Working with COMMUNITIES for Academic Research

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Working relationships

Getting to know a community develops your understanding of why the group formed and why members maintain it. This allows you to be sensitive to particular dynamics, internal conflicts and collectively agreed modes of conduct, behaviour or needs. *This is especially true on a practical level, i.e the group always meets on a Tuesday evening. Feeling that you understand and respect their evolving needs is a really important part of working with any group or individual.*

Alternatively you can create a new community cohort by building up relationships with individuals, agreeing expectations and then arranging mutually convenient dates and times to meet. These might be drop in, or bookable events or workshops. It's worth remembering that lengthy forms can be daunting to potential participants; introduce them once participants are invested in the project.

Try to make all participants feel welcome, safe and comfortable in that critical first ten minutes of any meeting. Agree your group 'rules of engagement' within the workshop. These might include discussions remaining confidential, or not interrupting one another. Ensure reasonable and adequate levels of support are in place (or made available) for participants, such as counselling, mental health support of support with maintaining healthy relationships for example.

Ask the group what they hope to gain from the project. They may, or may not of hoped to develop specific skills or want something more intangible such as feeling accepted within a group, feeling listened to, making new friends or gaining new experiences. The more you can understand their motivations for participating, and try to support them, the more positive the potential interaction. *I have designed a task tailored around one or more participant's specific interests before during a workshop, to increase engagement.*

Communication

Being really clear and transparent, your research methodology, what each stage will involve for the participants, how data is collected and used, and defining the final outcomes for your project are incredibly important.

Make sure for discussions, so that any questions to be answered or concerns aired.

Only offer what you can guarantee. If you aren't sure if you can offer a benefit or not, don't mention it until it is confirmed. It's much harder to re-build a relationship if participants feel disappointed or let down.

Advice and Recommendations

-Involve communities at the earliest opportunity (during the planning if possible).

-Share your passion for the project, enthusiasm is infectious and a smile is your most powerful tool, as well as open, friendly and welcoming body language.

-If you meet with a group on multiple occasions, spend a bit of time checking in with each person at the start of each session. *Ask and remember anything significant they have mentioned about their personal lives, such as a recent event, illness, their pet, or grandchild etc. It shows you have remembered and valued them.*

-Consult! Ask the community what would make it difficult for them to contribute to the project (barriers), what outcomes they might like to see the project result in, and the types of skills or experiences they might like to gain during the project.

-Set the overall tone. Aim for calm, friendly and relaxed, respectful. *Discourage any sense of hierarchy or favouritism within the group.*

-It can't be stressed enough that building trusted relationships with communities takes time. Start by building positive and trusted professional relationships with community leaders, support workers, and 'gatekeepers' who are respected by the community.

-Read the room. Constantly assess the body language of participants during your workshop. Go out of your way to put participants at their ease, such as offering drinks, refreshments, signposting toilets or asking them if you can do anything else to make them feel more comfortable.

-Refer back to the agreed 'rules of engagement' if at any stage the workshop begins to take a different direction which makes either you or the participants feel comfortable. This can be gently and firmly managed throughout the workshop in a polite and respectful way, i.e. 'Thank you for that useful comment, I can see X also has something important to share.'

In Practice

-Gather as much information about the group & individuals as possible, plan the workshop, and then be prepared to adapt it.

(*During one workshop I quickly realised that time was needed to build trust which would only be achieved by making the workshop much more informal and enabling discussions to take place. No one will know if you change the workshop plan, so if it isn't working, try something else.*)

- Planning a fun 'warm up' activity is essential: writing, drawing, singing, music, or yoga can engage a group quickly and help individuals to form new bonds.

-Be prepared that individuals within a group may have very different (at times conflicting) needs.

-It's better to offer something to everyone than nothing to some participants within a group.

-Offer unconditional support ('*you can't get this wrong*'), and lot of praise, support and encouragement to all participant and make the praise specific.

-Acknowledging how someone is feeling can be really powerful, if you aren't sure, ask them.

-Evaluate throughout. Ask what has worked well, what could we improve, and ask for ideas for future research, projects or collaborations.