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Learning to see: lessons from a participatory observation research project in public spaces

Journal Item

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Learning to see: Lessons from a participatory observation research project in public spaces

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Abstract

This article outlines the development and implementation of participatory research methodology centred on observational techniques. It discusses the theoretical understandings of the methodology and how it worked in practice. The research explored the use of public spaces by different social, ethnic and activity groups across the course of a 12 month period drawing on the experiences of, and data collected by local, non-academic researchers who were trained in a non-participatory semi-structured observation. The article discusses how this method was developed and implemented and considers some of the issues around how participatory research works in practice.

Keywords:

Introduction

Participatory research is becoming an accepted method in social science research, increasingly recognised by funding bodies. In this article we describe recent experience using a participatory framework in methods design, data collection and analysis. The study sought to develop a set of robust methods for understanding social interactions in urban public spaces and utilised observational methods. We outline how this particular method worked in practice; why we embarked on such an endeavour; and what we learnt from it. In the first section of the article we chart the academic context of the study and the substantive issues it explored. We then outline the specific participatory, non-participant observation method developed to meet the research requirements and consider the benefits and challenges associated with it. In the final section we present some reflections on being involved in the study, situated in the context of ongoing debates about ethical, representative, and participatory research

Methodology: A participatory approach

While participatory research has a relatively long history in development studies (Chambers 1997; Cooke and Kothari, 2001; Hickey and Mohan, 2004), this approach to collaborative research has also gained popularity across disciplines (e.g. de Koning and Martin, 2001; Pain, 2004; Peace, 1999). Its use has developed partly to satisfy predominantly post-positivist desires to question and challenge the principles and practices of research. They have also emerged amidst calls for a more socially relevant research agenda that better enables traditional 'research subjects' to bring their own 'voices' to the research process (Hickey and Mohan, 2004), and more 'user involvement' in social policy development (Beresford, 2002). One consequence of this has been the questioning of power relationships between researchers and researched. While some research tends to be concerned with 'knowledge for understanding', much participatory research focuses on 'knowledge for action', to be achieved through partnerships between traditionally-trained researchers and lay people in a community (Cornwall and Jewkes, 1995; Kindon et al., 2007). Proponents argue that a participatory approach offers those traditionally described as the subjects of research a say in determining what is being studied, and teaches community members the rudiments of research methodology so that they can assume collaborative roles. Participation has the potential to engage people in all aspects of the research process. Consequently, participatory research is seen as a way of achieving a more 'relevant', morally aware and non-hierarchical research practice that can also be emancipatory (Kesby, 2000; Pain, 2004). Furthermore the outcomes of this approach are claimed to produce alternative truths or more efficient ways of understanding complex situations and relationships (e.g. Moser and McIlwaine, 1999).

Insofar as most primary data collection in social science research requires interaction with others, most can be described as participatory to varying degrees (Biggs, 1989; Cornwall, 1996). It has been argued that what identifies research as participatory is not the methods used but the depth of participant involvement in the whole research process (Emmel, 1997; de Konig and Martin, 1996).

Participatory research is also situated in a more politicised agenda concerning power and knowledge relationships in both research and society as a whole. Questions about

control and power, and the potentially exploitative relationship between researcher and researched, led to attempts to facilitate collaboration in the research process, especially where the researched are service users. The researcher's role may consequently become that of facilitator working collaboratively with participants to achieve action orientated goals. The forms and extent of such collaboration vary from participants being involved in every aspect, including establishing research priorities, collecting and interpreting data and disseminating results; to engaging in only part of the process (Peace, 2002). A common factor is the belief that participants develop their own understandings of the research process, and the phenomena being investigated, and consequently act upon this knowledge to better improve their situations.

Perhaps ideally, participatory research is situated at what Biggs (1989) identified as a collegiate level of participation with "researchers and local people work[ing] together as colleagues with different skills to offer, in a process of mutual learning where local people have control over the process" (Cornwell and Jewkes, 1995; p1669). This is partly dependent upon practical constraints of the operation of such research, though some have questioned whether any research can ever achieve such a status (Cooke and Kothari, 2001). Rather than agonise over whether research should be labelled participatory or not, or becoming embroiled in debate about the depth or degree of participation, we position our experiences within the discourse concerning the wider challenges participatory research poses to research including issues of representation and constructing different sorts of knowledge. These are topics with which most post-positivist researchers engage, evident in practises aimed at destabilising unequal power relationships, encouraging marginalised groups to have a say, and developing less exploitative research methods; even if not necessarily 'participatory' in the epistemological sense of bringing about social action or change. In the study discussed here the primary intention was to produce knowledge about the everyday interactions of people in public spaces. Inevitably this would produce findings that we hoped would be of use to policy makers and providers of services, but this was not intended to be action research as such. The 'change' we wanted to address concerned both understanding about public spaces in towns; and a development of our own research methods toward engaging with local people. It was not our intention to effect direct change in the town and we ensured that participants understood that the town was a case study and that they were being invited to take part in academic rather than action research.

Tensions and paradoxes of public space: the study context

Central and local governments and numerous voluntary organisations have expressed commitment to the idea of providing public spaces in the UK (DTLR, 2002; ODPM, 2002). Studies have shown that good quality public spaces can benefit health and wellbeing, and local economies. Because, rhetorically at least, they are open to everybody, they can allow 'community' to exist and flourish (Cattell, 2004; Williams and Green, 2001). A brief review of the literature identifies two prominent narratives in current writing and thinking on public space in Europe and North America. One refers to the apparent decline of public space, linked to processes such as privatisation, regulation and surveillance. The other offers a less pessimistic view, of public spaces enabling diverse groups to come together to display their identities in the public arena. Thus there is seemingly a paradox between public spaces as sites

where difference is being eliminated, and sites were difference can be celebrated (Sennett, 1974; Mitchell, 2003; Sorkin, 1992; Young, 1990; Zukin, 1995).

Precisely because they can be used by everyone, public spaces are frequently considered contested spaces; places where opposition, confrontation, resistance and subversion can be played out over 'the right to space' (Mitchell, 1995; 2003). These contestations may involve people from a range of social groups based on gender, age, ethnicity, sexuality, (dis)ability, social class, and so on (Dines and Cattell, 2006; Malone, 2003; Valentine, 1996). They may centre on the different meanings attached to different spaces, or draw on deeper struggles about social representations, or collective 'myths', about spaces (Cresswell, 1996). How spaces are understood and used may also depend upon individual and group characteristics (e.g. Laws, 1997; Low 2000; Matthews et al, 2000; Mitchell, 1995; McDowell, 1999). Thus public spaces are imbued with power relations; particular social groups can be encouraged, tolerated, regulated, and sometimes excluded from public space depending on the degree to which they might be deemed 'in' or 'out' of place (Cresswell, 1996). It is in this context that the research presented in this paper was conducted; aiming to understand who uses which spaces, when and how, and how behaviour is interpreted by those observing it. As Dines and Cattell comment (2006; 1), the evidence base on ways in which different social and cultural groups use public space is thin (Williams and Green, 2001). This study was driven by a desire to understand the temporal and seasonal patterns of usage of different public spaces in order to uncover some of the ways in which time, as well as social and cultural representations and practices, impacts upon the use of public space. The study covered three types of public spaces: residential neighbourhoods, green open spaces and town centre spaces, and the sites selected included indoor shopping centres, a market square, a park, a canal towpath, residential playing fields and suburban shopping plazas (Holland et al, 2007)[1].

Selecting observation as a research method

A mixed methods approach was used, comprising surveys and interviews as well as the extensive observations that are the focus of this article. Observation has become a staple method in the social sciences (Angrosino, 2005; Wallace, 2005), used frequently in research exploring the actions of individuals in public spaces (e.g. Kellaher, 2007; Low, 2000; Lofland 1973; Southwell, 2007). However, while methods such as participatory diagramming and mapping (Emmel and O'Keefe, 1996; Kesby, 2000), photography (Chaplin, 2005), diaries (Johnson and Bytheway, 2001) and video (Kindon, 2003) have been reported, we contend that observation has not been used extensively in a participatory capacity.

Madge and Harrison's (1938) summation of the benefits of observation methods still relevant today. These include;
- being able to directly observe the behaviour of individuals and groups infers a 'face validity' that ensures, to a degree, that social realities can be simultaneously observed, documented and analysed by the researcher,

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[1] The research was funded by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation for 18 months. Of this, 12 months was dedicated to data collection, including user surveys, semi-structured interviews and the observation methods discussed here. The research aimed to provide detailed, 'real life' data about how different people used different public spaces over the course of one year, and to analyse how interactions in these spaces differ by age, gender or race/ethnicity

- observation methods enable researchers to document and understand the context within which activities and events occur,
- firsthand experience of behaviours and events in their setting (or context) enables inductive inquiry rather than, necessarily, reliance on prior conceptualizations,
- observation has the potential to reveal the mundane, routine activities that collectively make up those practices of everyday life that may escape the discursive attention of participants,
- observation may permit the documenting of the life worlds of individuals who are unable to express their lived experiences verbally,
- through observation it is possible to understand what people may be unwilling or unable to discuss through other, predominantly verbal (interview and survey) methods.

It was for these reasons that the observation method formed a major component of this research. The strategy was driven by a desire to get a little closer to 'what really happens' in public spaces to expand on more commonly researched aspects of what people think happens, or what people say happens within them. In order to cover as much ground as possible, over an extended time-frame, the involvement of many people working part-time offered a practical solution to the type of observation that we hoped to accomplish. We now discuss the development of the participatory observation method, describing how we anticipated the method might work, and how it worked in practice.

Non-participative, semi-structured observation
A non-participative, semi-structured observation method was devised for recording basic data about the characteristics, location and activities of groups and individuals within selected observation sites.[2] Following a trial period, it was clear that the public spaces selected for observation were too large and complex to observe without further sub-division into 'micro-sites'. Figure 1 exemplifies the elements involved in one site, an indoor shopping mall, which was subdivided into four micro-sites. For each micro-site an observation sheet was devised that comprised an outline diagram of key features and a matrix for recording the demographic characteristics (approximate age, gender, and visible ethnicity) of people using the site and any interactions between them.

A research method was required that was both *structured* - to enable comparisons between sites and across different times, and *flexible* - to enable the complexity of activities in public space to be recorded. The method also needed to be clear enough for a large number of non-academic researchers to conduct without the 'supervision' of academics. The ethnographic approach devised for this study encouraged observers to focus their attention on the micro-locations within each study location, and then on particular individuals, activities or groups of individuals within them. This produced a more nuanced account of site-specific geographies of public space, revealing strategies and locations of territorial practices by certain groups, and producing detailed observations on interactions.

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[2] Here a distinction is being made in the traditional sense between 'participative' and 'non-participative' observation. The method was 'non-participative' given the minimised interaction between the observers and any users of the public spaces. However, the research itself remains participatory in that it involved 'non-academic' co-researchers.

Figure 1. Sample observation site (from Holland et al., 2007; p13)

[Place Figure 1 here]

Observation in practice: recruitment and training
Over twelve months (October-October), more than sixty people (Table 1) were recruited to the project through local voluntary groups and subsequent snowballing from recruited co-researchers. They underwent an intensive day of training before committing to the project. We aimed to recruit a sample of participants who were representative of the diversity of town's population, purposefully recruiting through voluntary groups serving younger and older people[3]. A decision to offer payment for this work was taken because it was important to acknowledge the level of commitment involved in undertaking this work in all weathers and various times of day and night. Given our aim to involve a range of people with different backgrounds, it was clear that some people would not be able to take part without recompense. Payment for time worked (reported through timesheets) was based on a standard consultancy rate offered by our host institution. Co-researchers were responsible for their own tax returns and interactions with benefits agencies.

In the recruitment literature and at initial meetings the participants were variously referred to, and called themselves, 'volunteers' or 'observers'. Over time there was discussion in group meetings about the nature of the role and the most appropriate name for it. 'Volunteers' was felt inappropriate because of the payments; 'observers' was fine for describing the observation itself, but for some it failed to capture their involvement in reflection and analysis – and as the academics also carried out observations 'observers' could be ambiguous. To take these ideas on board and to reflect the sense of a co-production of knowledge, the term 'co-researchers' was suggested and this became the favoured term for the context of the whole study.

During initial training and ongoing supervision in the field we were further able to vet co-researchers on their ability to collect and return robust data. Seven training events were held over the year consisting of two hours of 'classroom' based discussion when participants met the academic team, were introduced to the rationale of the project, the observation method, and research ethics and safety procedures. Confidentiality was taken very seriously and co-researchers received instruction on the importance of not identifying known individuals in their data. This was followed by a period of 'hands on' observing at some of the research sites supervised by the academic team. Training concluded with a debriefing session when co-researchers were able to discuss further their role (if any) in the project and clarify any further concerns. Co-researchers were provided with a project Handbook and follow-up support: members of the academic team were on hand by telephone and in person to offer practical (and increasingly, motivational) support whenever people were in the field.

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[3] More discussion of our recruitment strategy is available in Clark et al., (2005).

Table 1: Observers receiving initial training across 12 months of the project

	Male	Female	Total
Under 24	10	17	27
25-49	4	11	15
Over 50	3	18	21
Total	17	46	63

Between initial training and the completion of the first session of observation, seventeen people dropped out of the project for a number of reasons including feeling unsuited to the work and finding other paid work In all 46 people (aged 16-73 years) took part in observations across all days of the week and in all weather. A core group continued to work with the project up to and beyond the 12 month fieldwork period: others could only commit shorter periods.

Co-researchers were given guidance about what and how to observe in the context of the aims of the research. The intention was to give enough structure to the observations to capture essential data and avoid observers feeling adrift, while allowing enough flexibility for observers to adapt to changing situations and perhaps 'deviate from the script' in the interest of the research question. Groups discussed how to judge the age and 'ethnicity' of others – in this case primarily by visual and some auditory clues; how to select which groups/individuals to concentrate on; how to decide when to stick to the allowed route and timing, and when to deviate from it; what to do when the observation site was very busy or completely deserted. Co-researchers were also asked to distinguish between 'objective' or categorical data and their own reflections on what they were observing. One member of each pair completed the observation sheet (Figure 2) while the other completed an ethnographic 'diary' extract to document a wider representation of activity. All co-researchers were trained in both techniques to enable alternation.

Figure 2. A completed observation sheet

[Place Figure 2 here]

Observation in practice: Safety and ethics
It was emphasised that a non-participatory covert observational technique requires observers to avoid as far as possible any intervention in the situations they would observe (with clear exceptions related to safety and legal requirements). Co-researchers were instructed to be as 'invisible' as possible and not interrupt activities and behaviours in the places they were investigating. However the research was not 'secret' and if approached about what they were doing, they were to give the enquirer a handout about the project. In practice, co-researchers were seldom approached except for a small number of occasions in either the municipal park (generally by members of the public); inside a privately owned shopping centre (always by security personnel); or by friends.

During the study we periodically observed the co-researchers in action, unannounced. From this it became clear that in busy and moderately busy environments it was difficult to identify them and most of the general public passed them by without a glance. In very quiet or deserted environments and later in the evening they were more obvious so during late night sessions co-researchers were always paired with an

academic. All co-researchers were instructed at the outset to leave any situation which they found uncomfortable and to inform the duty academic contact if this happened.

Other ethical issues raised by the method were discussed in training, informal meeting with the academics and at subsequent meetings. These included the ethics of watching people and recording personal judgements of their activities including what to do in the case of observing a crime or misdemeanour. In such cases co-researchers were told to follow their own code of ethical behaviour and to 'act as they would if they were not in observation mode'. The research was reviewed by our institution's ethics committee and we followed the British Psychological Society guidelines for conducting ethical observations in public spaces (BPS, 2006).

Reflections on the research method

Managing expectations
One claim of a participatory approach is a more transparent research process and perhaps democratisation of the use of 'public' funding. However this openness can expose the research and researchers to criticism, especially if things do not go strictly to plan and we were expected to give a good account of the research and its purpose. The interpretive, exploratory and participative aspects of the method were often questioned by potential observers and others. Thus participants as well as 'professional researchers' using participative methods need to be able to deal with public scrutiny, including being able to outline what might be the purpose and expected outcomes of the research.

Throughout the research we needed to convey our academic requirements and those of the funding body and methodological understandings of ethnographic observation to the team of co-researchers who were completing the bulk of the observations. Of course, uncertainty about, and the relinquishing of some of the 'control' over, a research project is one of the principals of participatory methodologies (Chambers, 1994; 1997) that has been much critiqued (Cooke and Kothari, 2001). We intended to embrace some of the uncertainty of the approach by 'handing over' part of the data collection process to co-researchers. In practice this meant that the data coming in from the field was variable in quality and completeness and dealing with this as well as discussing it with co-researchers individually and in groups became time-consuming especially for the academic leading the field work. Even with support, not all of the observers could do the work to a rigorous standard, yet others consistently turned in excellent and thoughtful reports. The use of participatory, inclusive research requires an acceptance of some tension between capacity building and the demand for rigorous data. To capture greater understanding of this role, interviews were carried out with the co-researchers to explore their views on the experience of co-production.

Nevertheless, once they had committed to the project most co-researchers found that the method developed their enthusiasm for observation. Many discussed the pleasure of discovering that they were now more observant when out and about, even while not 'officially' observing for the project. Some particularly relished the opportunity to be flexible within the research, for example in identifying and suggesting other observation locations; dodging security officers and CCTV cameras (and in doing so, learning some of the spatial practices of those less privileged); and working alongside

others of different ages, social backgrounds and knowledge of the town. On the other hand the need for a structured process perhaps contributed to a few observers' reluctance or lack of confidence about wavering from what they interpreted as strict instructions.

Some co-researchers were keen to look for something 'extra-ordinary' in the ordinary or conversely to seek the mundane in the unusual. In part this was driven by a desire to produce 'interesting' or 'relevant' data and make a 'real contribution' to the research or offer 'value for money'. Occasionally this came into conflict with our aim of observing and documenting 'the ordinary' per se, the better to understand it. Here the iterative nature of the feedback and further fieldwork gave opportunities to discuss again the nature of knowledge and what the project could hope to discover.

Motivation
The project had begun in an advantageous position in that the funding body was willing to fund the payment of participants and to support the uncertainties of this way of working. The question of payment is a vexed one (Russell et al., 2000; Thompson, 1996) and raises questions about whether co-researchers were working alongside or for the academic team. Payment was undoubtedly a key motivating factor, but some observers described a sense of growing professionalism and attachment to the study, determined to "*to see it through to the end*". Feedback from participants suggests that payment as such was appreciated as an acknowledgement of serious respect for their involvement, and that the rate of payment was significant in the retention of some participants.

In terms of the practicability of paying lay researchers, we had seriously underestimated the amount of time needed to collect the field data and check individuals' contributions against their allocated time sheets and the observation schedules. We also quickly discovered that lay participants are unlikely to be familiar with the workings of a university and its financial systems, and that university systems may not be geared up to respond to individuals not accustomed to working within large systems. A good deal of time and energy was spent on marrying the two sets of expectations - pointing up the need for flexible and creative administrative arrangements to deal with lay participants in academic research.

Observation as a participative and iterative method of inquiry
The participatory process can present an approach to research that favours a more flexible, circular process of knowledge formation (Kindon et al., 2007). Our participatory observational research involved reflection on what was observed, the questions guiding the observations, and the theoretical underpinnings of the research, leading to further data collection. The opportunity for reflection was central to the process and was facilitated through dialogue between academic researchers *and* co-researchers when data can be reassessed, interpretations questioned, and new avenues for inquiry presented. The ability to accommodate this dialogue is a crucial aspect of the participatory process and this was developed in the project through repeated interactions between academic and co-researchers, but also between co-researchers, building up a corpus of knowledge about public spaces in the town as narratives that recounted experiences in the field. However, the process of questioning, data gathering, and analysis is something that not all participants wanted to necessarily engage with. Although all participants received the same amount of formal training,

it became clear that those with past experience of conducting research produced different sorts of observations to those without. Despite considerable 'pre-planning' to ensure all observers could begin from the same starting point, reflecting our initial desire for uniform observations, this ultimately remained an impossible task that denied the histories and experiences of the observers as individual agents. Moreover not all participants wanted to engage in all parts of the research process from beginning to end.

Claims about truth have historically privileged the views of trained experts over those of 'ordinary' people (Foucault, 1980). This remains manifest in much social research where knowledge ('truth') comes from experts (researchers, scientists etc.) whose job is to present the 'truth' about other people's lives. In theory, participatory methods can offer a way of renegotiating the subordination of 'ordinary' knowledge by providing a way for 'ordinary' people to express their own perceptions, understandings and knowledge. By engaging with 'ordinary' knowledge, in addition to providing a platform for social change, and familiarising or putting participants at ease with the research process, participatory methods may provide alternative visions of reality. While the observation method could record the number and type of people present in public spaces, it was not possible to develop explanations for trends in presence and absence. Nonetheless, co-researchers were keen to offer their own opinions, based both on what they observed and their own experiences of living and working in the town. Co-researchers commented on the ways in which different parks, shops and neighbourhoods are frequented or avoided by different social groups, of how their relationships with different places in the town have changed over their own life courses, and of how they currently negotiate different public spaces in their everyday lives. Alongside interviews with local officials and business people, these 'insider' reflections went some way to propose explanations for what was observed, including for example, insight into the complex territorialities of younger people at weekends and after school, of the activities of older people during the evenings, and of the ways in which the socio-economic demographics of the town played out in the social geographies of the different neighbourhood spaces. The possibility of documenting and understanding ordinary experiences and lay knowledge of real life, and the development of methods to enable this, represents a real benefit of participation.

Yet as comments from participants in this study demonstrated, the tension between so called 'scientific' and 'ordinary' knowledge remained throughout the project, less in terms of 'whose view is best' but rather in the ongoing labelling of different views and opinions and in the ongoing positions. Ultimately we remained the 'academics' in the study, never truly 'local' (indeed to 'go local' would be seen as inappropriate). We were reminded at times of our own potentially privileged positions with regard to the construction and dissemination of knowledge. For example, we were conscious of needing to negotiate how marginalised groups such as street drinkers and the homeless, and different groups of young people, were referred to by co-researchers. As academics we held overall responsibility for the research findings, and we needed to carefully consider the potentially derogatory and prejudicial labels (notably class-signifiers such as 'townies', 'goths' and 'chavs') and opinions that were ventured. However, the study also concerned the ways in which co-researchers interpreted different groups and their activities and interactions, and in order to maintain some

degree of participant 'voice' we purposefully decided to retain some of this language in the final report.

The co-construction of knowledge

One critique of participatory research has been the tendency to approach local experiences and knowledge as a 'fixed commodity' that can be mined for the purposes of research, or that can potentially reify 'common sense' knowledge, masking the unequal and potentially exploitative power structures behind its construction (Kothari, 2001). We were also aware of the potential criticism that this research remains embedded in existing institutional power structures, with academics defining, monitoring and adapting the progress of the project. While we certainly attempted to open up the research process to a more participatory style of research, we do not claim a fully participatory research process, with participants commissioning, designing, conducting, analysing and presenting research. In this case as in others our ability to recruit lay participants depended on first securing funding. This is one way in which the success of participatory research may depend upon the ability of outsiders to initiate the process. For participatory research to succeed, it is nevertheless vital to quickly establish a rapport with the relevant communities, explaining the purpose and relevance of the research and justifying methods which depend not only upon a researcher's technical understanding of them, but also the capacity to 'stay in the background', facilitating rather than dominating discussion, and being prepared to be taught by participants rather than impart expert advice to them (Sense, 2006).

Breaking down the 'academic' and 'research subject' divide is not so straightforward in practice, not least because it involves rethinking assumptions about who owns research and who should benefit from it. As Kesby (2000) comments, the present climate of institutional pressures for academic researchers to contribute towards strong RAE/REF submissions, or to attract funding based in part on the strength of publications lists, relinquishing control of a research project to participants who may desire very different outcomes, can be a difficult process. In this we are mindful of the comments of two participants:

> *"I would think getting local people involved is good – they know the area and may have some expectations to bring to the study. Don't know that I'd know where to start analysing it. If you have lots of information from different people it will give you pointers – we only see our own." (JA)*

> *"I think my views are that there [is] so much behind the scenes that they need people like you to do the analysing. You people would have an overview. Lay people have a particular interest – they will be interested in a particular activity. Some people wouldn't like children running around. I have grand children and may think a different way. Some people will not be keen on teenagers. I think academics need to be more objective than lay people who may have a particular point of view" (PF).*

While we were careful to change language, for example referring to observers as co-researchers rather than participants, and presented findings of the research alongside some of them, we are aware of the potential irony that some co-researchers did not necessarily want full control of the research process. The co-researchers unavoidably

brought their own perspectives to bear on what they saw. As co-researcher PF implies, some had their own 'interests', ideas and concerns about the spaces, groups and activities they were observing. Some also concentrated their observations on the people and activities they found either the most familiar, or most different, to their own lives. Yet as PF also suggests, co-researchers may believe (however incorrectly) that academic researchers are better positioned to present 'objective', perhaps more 'truthful' accounts. While as academic researchers we are in receipt of data collected from several co-researchers, each with their own perceptions and positions, it is of course important to not conflate data quantity with objectivism.

Conclusions: Learning to see?

In offering their own views and experiences of 'observing', and of living and working in the town, co-researchers contributed to theory building and analysis of the observation data. The contribution of their 'lay knowledge' and their engagement with the study thus embedded participants in the research process. Furthermore, this engagement enabled a re-evaluation of the position of local knowledge in the scientific enterprise. The co-researchers brought a depth of local knowledge, experience, history and opinion that proved invaluable in our attempts to better understand the public spaces in the town; with co-researchers frequently commenting on how their own stereotypes has been proved or disproved through the research:

> *"[I am] just noticing more – you take more notice of what people are doing and where they are. You keep your eyes open and you are aware of what you are seeing" (PA)*

> *"I have got to know [the town] better, the old areas etc. my knowledge of being in [the town] has been enriched by being on the project. The canal I went down. I was absolutely amazed it was so peaceful down there. I know that without the project I would have not known about it" (ED).*

While most of the co-researchers therefore claimed some insights into both everyday life in the town and the academic research process - including differentiating between objective and reflective data, it would be wrong to claim that taking part in the research turned them into 'objective' observers. The phenomena co-researchers focused their attention on, and the ways in which they interpreted what they were seeing, was based upon co-researchers' positions and contexts; that is, their histories, their identities, their relationships with the town and its public spaces and what they each considered to be of interest. Thus we do not claim that the data produced by the co-researchers was somehow more 'authentic' or 'truthful' than that produced by academic researchers and the approach it is certainly not immune to the challenges of positionality and researcher bias. However, we do believe that the participatory method opened up to some people the idea of taking a more analytical and critical approach to observing and reflecting on the world around them.

It is through challenging research practices that the ethos of participatory research has begun to spread beyond the disciplinary confines of development studies to other forms of participation. Participatory research not only engages in the debate about 'research relevance' or 'action research' but also contributes to concern about the way knowledge is produced in social science research. In its deepest form, by 'handing

over the stick' (Chambers, 1997), participatory research aims to place the production of knowledge into the hands of 'local people' who can use it to achieve equality, though as many have argued, this is difficult to achieve (Cooke and Kothari, 2001). We did not 'hand over the stick' entirely, and some would criticise the method as failing in this regard, yet given the nature of research funding and academic necessities we would argue that an honest attempt at participation of a kind may often be better than no attempt at all. As with other research methods, constant trials may refine the tools and the ways that we use them.

From this exercise in participatory research we claim legitimate results that produced some useful insights into the phenomena being studied. The knowledge we collectively produced was different from that which would have been produced by the academic team working alone: whether this knowledge is more or less accurate, legitimate or scientific is open to debate, as are the meanings of these concepts in this context. The use of additional methods, including interviews and a public space user survey, as well as access to the full observation data set, provided us with knowledge that was not available to the co-researchers. While we are not claiming this offered us an all seeing and all knowing perspective, it did provide us with insights from multiple perspectives that needed to be considered alongside the views of individual co-researchers during the analysis, write up, and dissemination of the research.

We learned to look at research and our own attitudes to knowledge in different ways, gaining clearer insight into the tacit knowledge that lay participants can bring to research and how that can and can not be used. The co-researchers in various ways shared this experience of discovery and many of them felt that they had become equipped with new skills, learned to look at the world around them with more attention, and to see their town in a new light. Doing research in this way was complex to organise and to manage, and it came with additional costs. We found that as with other forms of collaborative research including between academics, the benefits of joint working needed to be balanced with the necessary compromises and (to some extent) sharing of control, particularly over the production of raw data. Nevertheless the majority of us, academics and co-researchers alike, found that working together in this way was rewarding on many levels, raised as many questions as it answered, and deserves replication.

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