stakeholders have an equal part in designing interviews and other research activities. This should ideally involve co-designing research projects, sharing decision-making responsibilities, and ensuring that community voices are heard and respected throughout the research process.

Recommendation 6: Actively break down hierarchies

Building authentic relationships is central to participatory research, collaborating productively with community groups rather than seeing them as resources to be exploited. Investing time and effort to build long-term relationships helps establish trust, ensures sustainable benefits, and creates a framework for future collaborative research efforts.

"One of the most important lessons I've learned is that people will engage with research when they feel genuinely valued. This means dismantling hierarchies between the 'academic' and the 'community'. It means giving people ownership over how their stories are shared."

Neelam Heera-Shergill, Cysters

[12] UKRIO. 2026. "Academic wheel of privilege". Available online: https://ukrio.org/ukrio-resources/equality-diversity-and-inclusion/academic-wheel-of-privilege/.

Recommendation 7: Maximise participant agency

In participatory research, roles are rarely static and processes and procedures can change over the course of a project. It is important to ensure that participants have a clear understanding of their rights, what the project involves, and how their contributions will be used.

Being aware of power dynamics and how these might affect an individual's ability to give consent to a request should be carefully considered and appropriate safeguarding protocols incorporated, including ongoing informed consent (and checking capacity to consent), anonymisation protocols, data protection, voluntary and flexible participation, working within familiar service settings, and ensuring professional support is available to help create a safe research environment.

"We are aware that the power dynamic means that many of our members would find it hard to say no to any request, and we have a responsibility not to ask unless we feel a particular member is able to give genuine informed consent."

Alex Taylor, Journey LGBT Asylum Group

Recommendation 8: Develop opportunities to upskill research participants

Research leads, with input from community participants and peer researchers, should ensure that reciprocity is directly built into the research project and that the community benefits from the research. This could take the form of capacity-building opportunities, access to research findings, tangible outcomes (e.g. policy changes or new community resources), or recruiting and training peer/community researchers.

Case study: The Iris Project

Working in collaboration with Changing Lives, an organisation that works with women who have experienced sex work or sexual exploitation, the Institute for Community Research and Development recruited peer researchers with lived experience of sex work or exploitation to conduct interviews regarding the efficacy of Changing Lives' Iris project and whether it was meeting the needs of its members. The peer researchers were trained by the research team and co-designed the interviews. Roleplay was a particularly essential part of the training. Their insights and experience meant that they were able to adapt to the needs of the participants more effectively.

4. Common roadblocks along the way:

Addressing challenges and barriers

This section considers the challenges and barriers that may arise during a participatory research project. Although these challenges differ in nature, each can affect the ethical conduct of the research and requires appropriate planning and support.

Unpredictability of the research process

By its nature, community research can be 'messy' and unpredictable. This might be unsettling for those new to this approach. Researchers are encouraged to embrace that messiness and adapt to changes for a more meaningful outcome. This is also the case for training, which might need to shift as circumstances evolve.

Recommendation 9: Be open and adaptable to change

Researchers should be prepared to adjust their research methods and approaches based on the needs and feedback of the community group, as well as individual participants with specific needs. Low-pressure engagement methods, such as regular group sessions that are recorded in a low-key, non-intrusive way, can make research more accessible while ensuring participants are comfortable to share their experiences. More creative and flexible approaches to research can also lead to participants feeling safer to share stories than traditional interviews.

Emotional support

The subject matter of participatory research may be upsetting, and there may be emotional impacts for both researchers (hearing distressing stories about traumatic experiences) and participants, especially if they are vulnerable. This might include the designing of research questions and the conducting of interviews and fieldwork activities and carrying out data analysis.

Recommendation 10: Incorporate additional support for participants and for researchers into the design of projects

The safety and wellbeing of participants must be a priority. A good start to this would be providing a safe environment for the sharing of potentially difficult stories and showing sensitivity and respect for their needs and experiences. This should take into consideration possible power imbalances between peer researchers and an academic research team (see previous section).

Lack of engagement and limited capacity

For organisations, it can be difficult to establish relationships with academic institutions. Lack of resources, volunteer capacity, difficulty getting funding, and the centring of academic goals (rather than community needs) can also be barriers which affect community organisations' willingness and ability to engage with academic partners. Without existing relationships with academic institutions, community organisations may decide to undertake their own research (if they deem it necessary) to address specific community needs, resulting in fewer opportunities for knowledge sharing and co-production of new insights.

Recommendation 11: Think creatively to collaborate and overcome barriers

Creative approaches are needed to secure involvement, and there should be active attempts to identify and address barriers that may prevent community members from participating in research. Workshop participants called for more opportunities to make connections between universities and community organisations. This should be prioritised by institutional research strategies and enabled by processes and procedures (e.g. relating to payment of participants and community peer researchers; see section 2).

Practical challenges

For research with marginalised participants, it is especially important to pay attention to the practical facilitation of research activities. This includes covering their travel costs or possibly relocating the research activities to a site that is accessible to them.

Recommendation 12: Embed clarity and accessibility in research processes

The research space should be accessible and welcoming, and it should be clear who is responsible for booking the space (the researcher, the collaborating organisation, or another partner). Providing refreshments (such as snacks, drinks, or a meal) ensures that participants are not left out because they are hungry. Translation support may also be provided as appropriate.

Key learnings

Ethical participatory research with marginalised groups and communities involves building and sustaining meaningful relationships, challenging power dynamics, fair reimbursement, and centring the voices and decision-making of these groups. The following is a reminder of the key recommendations for researchers that emerged from workshop discussions:

Recommendations for researchers

1. Where possible, engage with communities before the research process starts and consult with them from the project planning onwards
2. Develop trust through clear communication and transparency
3. Provide fair practical benefits to participants and peer researchers
4. Consider how the research process can be designed to benefit individuals
5. Promote equity and address power imbalances
6. Actively break down hierarchies
7. Maximise participant agency
8. Develop opportunities to upskill research participants
9. Be open and adaptable to change
10. Incorporate additional support for participants and for researchers into the design of projects
11. Think creatively to collaborate and overcome barriers
12. Embed clarity and accessibility in research processes

Back Matter

The event that led to these guidelines was organised by a team of researchers across the School of Arts, the School of Law and Social Sciences, and the School of Health and Life Sciences at Birmingham City University. These were Robert Lawson, Kirsten Forkert, Emma Franklin, Poppy Wilde, Geraldine Lee-Treweek, Emma Craddock, and Dharmesh Rajput.

Invited speakers contributed to the event, and thus this guidance:

- Joseph Anderton, Associate Professor of Modern and Contemporary Literature at BCU
- Tatiana Grieshofer, Professor in Language and Law at BCU
- Neelam Heera-Shergill, Founder of Cysters and the Maternity Justice Network
- Geraldine Lee-Treweek, Professor of Knowledge Exchange and Social Justice at BCU
- Hussien Saeed, Coordinator at Birmingham Asylum and Refugee Association
- Alex Taylor, Organiser at Journey LGBT+ Asylum Group
- Amy Woolston, Clinical Researcher and Director at The Koala Tree CIC

Resources

Below are links to some useful guidance documents aimed at researchers undertaking participatory research:

- Community-based participatory research: A guide to ethical principles and practice (Centre for Social Justice and Community Action, Durham University; National Co-ordinating Centre for Public Engagement)
- Navigating participatory research: A visual guide (Centre for Social Justice and Community Action, Durham University)
- First steps in participatory research: A guide for postgraduate and early career researchers in arts and humanities (The University of Sheffield)
- Ethics in Participatory Research (Imperial College London)
- Youth participatory research: A review of reviews and practice guidance (Youth Futures Foundation)
- "Not another toolkit" Policy session reflections (Yorkshire Policy Innovation Partnership)

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