RJ4ALL

PUBLICATIONS

CONDUCTING YOUTH-LED RESEARCH

INFORMING AND INFLUENCING SOCIAL POLICY

RJ4ALL

RESTORATIVE
JUSTICE FOR ALL
INTERNATIONAL INSTITUTE

THIS HANDBOOK FORMS PART OF RJ4ALL
ECOURSE CONDUCTING YOUTH-LED RESEARCH

RJ4All Publications

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Restorative Justice for All cic (RJ4All) is an international Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO) with a mission to advance community and social cohesion at the local, national and international levels. Through our programmes, we redistribute power within society using the values and practices of restorative justice.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	4
RESEARCH METHODS	8
AN OVERVIEW OF A RESEARCH PROJECT	19
ANNEXES	24
RESTORATIVE JUSTIVE SERIES	34
THE INTERNET JOURNAL OF RESTORATIVE JUSTICE (IJRJ™)	39
THE YOUTH VOICE JOURNAL (YVJ™)	40
READING LIST	41
FIGURE 1: THE LADDER OF CITIZENS' PARTICIPATION	7
FIGURE 2:" "CHILDREN ARE TO BE SEEN AND NOT HEARD!"	9
FIGURE 3: THE RJ4ALL EMPOWERMENT MODEL	10
CHART 1: TYPES OF SAMPLING METHODS	15

1

INTRODUCTION

WHY DO WE DO RESEARCH TO INFORM SOCIAL POLICY?

It may seem like an axiom to say that to develop and implement any type of policy, first you must do some form of research to understand (1) the essence of the problem that needs to be addressed and (2) what methods will be used to remedy the problem. However, as is often the case, 'social policy' can be developed on an ad hoc basis by policy makers without due consideration for the needs and welfare of the people it is seeking to benefit.

Therefore, we carry out robust research to ensure that policy:

- is not created arbitrarily at the whim of individuals, but the need is evidenced in research findings; and
- is effective to serve its purpose; and
- meets the needs of those it serves to benefit; and
- doesn't unfairly and without justification adversely affect members of society through its implementation; and
- is proportionate; and
- is cost effective.

The type of research that is carried out to inform policy depends on the policy area. For example, it would be appropriate to conduct clinical trials at academic research institutions on the effectiveness of new drugs to inform a health policy, whereas it might be appropriate for a charity working with the homeless to carry out research on particular aspects of housing policy. However, the policies developed should always try to conform with the above list.

DEFINITIONS & CLARIFICATIONS

Before we proceed, it is important to state some key definitions including what constitutes evidence-based social policy. The truth is that there are still intense debates on what constitutes 'evidence.' As Bryman (2004) points out, the gold standard is usually thought to be quantitative data from randomised controlled trials. This is particularly true for civil servants who are quick to dismiss credible and in-depth new knowledge simply because it is not based on large units (e.g., see Gavrielides, 2011).

When it comes to complex notions such as youth justice and how they interact with young people's realities, "the abstraction inherent in quantitative studies" hinders the process of understanding (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 41). As Bryman puts it, qualitative research allows "an inductive theorizing about the way individuals (the sample) interpret their social worlds" (2004: 63). The same applied to sampling strategies. Bryman's (2004) warning was brought to mind as he alerted us not to be consumed by stringent methodological sampling rules. The qualitative type of research strategy, he said, is not meant to be based on comparisons of variables, but on substantive, in-depth qualitative discussions among participants .

Evidence-based policy and practice is defined as "the integration of the best research evidence with professional expertise and client values in making practice decisions" (McNeese and Thyer, 2004: 8).

According to Whyte, evidence-based practice "can be viewed as an attempt at a systematic approach to making a decision that emphasises: (a) generating answerable practice questions; (b) locating, critically appraising and interpreting relevant evidence; (c) applying best available evidence in consultation with clients and (d) evaluating the intervention" (2009: 47).

Moving on to "user participation", Brady defines it as "the process by which individuals and groups of individuals influence decisions, which bring about change in them, others, their services and their communities" (2012: 159). She distinguishes it from "user involvement" which is a term more commonly used in the context of participative research.

According to Dick (2002), "participatory action research" is experimental research that focuses on the effects of the researcher's direct actions of practice within a participatory community with the goal of improving the performance quality of the community or an area of concern. Interestingly, Barnes and Cotterell (2012: 145) believe that participatory action research has its origins in community development and in the role of community inquiry in challenging Western experts in development contexts in the global South.

A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK FOR YOUTH-LED RESEARCH AND PARTICIPATION

The official involvement of users in the development of policy is a recent phenomenon. According to Barnes and Cotterell (2012), the first social policy area that officially involved users in its development was health and social care in the early 1970s. For instance, in the UK, this initiative was led by the then community health councils that were created to represent the public interest in health and health services. They also argue that the disability movement helped boost this interest and indeed develop new participatory models of user-led policy. Barnes and Taylor (2007) also quote later examples of older people's involvement in research for policy.

Literature advocating service user involvement in research reveals a wide range of underlying motivations, theories, and methodologies (Lomas et al., 2005). For example, in North America, users are increasingly employed as workers in community mental health teams (Rose et al., 2010, p. 390). As Godin et al., put it: "Policy document statements about user involvement in research, that refer to the need for a 'patient-centred NHS' and talk about 'customers,' suggest a neo-liberal desire to overcome the domination of state professionals and a post-Fordist process of making public services more consumer-driven" (2007, p. 452). In the UK, following the NHS and Community Care Act 1990, user involvement gathered pace (Rose et al., 2010). Service user involvement in mental health services developed in several areas such as training (Forrest et al., 2000), service development (Crawford and Rutter, 2004) and research (Rose et al., 2002). The involvement of young people in research and social policy was somewhat more delayed. Increasing dialogue regarding youth-led activity assumes that there is also a growing recognition that young people have the capacity to meaningfully contribute to outcomes in policy and practice. The famous Victorian saying "Seen and not heard" comes to mind. Indeed, the youth-led approach repositions young people as important stakeholders who can make key decisions which impact on the quality of their lives, rather than simply accepting their position as passive subjects whose lives are guided by decisions made by adult 'others' (Youth

in Focus, 2002).

Brady (2012) believes that the involvement of young people in decision-making and democratic structures is not an option for governments, but a statutory obligation under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (UN, 1989). Indeed, Article 12 states that children and young people who are capable of forming their own views have a right to express those views freely in all matters affecting them. The article asserts the right of children to express their views in decisions affecting their lives. According to Cass (2010), the underlying principle of this article is that as the capacity of children and young people evolves, so, too, should opportunities that enable them to participate in decision making. Intrinsic to the youth-led approach is the principle that young people should be provided with opportunities to exercise their rights, as enshrined in international human rights law.

Nonetheless, the Convention does not make any specific references to their involvement in law making or the formation of social policy. It is true, however, that the Convention has helped to increase awareness and to some extent acceptance of young people's right to be involved in decisions, at least in those that affect them (Sinclair and Franklin, 2000). On the back of the Convention, a number of signatory countries developed their own domestic laws, institutions, independent commissions, regulators and regulations (e.g. for a review see Brady, 2012; Davey, 2010).

Hanley et al. (2003) identified three levels of user involvement in research. These are: consultation, collaboration and user control. Hart (2008) took a step further by adapting Arnstein's (1969) ladder of "citizen participation" to include children and young people. Hart's ladder consists of eight steps:

- Manipulation
- Therapy
- Informing
- Consultation
- Placation
- Partnership
- Delegated power
- Citizen control.

Tokenism and exclusion is what describes the first steps. Only the last three are described by Hart as citizen power or shared decision-making. Kirby et al (2003) used Hart's ladder to construct a model for the genuine involvement of children and young people. Their starting point is Article 12 of the UNCRC and their model is not meant to be hierarchical, but adaptable according to the given circumstances. In particular, children and young people:

- have views that are taken into account
- are involved in decision making
- share power and responsibility for decision making
- make autonomous decisions.

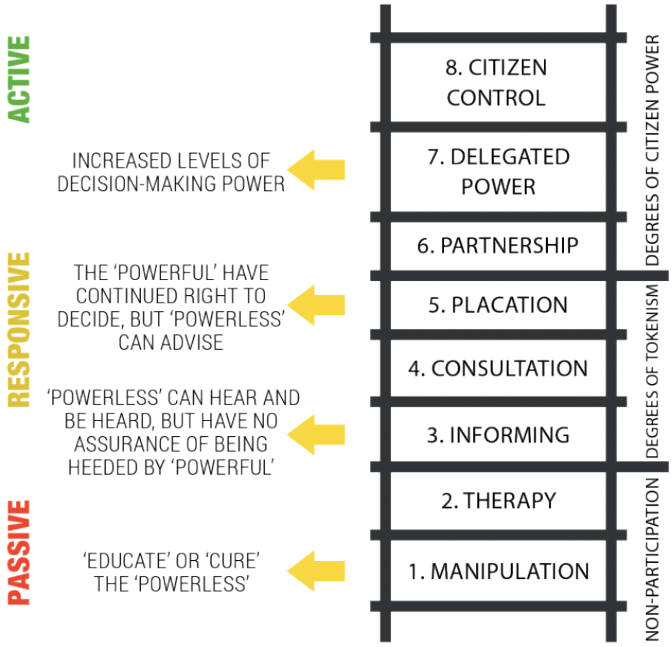

Figure 1: The ladder of citizens' participation

Admittedly, the extant literature on user-led/youth-led research is generally scant (see Pawson et al., 2003; Gough, 2006). To better understand the underlying principles of the youth-led approach, RJ4ALL carried out a small-scale qualitative study that was triangulated with secondary sources. The primary research included ten semi-structured interviews with representatives from youth-led, UK-based organisations. The questionnaire was drafted by young people and five members of the RJ4ALL Youth-led Policy Forum (YLPF). This is a strategic body that brings together youth-led organisations to coordinate responses to government consultations on youth and social justice reform. Forum members also provided case studies, which were used as part of the process.

Cass (2010) describes these underlying principles of youth-led research and policy in RJ4ALL' Youth Voice Journal, a peer reviewed publication for young people. These principles are: (1) addressing power imbalances; (2) valuing lived experiences; (3) respecting choice in participation; and (4) empowerment. For Cass, youth-led does not mean 'glorifying' young people as idols or models. Youth-led is a daily process that happens organically within projects and organisations. The youth-led approach repositions young people as important stakeholders who can make unique decisions which impact on the quality of their lives, rather than simply accepting the position as passive subjects whose lives are guided by decisions made by adult 'others' (Youth in Focus, 2002).

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