

Open Research Case Study



Open Research as co-creation in a Participatory Action Research project

Jess Adams¹, Elaine Lopez², Natasha Mauthner¹

1 Newcastle University Business School. 2 School of Education, Communication and Language Sciences.

Introduction

We are developing an open research (OR) approach, and a process for shaping it, grounded in the philosophical, methodological, and ethico-political principles of participatory action research (PAR). Our approach to OR is embedded throughout our project and is rooted in cocreation (including writing this case study).

Research context

Reimagining Leadership is a Wellcome Trust-funded 30-month, £1 million transdisciplinary project aiming to enhance research culture by fostering more 'psychologically safe' and inclusive research environments. The project's PAR methodology draws on pragmatism, critical theory, constructivism, feminist epistemology and participatory democracy. It emphasizes cocreated, relational, and context-sensitive knowledge, viewing research as a collective, transformative process. Our PAR group of 'co-researchers' comprises 24 academic and professional services staff, representing various roles, faculties, disciplines, staff networks, committees, and trade unions.

Open practices used

We define OR as making the processes, materials and outputs of research as openly available as possible, and as closed as necessary, so that others can understand and build upon them.

Processes: All processes and procedures are co-created with PAR members. We have sought participation at every stage, including aspects of research not typically open such as budgetary decisions, accessibility, and data analysis. These processes will be openly published online.

Materials: The PAR group have co-created an understanding of data that reflects our project's positioning and is sensitive to disciplinary differences. Interviews, workshop transcripts and preparatory work, reflexive diaries, project communications and documentation (e.g. PowerPoint presentations), surveys, observational notes, media, and analytical outputs all constitute data. Our specific understanding of data has shaped ethical decision making around what could be shareable and has required additional layers of transparency and openness.

Outputs: We have co-created an authorship policy intended to democratise contribution to outputs. We will make many of the project's outputs open access and will be sharing resources. We use the [CREDIT taxonomy](#) to acknowledge all contributions

Benefits

While PAR shares many principles with open research, formally adopting it has provided a framework to promote open practices. It is enabling a shift in mindset that expands beyond this specific project to encompass broader research practices. PAR colleagues have reported a strong sense of inclusion – we believe this is partly attributable to the transparency, openness and co-production of our processes. This also relates to the ways we have challenged structural differences by bringing together academic and professional services

colleagues, working across faculties and disciplines. Everyone has been invited to contribute to shaping both 'content' and 'process'. This has benefits that extend to the wider institution and beyond. Our approach has 'ripple effects' with colleagues sharing examples of their own adoption of more open and inclusive approaches.

Barriers or challenges

A significant challenge is the sensitivity of data. We operate on the principle of being as open as possible and as closed as necessary, alongside participant choice. This means working with complex participant preferences around data. For example, giving participants choice around how their data are used and co-producing our processes has meant building time for colleagues to review materials.

Utilising open principles alongside PAR's emergent approach to research design is a further challenge. For example, it was not possible to determine exactly how data would be used at the beginning of the project, so we have frequently recorded meetings. This can limit what colleagues feel they can contribute, and we have needed time to develop trusting relationships.

There are also more personal challenges relating to the emotional and relational labour involved, the leadership work required, and the complexities of the positions we hold in the project (including as leaders, researchers and employees).

Lessons

Reframing OR to include processes and protocols increases what we can share. Ultimately, PAR is about creating spaces where we can hear from a variety of voices, including those who are marginalised and/or minoritised. We see this as part of a wider, potentially transformative process to democratise knowledge production.

Conclusion

Our approach to OR involves not only determining what information or materials might be shared, but also how those decisions are (collaboratively) made. We are not applying OR principles in a uniform or prescriptive way. Instead, we are critically reconfiguring them to align with the philosophical, methodological, and ethico-political foundations of our research. Our case study illustrates how OR can be meaningfully applied in a transdisciplinary project. It demonstrates a critical engagement with OR that redefines its practice from the perspective of our project and its collaborative ethos.