

Peer research, power and ethics: Navigating participatory research in an Africa-focused mobilities study before and during COVID-19

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Introduction

This paper reflects on peer research and its potential to transform young people's life chances through a study of young women's daily mobility and access to work in low-income neighbourhoods of three Africa cities.¹ Peer research is a participatory research method in which research subjects (from the same social or generational group) are active partners in the research process. Peer researchers are sometimes called 'community researchers' or 'peer interviewers' (Burke et al. 2019, Devotta et al. 2016, Mosavel et al. 2011). Participatory research *per se* refers to a broader approach concerned with the involvement of community members in some or all aspects of research design, process, dissemination, or impact (Banks et al 2019).

The paper pays particular attention to the challenges and potentials of the peer research method that emerged when our project was delayed and modified during the Covid-19 pandemic. Increasing attention is being paid to the potential for change when peer researchers are involved in the research process: they are experts in their own lives. From an academic researcher perspective peer research may facilitate better access to groups potentially reluctant to engage with professional researchers, and enable higher quality, more nuanced data, built through insider understanding, empathy and sensitivity (Porter 2016; Yang and Dibb 2020). Potential attributes of peer research include peer researchers' personal empowerment (as training, work experience, and social interaction with researchers build self-esteem); mitigation of the usual power imbalances between researcher and research subject, and wider community empowerment, encouraging action.

Participatory projects differ in scope and scale. Some participatory projects are managed entirely by the communities, whereas other projects are coordinated by academic researchers, or involve an equal partnership between community members and academic researchers (Banks et al 2013). The key issue is to be reflexive about how power is distributed, and

¹ See our project website <https://transportandyouthemploymentin africa.com>

control is exerted (Banks et al 2013). This paper is based on a partnership approach situated within a participatory action research methodology, with the goal of implementing policy changes to support young women's improved access to daily travel journeys (to enable access to goods, services and employment) following data collection.

Our approach has been shaped by the first author's prior experience of research focused on involving children in research and data analysis. This approach, suggested by an Indian activist NGO, The Concerned for Working Children (CWC), was less focused on conventional methods of consulting children, but rather involve them as researchers. A series of physical mobilities-focused peer research studies followed in Africa, including a child mobility project involving 70 young peer researchers in 24 sites across Ghana, Malawi, and South Africa (2006-2010), and a follow-up project on young people's virtual mobility and mobile phone use (2012-2015) in the same sites (Porter et al. 2010, 2017; Hampshire et al. 2012),

This paper draws on research with eighteen unemployed young women aged 18-35y resident in low-income areas of three African cities (Tunis, Abuja, and Cape Town) – 6 in each of the study cities. These young women (recruited in early 2019 through local NGO advertisements), were trained as peer researchers, employing many of the key features of the earlier projects: a one-week training (in-depth interviewing, mobility diaries, participant observation) after joint agreement of ethical guidelines and methods appropriate to task and context, then a period of independent research (10 days minimum) and agreed participation in (approximately 4-5 monthly) Country Consultative Group (CCG) meetings for discussion of findings and potential follow-up actions with the policy community.

The peer researchers have been involved in the design of the project, data collection, analysis, and interpretation of findings, and writing processes. Our project also involved other research participatory methodologies beyond peer research, including involving or interviewing policy stakeholders, sometimes conducted by the wider team. During COVID-19, when face-to-face interviewing was no longer possible, peer researchers were interviewed to explore their perceptions of personal costs and benefits of their work (mostly via WhatsApp).

This paper is divided into three parts. Firstly, we situate peer research in historical perspective, exploring how participatory research is moving in the direction of active partnerships rather than outside 'experts' consulting local participants. In this section, we reflect on the ethical issues that have often been linked to peer research/child-led/youth-led

research. In part 2 we explore the transformative potential of peer research methodologies but also difficulties encountered through three key themes that emerged: Confidence building, income generation, and diary writing as a way of dealing with complex emotions. In part 3, we discuss power differentials. As the co-investigative process has deepened, requiring intense levels of engagement from all those entangled in it – peer researchers, academics, and urban policy makers drawn into the project consultative groups - we try to track how evident power differentials across the diverse actors involved (spanning age, gender, expertise and wealth) have played out to date. Finally, we conclude on the importance of reflecting on vulnerabilities in this time of crisis.

From consultation to partnerships

Initiatives involving youth as peer researchers have grown in high-income countries over recent decades, mostly through NGO work, and associated with the 1989 UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and its emphasis on children's rights to participation. In the Global South, although initiatives can be traced back to peer-to-peer child health education in the late 1970s (Pridmore and Stephens 2000), it has gathered pace relatively slowly and is often still set in health arenas (e.g. Hodes 2021). Academic researchers have possibly been less attracted to peer research than NGO staff due to university-imposed pressures for rapid research publication and funding and employment concerns.

There is increasingly an attentiveness towards the difficulties of doing participatory research when conflicts of interest emerge, or when peer researchers encounter ethical difficulties, since they continue to live and socialise with respondents (Banks et al 2013). Some scholars such as Hammersley (2017) question whether research should be done by trained experts (with professional university training) and consider issues of overall ethical responsibility, with respect to minimising harm, the final research product, the validity of findings, especially in the context of child-led research. It has also been debated whether children are actually able to understand other children's lives better, or at least understand their own worlds better than 'trained experts' (Tisdal 2012, Coyne and Carter 2017).

Peer research can also raise significant ethical issues for those who initiate it (Yang and Dibb 2020). Key questions involve who should be involved and in what capacity (such as data collection, data analysis or advocacy roles) and in what way their work should be compensated.

Building confidence, generating income, and managing emotions

Learning from the experiences of young women involved highlighted the transformative value for peer researchers themselves in terms of their own personal development. In Abuja, responses to some of the key ethical issues were overwhelmingly positive, especially regarding the degree to which the interviewing work gave peer researchers confidence:

[It]‘uplifted my self-esteemI feel confident about myself’;

‘It’s built my confidence’;

‘[I learnt] how to relate to difficult people I come across’;

‘The people you get to interview or interact with tends to build up a wealth of knowledge and confidence’;

‘[It]made me more outspoken whenever [I]am in the midst of high calibre of people’.

The CCGs were also considered beneficial:

‘I gained a lot ...like getting to know the public relation officer of the Road Safety Commission and the representative of the transport authority’;

‘I was delighted to have been given an audience’;

‘I used to be an introverted person but CCG meetings made me speak up sometime – positive’.

In Tunis, two of the youngest peer researchers provided detailed responses of their experiences (working through a young Arabic-speaking Tunis-based RA). As in Abuja they are very positive regarding what that they have gained through the work, particularly regarding how they engage with their peers:

‘[It] has changed me for the better; now I pay more attention to detail and notice more behaviour of others, respect more others’ feelings and try to not cross lines of their comfort zones’;

‘[It] gave me more insight and deeper understanding...I developed more empathy and I am now more grateful to what I have’.

Both of the young researchers in Tunis were particularly positive about their involvement in CCG meetings:

‘It was so important to me because I had an opportunity to speak and be heard. I feel more confident now because I know how it is like to speak out to someone responsible being present at the meeting and discussing with the other part was like I’m delivering all the women’s experiences that they told me...[and] I felt the other members of the CCG were also kind of positive to support and take it [into] consideration’;

‘The meeting has developed a social skill in me... I felt really confident stepping forward and asking, I felt heard and understood... the response was very positive and respectful’.

They also valued the lockdown diaries: ‘a great idea ... I had fun writing [but] also I have my own proof of how I experienced that period’. However, both young researchers also referred to the emotions they experienced when sad stories emerged: ‘it’s really not easy to hear [a] woman talk about bad things happen[ing] to her when she’s laughing sometimes, crying sometimes, it touched me deeply because it could happen to me too’.

In our Cape Town township study sites conditions have been less conducive to sustained peer research, seemingly partly a legacy of continued inequalities in this post-apartheid society. At the first CCG (where there were black and white representatives from diverse organisations) peer researchers were far more reserved than elsewhere. Afterwards, however, when asked for their impressions, one remarked, ‘this [women’s access to transport] is a big issue nationally, now I know [it’s] all over the world, so I need to continue being part and parcel of making some change.’ A few peer researchers indicated the potential benefits they thought might come from the study: one had included her certificates in job applications, another used her certificate to obtain a call-centre job interview. Sadly, however, with COVID-19 it has become particularly difficult to maintain contact; a majority seem to have relocated and all to be experiencing considerable difficulties in their daily lives.

Given the security challenges prevailing in the project sites, peer researchers and community leaders have been crucial to safe access throughout the study. Our peer research teams have been especially critical since the onset of COVID-19, when we became largely dependent upon their personal mobility diaries for charting ongoing, often quite sensitive, mobility issues. When we contacted them at the start of the pandemic using WhatsApp to find out how they were coping, we received distressing text messages: “I have no money to buy food”, “alive-and you?”, “I’m stressed”. The academic teams were in an invidious position at

this point since we were unable to continue face-to-face fieldwork safely yet our peer researchers were clearly struggling as family income sources dried up and food prices rose dramatically – some wanted to continue to work despite dangers of infection. Our solution was to require peer researchers to stop interviewing outside home and instead, if they so wished, write personal (im)mobility diaries on their virtual contacts (through mobile phone) and their necessary travel for basic goods and services. This strategy has been very successful in the longer term in providing them with small sums of money, though delays in fund transfers were inevitable at the start of the pandemic. Lockdown diaries enabled the Abuja peer researchers to continue to utilise their training at a time when little opportunity was available either to socialise or make an income. Diary-writing was reported mainly as a relief from the boredom of not being able to visit family and friends: ‘it reduced the idleness as many things were put on hold’; but in one case it ‘made me find myself more. It made me know how to think deep and reflect about myself and my daily activities.’ Income gained from project work in Abuja seems to have gone into diverse small projects/necessities:

‘I supported my mum with some money to do petty business (in cooked food)’;

‘The first payment surfaced as my daughter was hospitalized, hence I could settle hospital bills’;

‘(It) help me to open small business for my father’ (and subsequently provided school fees for a sibling and funds to buy a motorcycle-taxi which will bring in more income)’;

‘I now have ...my own sewing machine with the money I earned’.

However, as some of the researchers noted, payment timings were affected by the slow pace of fund transfers (from the UK), inevitably further delayed by the pandemic. Specific costs of project participation are rarely mentioned; two researchers referred to the disappointment they felt when people refused interviews or pressed for payment, while one noted difficulties ‘managing the emotional involvement due to some response(s)’. These emotional issues appear to have deepened in all sites during COVID-19.

Reflecting on power differentials

Throughout the project, we reflected on the process by which co-constructed knowledge emerges and the potentially diverse perceptions of power and responsibility for change between the older, wealthier, well-qualified adults (male and female) in our research teams and CCGs, and our young, unemployed female peer researchers.

We asked peer researchers about team relations, while recognising that this would ideally be done by external reviewers, difficult during the pandemic. In Abuja, there were references to (mostly older) academic project staff as ‘mentors’; ‘I see them all as my parents and teachers’; ‘I got really comfortable working with them’; ‘they made corrections without ‘scaring’’. In Tunis the wider project team (which had more young RAs of similar age to the peer researchers) were all seen as ‘very cooperative and understanding’; ‘new friends I made’. This is positive, but it also points to likely ongoing responsibilities for the academic team in future years.

The potential of the peer researchers’ work to advance improved daily travel for young women in their communities remains open to question. In Tunis and Abuja these young unemployed women, having diligently collected evidence, engaged enthusiastically in pre-pandemic face-to-face CCG meetings, which they perceived to be peopled by professionals with some power (at least in their own circuits) to initiate change. Their engagement with (mostly older male) CCG members, as noted earlier, seems to have been surprisingly uncontentious. In Tunis, particularly, they have spoken out strongly to transport ministry officials about the level of sexual harassment, arguing for more security on transport and at transport hubs. Even women in their early 20s felt they had had an opportunity to air their views and that these were received respectfully. They – and we – hope their evidence will contribute to the development of improved travel experiences for women. However, it has been extremely difficult to avoid building high expectations among our peer researchers, and there is still potential for their work to fail to make impact, despite our best efforts. Moreover, having spoken so positively regarding the potential for our project CCGs to improve the mobility constraints faced by vulnerable users, it must be noted that the transport sector (globally) remains dominated by technocrats who often lack clear understanding as to how to engage with transport users. As Oviedo et al. (2018) observed with specific reference to Abuja, city engineers tend to hold tenaciously to the technocratic approaches that encourage a focus on infrastructure systems because their training and professional identity is built on these. They may fear engaging with what may be potentially a difficult, unruly public.

Concluding reflections

Our findings in this paper indicate the transformative potential of peer research for vulnerable young people in precarious environments. Partnership with peer researchers has offered the academic team opportunities for unique community access, novel insights and enhanced local understandings, but the partnership has also wrought significant positive benefits for the peer researchers. Many are now more confident to engage productively with a diversity of residents in their own communities, through the interview techniques they have learnt. They can also engage authoritatively with urban policy makers because they now know how to manage such exchanges, emphasising how they speak not just from personal experience but from their wider research evidence. Additionally, through generating vital income for their families during difficult times they have built respect; they have also used diaries to manage emotions such as boredom or fear. Overall, we observe their growing maturity of judgement coupled with impressive commitment to their peers.

At the same time, it is important to acknowledge the fragilities of partnerships with vulnerable young people, especially in circumstances where funding is sourced overseas, and may risk being cut mid-term, and where payments can be delayed due to bureaucratic processes. When meetings had to move online, peer researchers with poor internet access were excluded from the virtual CCGs where they had been keen to have their voices heard. Only now, as COVID-19 recedes, can we return to in-person engagement with our peer research teams for the final phase of the project. That most remain with us as committed project partners, intent on promoting positive change in their communities, is indicative of the value they have perceived in participating in this study.

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