Working with voluntary and community groups

Royal Geographical Society
with IBG

Advancing geography
and geographical learning

A guide for researchers

Contents

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About this guide

Working with voluntary and community organisations for some is a very important way to do geography. These organisation come in various shapes and sizes and may also often be referred to as the third sector, the voluntary sector, not-for-profit organisations, community groups or the civic sector. In this guide, we share the experiences of researchers doing geography in collaboration with community and voluntary organisations. A range of topics and issues are explored from health, disability and care, through to austerity, violence, and craft, amongst others. We learn about the approaches taken by geographers in their work with community and voluntary organisations, and some of the challenges they have negotiated in the process.

Introducing the ‘working with voluntary and community groups’ guide

By Peter Hopkins, Newcastle University

Working with voluntary and community organisations for some is a very important way to do geography. Here we refer to voluntary and community organisations; such organisations are also often referred to as the third sector, the voluntary sector, not-for-profit organisations, community groups or the civic sector.

According to the National Council for Voluntary Organisations in the UK, there were 165,758 voluntary organisations operating in 2019/20. This sector contributes about £20 billion to the UK economy (1% of GDP), employs about 952,000 people, and has grown by 27% since 2011. Women make up 67% of the workforce, and there has been an increase in people over 50 and disabled people working in the sector in the last two years. 16.3 million people volunteered through a group or organisation in 2020/21 and more than a quarter of the population were involved in informal volunteering at least once a year. This is only the data for the UK; there are many voluntary and community organisations operating in different local, community, urban, national, and international contexts across the world.

Voluntary organisations focused on social services make up around one fifth of the sector with a significant number of organisations focused on culture and recreation, religion, parent teacher associations, development, and education. Voluntary groups focusing on research and international development make up most of the top ten voluntary organisations by income. The focus of community and voluntary organisations is of much interest to geographers, especially for those working on societal issues or who want to engage locally with communities about the issues of importance to them, such as about the environment, health and wellbeing, or social exclusion and social justice.

In this guide, we share the experiences of researchers doing geography in collaboration with community and voluntary organisations. A range of topics and issues are explored from health, disability, and care, through to austerity, violence, and craft, amongst others. We learn about the approaches taken by geographers in their work with community and voluntary organisations, and some of the challenges they have negotiated in the process.

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Volunteering with a community or voluntary organisation

By Matej Blazek, Newcastle University

Collaborating with community and voluntary organisation partners has become a common practice for many geographers, even though the precise nature of such partnerships may vary. For some, it is about research outputs that help inform the partner's work, advocate for their cause, or influence other stakeholders such as policymakers. It could also stand for knowledge co-production, from working together on setting out research focus and methodology, through participation in data collection and analysis, to how the final outputs are shaped and disseminated. And for many, it is equally about the outputs and the process of research and includes mutual training, secondments or advisory work.

More commonly, geographers also adopt a dual role of a researcher and a volunteer. In addition to the forms of collaboration outlined above, taking on the role of a volunteer means undertaking activities and committing to responsibilities expected from all practitioners within the organisation. In other words, the researcher works for the organisation rather than with it, and their work is defined by the needs of the organisation or group rather by the nature of their research. What they do may become part of research fieldwork (e.g. in ethnographic projects), but it also may remain completely unrelated and irrelevant to the research focus.

Taking on such a role may be driven by a multitude of motivations, but at the very heart is likely to be reciprocity. Researchers benefit from collaborating with community and voluntary organisations: they gain access to people, knowledge, events and spaces. Aside from the more established forms of giving back where researchers generate knowledge that can be of use for the partner, a contribution through volunteering is first and foremost about time, availability and generic skill. You may not benefit the organisation you are volunteering with through your research skills, but by giving of your time as a receptionist, driver, outreach worker, graphic designer, by helping with grant application or report writing, website management, or painting the offices, mopping floors and assembling furniture.

Why should community and volunteering organisations be interested in such a contribution? Quite often, academic researchers and third sector organisations are in an uneven position of power, privilege and resources. Voluntary organisations may be struggling with workload demands and if the time available to researchers as part of their research projects is generous enough, assigning it to address the direct needs of the organisation can become highly valuable. This is unlikely to be the case for most research projects, but it might be more easily facilitated for those with significant time allocation such as fellowships, PhD studies or where the university provides a significant amount of time for research.

The researcher-volunteering form of collaboration requires special attention to ethics. As academic researchers, our work in the field is guided by well-established frameworks and principles. Those may be very well relevant to your partner organisation, but your partner may also have a framework in place that includes additional requirements or poses challenges to academic ethics. In an ethnographic project where I took on a role of a detached youth worker in Slovakia, for instance, additional principles in the ethics code of my partner organisation included not sharing personal information such as phone number, requirements for chaperoning any independent contact with children on the street (i.e. always working in a pair with another youth worker) or a guide about communicating the departure from the field to the children gradually and over a longer period of time. On the other hand, the code advised against asking for written informed consent, given the confidential arrangement and anonymity offered to the young people involved with the organisation's services.

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Key points to consider when planning a researcher-volunteer project

- Clarify what you want from your partner and why. Then listen to what they need and think carefully what you can offer. Be as flexible as possible but also honest about your time and resources. The volunteering element of partnership normally expects long-term and regular engagement that offsets the time and effort required from the community partner to provide training and supervision.
- Adhere to the ethical and safety codes of your partner organisation. They know the day-to-day field contexts better than you do. If there is a conflict between their codes and your institutional requirements, raise those immediately with both and seek to find a reconciliation together.
- Be focused but at the same time open in terms of your research interests. Research collaboration based on volunteering can provide invaluable material that would be otherwise inaccessible, but it is also likely to identify new questions and answers.

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Promoting social justice

By Peter Hopkins, Newcastle University

For many, doing geography is about working to make the world a better place. One way to do this is to promote social and spatial justice. This often focuses on exploring the ways that inequalities and injustices exist and the processes that work to maintain the unequal status quo. Examples of the type of work here might include research about housing inequalities, racism and religious discrimination, exclusions based on gender, sexuality, or gender identity, or experiences of poverty and social exclusion, to name only a few.

There are many examples of researchers working on issues of social and spatial justice through writing for policy and practice audiences, through engaging with politicians and policymakers, and through engaging students about such issues. Others still work alongside community groups, or participate in different forms of activism, with the aim of generating positive social change.

Opportunities through our institutions

Another mechanism that may be open to those interested in promoting social justice is through funding and related opportunities that may present themselves through the institutions in which we work. Some universities have specific initiatives focusing on public and community engagement, and often have funding, training, and resources related to this. However, in some universities, such initiatives might be quite limited were there might be a preference for industry or business development. In other institutions, the focus may be on links with schools, or in promoting global connections, both of which have a primary focus on recruiting students. However, even in such institutions, there might still be space for doing geography to promote social justice through some of these routes, if appropriate, given the space, resources, time, and knowledge that can be found within our institutions.

Newcastle University has often promoted itself as a civic institution that works to foster meaningful and engaging relationships with non-academic organisations and groups in the North East of England. The university currently has four strategies, one of which focuses on 'Engagement and Place'. One aspect of this strategy focuses on the promotion of social justice with the intention of advancing the legacy of Martin Luther King who was awarded an Honorary Degree by Newcastle University in 1967. In his acceptance speech, he says "there are three urgent and indeed great problems that we face ... that is the problem of racism, the problem of poverty and the problem of war".

Social Justice Advisory Group

As part of Newcastle University's work in this area, we developed a Social Justice Advisory Group to steer the University's work in addressing social justice. Membership of the group included leaders from community, voluntary and social enterprise groups, academic colleagues working on key social justice issues, as well as professional service staff working on issues relating to engagement and impact. The University's Engagement Manager and her team organised the Social Justice Advisory Group and provided support in terms of organising meetings and facilitating connections between voluntary sector groups and academics.

We collectively developed guidance for a funding initiative that supported collaborative projects between academic researchers and voluntary sector organisations, and non-academic members of the Social Justice Advisory Group also participated in the grading and ranking of the applications. Nearly 20 new projects were funded in the first couple of years, including projects with a local foodbank, a youth project in a disadvantaged neighbourhood, with women's groups exploring transgender issues, and about environmental justice.

Also, we jointly hosted regular Social Justice Forums focused on key issues of interest to the voluntary sector. For example, we held a forum focused on bringing together refugee community groups and researchers working on migration and asylum issues. This enabled new connections between voluntary sector staff and university researchers to emerge as we learnt from each other in the process.

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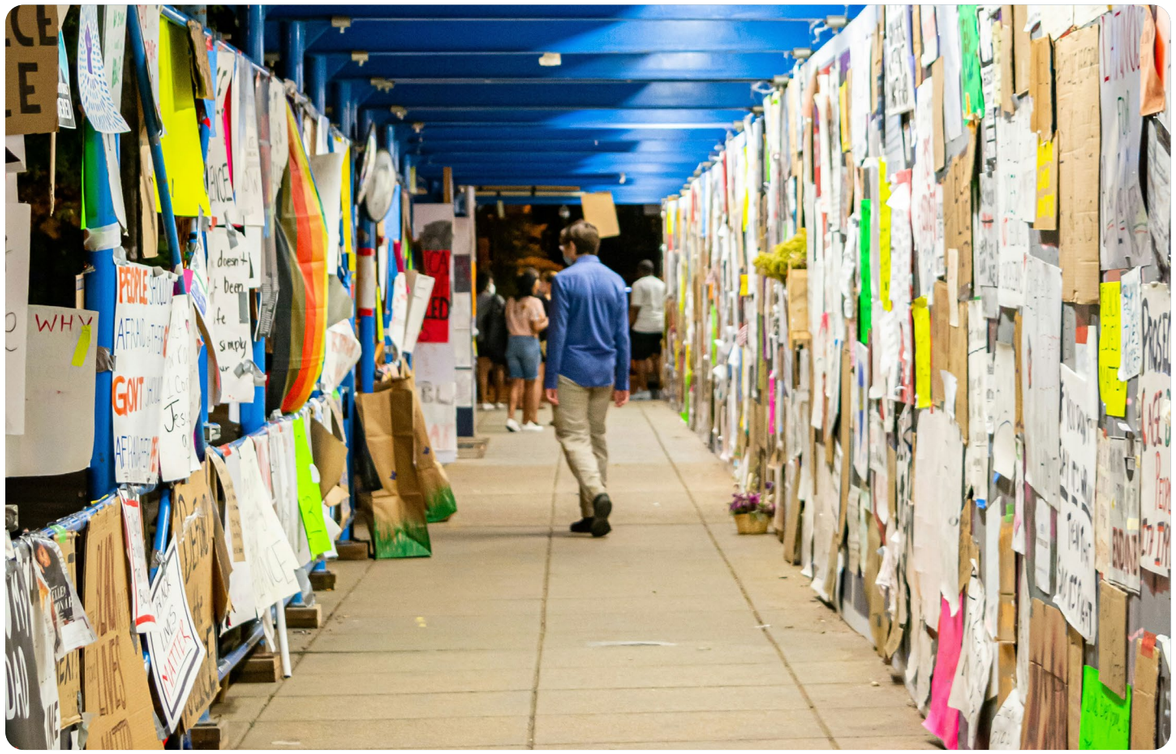
Some things to think about

- Consider what funding possibilities there might be available within your institution for you to promote social justice through doing geography.
- If funding within your institution is very limited, consider additional opportunities to release resources to promote social justice such as space, time, and expertise.



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Mental ill-health geographies and the arts

By Cheryl McGeachan, University of Glasgow

Experiences of mental ill-health can be challenging to communicate but they are an inherently important aspect of our human condition. Understanding the varied lived experiences of mental ill-health is of vital importance for geographers, opening up ways to share how worlds are changed, altered, obliterated and transformed by such conditions and processes.

Understanding the lived worlds of mental ill-health requires engaging with a wide variety of stories, sources and experiences. Our project has used an art collection, called Art Extraordinary, to explore the lived worlds and experiences of mental ill-health from a variety of perspectives. Art Extraordinary is a unique collection of Scottish "outsider art" collected by Joyce Laing, a pioneering art therapist and advocate for the arts and mental health. Most of the artists featured in this collection are individuals without formal art training, who were marginalised and received mental health care both inside and outside institutional settings. Joyce, from the 1970s, spent over forty years collecting work from the Scottish mental health landscape, scouring in rubbish bins, gardens and hospital wards, and amassing over 1,000 pieces. The collection was donated to Glasgow Museums by Joyce in 2012 and represents lives and experiences largely unknown and neglected in our contemporary society.

Since 2012 we have worked in partnership to explore the Art Extraordinary collection and to tell new stories about the worlds of mental ill-health from a historical and contemporary perspective. From the outset, myself as a human geographer interested in the lived experiences of mental ill-health, has partnered with Scottish History Curator, Dr Tony Lewis, and Open Museum Curator, Claire Coia, to develop a shared platform from which we can develop work with Art Extraordinary. Our first step was to consider how the collection could be used to incite new ways of understanding art and mental health. We decided that in order to interpret and story the collection in a meaningful, informed and ethical way, we needed to work with experts: people with lived experience of mental ill-health and healthcare providers.

This partnership has inspired over a decade of collaboration with a range of dynamic organisations and passionate individuals with lived experience of mental ill-health. These include Leverndale Recreational Therapy Unit, Barlinnie Prison, Project Ability and Gartnavel Hospital. Our various projects have taken the Art Extraordinary objects beyond the walls of the museum and into different community and institutional spaces. We have co-run art-making and storytelling workshops, developed multiple exhibitions, including the first permanent community curated exhibition on mental ill-health in Glasgow's flagship museum, Kelvingrove, undertaken museum store tours, written poetry and songs, and undertaken pioneering research into the collection.

The key to the success of this project is collaboration and listening to the voices of experience that are embedded deeply within diverse community spaces. For example, we worked with people in HMP Barlinnie to curate our first Art Extraordinary handling kit – a community resource of museum objects that can be borrowed and used by publics. Each group learned basic curatorial and research skills, from object handling and preventive conservation, to archival research and writing exhibition text. From the process, we gained new insights into the artworks and their stories of experience. All of our projects place communities at the centre, drawing upon and valuing their knowledges, ideas and skills. Every item for every exhibition has been carefully selected by communities and exhibition texts written by communities for communities. Community voices are centralised and become the driving force for future collaborative pathways.

Our ethos for collaboration is deeply embedded within working with communities and individuals to explore the Art Extraordinary collection. Undertaking such work requires an ability to engage collaboratively and openly with individuals, groups and organisations. It is an emotional and affective undertaking. The worlds of mental ill-health can be difficult to navigate and take time and trust to access. Working in partnership, particularly with experts by experience, requires commitment that stretches beyond traditional academic partnerships. Yet, anyone can apply it. Finding partnerships that work for both your area of interest and your own personality is key. To truly work alongside people you have to be authentic, committed and open, and these provide the foundations for any community projects.

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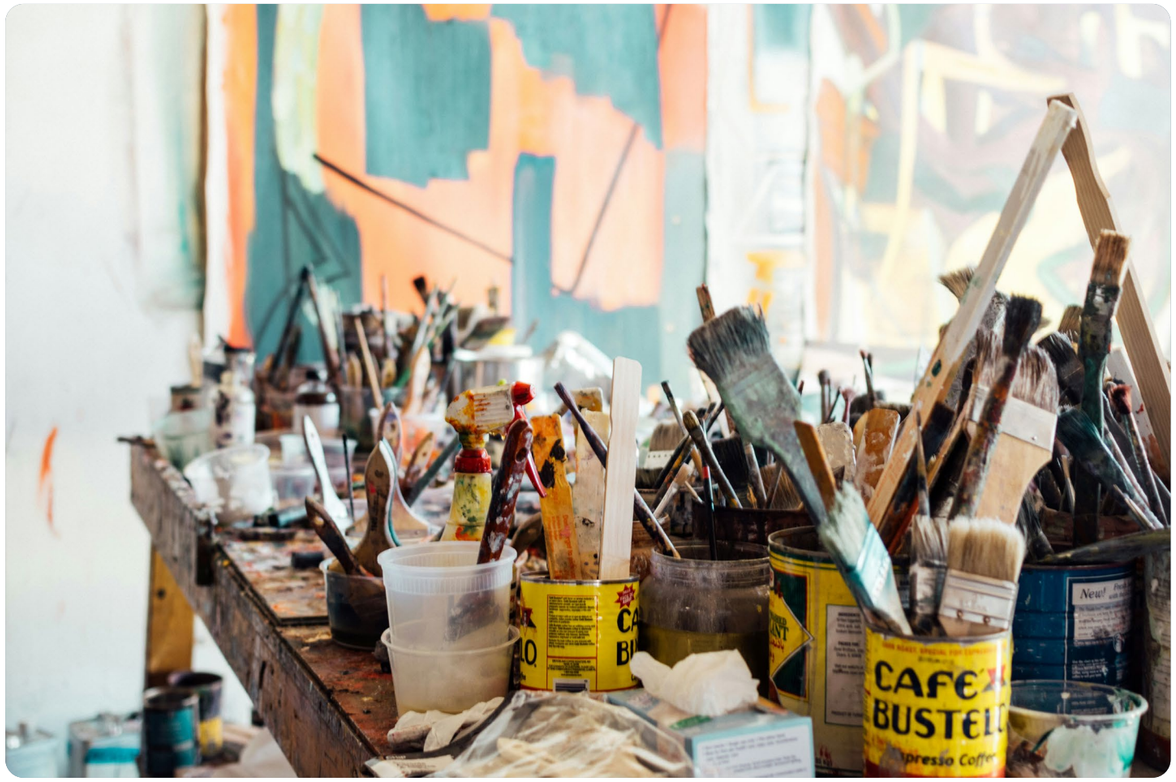
Summary

- Working collaboratively with museum collections allows the lived worlds and experiences of mental ill-health to be explored from a variety of perspectives.
- Centralising community voices and experiences can drive innovative research.
- Meaningful collaboration requires trust, commitment and authenticity to succeed.



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Geographies of care

By Andrew Power, University of Southampton

Seeking to understand how and where care operates is important to doing geography. Most of us will require care at some point in our lives. Small informal acts of care take place in our everyday life, with friends, family and neighbours, such as minding a neighbour's pet, helping a friend needing a lift. For people with higher support needs, such as people with physical or learning disabilities, more formal care and support may be required. This can involve a complex array of different people and organisations, working across the informal, voluntary and statutory sectors, including volunteers, social workers, community health workers and advocates.

Doing geography then becomes important, because there is an opportunity for geographers to add a new dimension to our knowledge and understanding of how care takes place across space. The 'geographies of care' can help us understand the spaces of care between people, as well as the various community settings that people spend time in and what support they may need to access these spaces. It also allows us to understand the gaps and absences in care, and how these can disrupt people's lives and reduce their access to public life. Finally, doing geography can prompt us to think of how care may change the meaning of spaces, such as the home becoming less of a private domain and more of a space of care or a workspace for the support staff.

I have used inclusive research methods, working closely with adults with learning disabilities to give them opportunities to tell their story of using social care, through photographs, co-produced maps of people and places, and schedules of a typical week. This allows me to find out how they take part in their communities, what barriers they face, and what networks of support they draw on. This gives people the ability to share rich insights into their lives and the spaces and places that they spend time at. For adults with learning disabilities, a key issue has been the withdrawal of formal statutory services. Social care policy has emphasised that support should no longer occur in day centres but out in the 'community'. A geography lens therefore becomes important, as it allows us to understand how people navigate social care and what tactics people use to gain access to public life, such as developing peer-networks of support.

These methods have also allowed me to understand how residential care providers could better support residents to 'feel at home' in these settings. Giving residents cameras to document the spaces in the home that they like and don't like, has provided a powerful means of revealing how space can be governed by support staff within these settings. It can reveal when certain care practices designed to 'protect' people can hinder and harm people's lives, such as preventing people to take a greater role in tasks around the home or managing who and when people can visit. It also provides glimpses into what routines and practices can help to make people feel more at home, to help inform future support delivery and management of care settings.

Voluntary organisations also can play a pivotal role in helping people to find their way around the geographies of care and for plugging the 'gaps' in care. To understand the 'big picture' of how care operates across a region, I have used area-based case-studies, involving interviews with voluntary sector managers, local authority commissioners and disabled people across different locales. This has allowed me to understand how responsibilities for care are shaped and shared on a larger scale, as well as the experiences of support providers, and how they sustain their provision, often with limited available funding.

Some recommendations are to think about space as a network of flows between people, ideas, and power, rather than solely about the physical 'bricks and mortar' of places. This can help reveal the underlying relationships behind the patterns that we see and can give insights into why these patterns look and operate in the ways that they do. Try to envisage people's 'everyday geographies', in terms of the spaces and places people use and occupy in their daily lives. Ask yourself where do people belong and have a sense of place? Do people feel at home in their community? What alternative communities might they occupy and feel part of? Addressing these questions can provide an important lens to understand how geography is real and felt in people's lives.

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Summary

- Geography provides an important lens for understanding how care takes place across space and how it can change the very meaning of space between people.
- Helping people to map their relationships and places can be a powerful tool used by geographers to understand the role of care and support underpinning their lives.
- Doing geography can also reveal how care practices in some cases can hinder the places that people use and occupy and unlock conversations about how care could be provided differently.

Image by Matthias Zomer on Pexels.

Volunteering in faith-based welfare organisations

By Andrew Williams, Cardiff University

Geographers interested in faith-based welfare seek to unmask and challenge the power dynamics and hierarchies that structure inequalities, and also experiment with and amplify alternative, more just possibilities. Such research can take the form of activism or different forms of collaboration and participation, though it is important to note that much research adopts a mixture of these.

My research on voluntary and faith-based welfare provision has been closely interconnected with my everyday life working as a volunteer in food banks, food coops, and substance misuse and homelessness services. The work is unspectacular, time-intensive, and follows a long-established strand of research that tries to follow the example of 'slow', 'gentle', and 'care-full scholarship' that stays engaged in the lives of participants in a manner that minimises intrusion and prioritises reciprocity and social justice. For many geographers, volunteering offers a mode of participant observation in welfare organisations to study what, how, and why welfare spaces are organised the way they are; to understand the gap between what people say and what happens in practice; and to foreground the voices and experiences of 'service-users' that are often marginalised in official narratives.

Engaging with faith-based and other welfare organisations can also bring unconventional insights:

- **Heightened sensitivity to the mundane:** choosing to prioritise the messy relational experiences of welfare spaces rather than rushing to tidy categorisations of those involved. This entails giving space for deliberation rather than presuming to know what others believe.
- **Friendship and accountability**: sitting and listening to the same people over several years trains the critical lens, refines existing questions, and generates new lines of inquiry. Rather than seeking to 'capture' poverty stories as if the researcher is akin to a Pokémon Hunter out to collect ever more rare and elaborate stories of injustice; the researcher seeks to foster mutual relationships of trust and reciprocity with participants whilst recognising the asymmetries and fragility of these relationships.

This is not without its challenges: not least the ethical and moral conflicts that arise when working within faith-based organisations, especially those whose values, policies and procedures deviate from one's own. There can be difficult conversations about the ethics of care for unwanted proselytisation or more explicit forms of spiritual abuse. When helping manage foodbank centres, one is privy to the behind-the-scenes decisions regarding clientele, stock management, and referral systems. There can be limits on what volunteer-researchers can "make public" due to data confidentiality agreements or sharing information derived from privileged "insider" access, which may betray the trust and sense of reciprocity developed with participants. This raises the question of whistleblowing and the range of strategies researchers can use to address serious problems revealed through their research. For me, this has ranged from difficult one-to-one conversations with staff and volunteers about 'good practice', to working with national organisations and regulators to bring awareness and policy change across the sector.

Researchers also adopt more activist positions to disrupt or unsettle existing orthodoxies, perhaps to stimulate ethical reflection among staff and volunteers, or challenge specific policies and procedures; or work collaboratively with others to develop new projects. This has been my experience having been asked to stop running a Trussell Trust foodbank centre after providing food to people who lacked the necessary paperwork to access its services. Hearing the struggles people faced obtaining foodbank vouchers throughout COVID-19 lockdown, in February 2021 a few friends and myself established a food coop based in a drop-in centre that now has over 350 members, ensures access to fresh and unaffordable produce, and unlike the foodbank model does not require referral or voucher.

The commitment to taking care, a research approach which is slow, embodied, and attentive to everyday tensions in terms of friendships and relationships, ultimately shapes what is considered 'ethical research' in welfare spaces. Asking someone in a foodbank to recount their experiences of hardship can induce shame by replicating the dynamics of 'confessional power' where lived experience is codified by 'professionals'. This is despite arguments that interview settings provide political space for participants to enact agency in narrating their own story, for instance, naming uncaring encounters and tediously complex processes they have had to navigate with an array of 'decision-makers' (e.g. housing office, job centre).

Put plainly, the 'researcher' identity can be perceived as just another professional populating foodbank spaces (for example, debt counsellors) with whom they are often, and understandably, reluctant to engage. Irrespective of the 'sensitivity' of the interviewer, the research dynamic is part of the emotional scripts demanded in foodbank settings: obligatory gratitude for the foodbank, or finding themselves being steered to reveal (yet again) the deeply personal (and often painful) circumstances that led them to the food bank (and research interview).

Reflecting these concerns, researchers instead choose to immerse themselves in spaces of welfare and advocacy where collaborations with and for people can emerge slowly and on equitable terms.

Involvement in voluntary and faith-based welfare provision provides one such route that fosters sensitivity, rapport, and friendship – one where 'research' is secondary to just being there. Working at the food coop, I have built a good relationship with several regulars over the years through benefits work, mental health support, organising beach trips, and an informal boxing class. They all know I'm an academic. It has been their conversations that have shaped my research projects: sometimes as consenting and fully anonymised research participants, but most of the time simply wanting to share a story on their own terms that highlights the bureaucratic violence they face in everyday life.

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Questions to guide research practice in this area

- In what ways might the choice of research design – and the personal and ethical conflicts faced in research - reflect the way in which researchers are positioned theoretically, religiously, politically, and geographically?
- What strategies do researchers need to put in place to avoid rose-tinted narratives or sweeping criticisms of faith-based or other welfare organisations?
- In what ways do researchers of poverty and injustice replicate an intrusive form of 'confessional power'?
- What constitutes 'ethical practice' working as a volunteer in faith-based and other welfare organisations, especially in those contexts where dynamics of 'covert/overt', 'insider/outsider' and issues of consent, anonymity, and confidentiality are fraught and constantly being (re)made?

Image by Joel Muniz on Unsplash.

Researching geographies of learning disability

By Edward Hall, University of Dundee and Andrew Power, University of Southampton

People with learning disabilities are amongst the most marginalised and excluded groups in society. Our research has examined different aspects of the lives of people with learning disabilities, including experiences of social exclusion and inclusion, sense of belonging, roles in employment and volunteering, involvement in creative arts, and the impacts of hate crime.

Throughout this research, we have sought to work closely with people with learning disabilities, and the people and organisations that support them. Community, voluntary and third sector organisations play a central role in the lives of people with learning disabilities. With the reduction in funding to services provided by local authorities, including the closure of collective sites of care and support, these organisations have taken on an even more central role.

People with learning disabilities, as with all disabled people, have been marginalised in the research process. Central to social geographical research on learning disability has been devising approaches to involve people in research as collaborators and to give people a voice to share their views, experiences, and expectations. Working closely with community, voluntary and third sector organisations has been crucial to providing a platform for more participatory and inclusive research.

Given people with learning disabilities often occupy an excluded social position, and have been subject to previously negative experiences of research, building relationships and trust with individuals and groups is vitally important. Organisations that work directly with people with learning disabilities can be a safe and supportive environment for the building of these relationships. In the past, researchers would have likely approached these organisations to seek their help in identifying potential participants for a project. More recently, it has become more common for researchers to work directly with people with learning disabilities and their representative organisations, at an earlier point in the research process. This has involved working in a collaborative or co-productive way, as part of an advisory group or as co-researchers, to develop and design the project, its methods, and potential outcomes and impacts.

Ensuring a more equitable engagement with research, that is safe and empowering, for participants is very important. University ethics and risk codes of practice establish the expectations around process and documentation. Community and voluntary organisations (and advisory groups) can provide valuable support in both designing these procedures, and in supporting people with learning disabilities through the process of the research.

One core subject of research enquiry that has concerned people with learning disabilities and geographers alike has been the impact of funding withdrawal in state and voluntary care and support provision. These sectors have experienced significant reductions to their budgets in the years of ongoing austerity since 2010. The COVID-19 pandemic period presented a further, in some cases existential, funding and operational challenge for organisations. Many organisations are now operating on unsustainable budgets and staffing levels. In many cases there is a dependency on a small number of staff, or in the case of many smaller organisations, a single key person. This presents challenges for researchers, wary of asking for assistance and making demands on organisations' time. In these constrained times, it is ever more vital for researchers to offer a focused and clear benefit to the organisation, its staff, and those people it supports, for involvement in a project.

Geographers can offer significant benefits to community and voluntary organisations through collaboration in research. This can include direct outcomes, such as a training resource or evidence for a funding application. More nuanced benefits can also be gained, like recognition and enhanced profile of an organisation and its work, through for example a project website or film, and the involvement and resultant capacity building of staff and people with learning disabilities participating in the research. This can include the opportunity to reflect on the work of the organisation, and connect to others in the sector. To generate such benefits, it is crucial that researchers include costs for the activities and outputs in the project budget.

The benefits to the researcher are also potentially very significant, not only in engaging with participants and collecting data, but also in understanding the key issues in greater depth, and in the opportunity to make a positive impact to a specific organisation and the wider sector.

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Suggestions for researchers working with community organisations

- Always contact organisations at an early stage in the research project, to begin to develop an ongoing relationship, and to ensure that the issues and questions you have identified are relevant to their interests and to those they support.
- Devise means for communication and guidance; this could be regular meetings with staff, establishing an advisory group, a website.
- Discuss the best way to enable and support inclusive research, including through more creative methods, for people with learning disabilities.
- Agree on outcomes from the research, that benefit the organisation, its members, and the researcher.
- Ensure as far as possible that the research is funded and staffed so not to place too many demands on the organisation.

Image by Cliff Booth on Pexels.

Working with young carers

By Elizabeth Olson, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

In the UK and the US, care work is largely undertaken by women and is either unpaid or poorly compensated. Being a family or home carer can be isolating and precarious, especially when carer identity intersects with race, ability, age, sexuality, citizenship status, and are thus subject to systematic and violent discrimination.

My research and translational work focus on the intimate ways that care happens, how this is stitched into the structures of our societies, and how the ethics of care challenge us to think about new conceptions of justice. I consider a range of factors, from supports for carers in schools, to housing provisions, to policies and laws that determine who gets defined as a carer and thus gains access to key supports. In the past ten years, I've been working with non-profit organisations, government agencies, and with researchers from diverse disciplines to better understand and support young carers and their families in the United States.

Increasingly, I've turned my attention to identifying ways that governments, schools and universities, or employers could better support child and adolescent carers. In the United States, where young carers (or 'caregiving youth') are largely a hidden population of potentially vulnerable youth, I create my research projects to be most impactful for complex care families. Sometimes I'm designing research and collecting data to provide a base of evidence that helps us both identify and understand the characteristics of the population here. Other times, I'm working with leaders in different sectors – education, health, government – to move the research we've conducted into meaningful policy and practice.

Collaboration and partnerships with non-profits and charities, government agencies, and regional and local leaders are necessary for my research to be translated into transformative ideas. I've been surprised by how much my humanities-informed approach, and even my tendency of quoting care ethicists in planning meetings, is valued by my collaborators.

I often refer to my process as 'cart beside the horse' research. As the modified metaphor suggests, being responsive to the priorities of communities and organisations while also pursing the highest quality of research can make you feel temporarily immobilized. The work requires patience and openness, because very slow progress can be positive when it leads to clearer goals, more trust, and relationships are resilient enough to withstand stress.

I'm currently conducting a research project on the everyday geographies of caregiving youth in partnership with the American Association of Caregiving Youth, a non-profit that I've partnered with for nine years on a wide range of research-led collaboration. My research assistant and PhD student, Leiha Edmonds, has designed an innovative approach to qualitative mapping involving both GPS-enabled and sketch mapping. Our partners have other more immediate data needs, but they trust us when we explain that this research will reveal new insights into complex care and identify new areas of focus. Our young participants enjoy the research because geographic methods are fun, and they think it is important to raise awareness of what they do for their families. They also get a gift card and a certificate, and we provide a sentence they can use in job interviews or on a CV to explain their role in the research. This is in addition to feedback events for caregiving families, non-profit networks, and policy makers.

The outputs of my collaborations with government and institutional leaders are varied and have local and national impacts. I've worked with colleagues at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill to survey existing students and understand the kinds of challenges that they face as caregivers and will use this work to inform our support for students. Dr. Emma Armstrong-Carter, a former undergraduate student of mine and now faculty at Tufts University, has led on a collaboration with the Rhode Island Department of Education (RIDE) with the American Association of Caregiving Youth to analyse data on caregiving by students. Rhode Island has subsequently approved a new curriculum for all schools to support caregiving youth, and we are collaboratively designing the next stage of support and research to help schools prepare for the new requirement.

It can be challenging to financially sustain deeply collaborative work from inside a regular academic department. Funding agencies like the National Science Foundation and UK research councils allow purchasing of gift cards for youth participants and families, and they approve appropriate payment for non-profits that assist with things like recruitment of research subjects, or logistical support for community events. However, many US researcher-practitioner partnership schemes that are ideal for collaborative work have been discontinued in recent years. As an employed academic, I can justify using my time on unfunded collaboration, but I can't ask the same from a PhD student or student research assistant.

Costs related to collaboration sometimes require me to piece together multiple small grants from university centres, which can be time-consuming and uncertain, and it means that we always have to do more with less.

How to cite

Olson, E. (2023) Working with young carers. Working with voluntary and community groups. Royal Geographical Society (with IBG) Guide. Available at: https://doi.org/10.55203/YJJL2822

What I wish I knew when I started this work

- A young carer in Glasgow once told me that she cared for her family all night, and then went to school all day, and so the time we spent together had to be fun. Consider how to build joy through play and joy into your research and your collaborations to strengthen your relationships. It is a different kind of important, 'productive' activity, and it should be valued as such.
- Sometimes researchers have consequential deadlines, including employment and promotion concerns. Not all scholars can wait for long-term relationships to yield research outputs. Carefully plan for how you will publish excellent work while alleviating pressure on the timeline for your collaborative relationships. If you can't envision a viable plan, consider bringing in another researcher who can help you meet your obligations to yourself and your collaborators.
- Things can get messy in collaborative research. Make sure you are comfortable with the loss of control that comes with deep collaboration...
- ...however, don't conflate messiness with irresponsibility. Can you help create new structures or networks to solidify loose-knit relationships, or design a modest, low-stakes project that can help you improve your own capacity or those of your partners? You likely have a lot of valuable skills that are needed. Deliver on your promises. Do a good job.

Image by Matthias Zomer on Pexels.

Young people growing up in the countryside

By Michael Leyshon, University of Exeter

One of the greatest challenges in researching the lives of rural youth is tackling the powerful idea that rural places are ideal places in which to be a child or younger person. When one thinks of the countryside, we conjure up images of rolling green countryside where field boundaries and farm buildings structure a landscape in which wildlife is ordered and that everything is in the right place. Churches and manor house, so symbolic of power, are nestled on hillsides above villages, hewn from local materials that appear to have organically grown out of the landscape. We imagine rural communities as thriving, where everyone knows and cares for each other. Residents shop in a local store and socialise in an ancient but welcoming pub. All connections to the outside world of modernity, hustle and bustle are conspicuously absent. This evocation of a pastoral idyll, where people's needs, hopes and aspirations are played out in a green and pleasant land, is still surprisingly prevalent among many policy makers, the media, and the business sector. They carelessly portray rural areas as if not prosperous, then abundant with social capital and lifestyle benefits, with few problems that need addressing. As geographers, we have an important role to play in challenging such misrepresentations.

The countryside is posited as a good, safe place to raise children. The environment is believed to enhance their wellbeing. Services within villages support this idea - playgrounds, parks and village schools are designed for children. Yet as my research has argued, as young people grow up they become increasingly out of place within their communities. They are seen to be deviant and dangerous; they hang out in the wrong places, they listen to the wrong music, wear the wrong clothes, do the wrong activities, or drive the wrong cars. This misrepresentation of rural youth has persisted for a long time and has resulted in a range of regulatory practices within villages that seek to control their lives, for example, though banning them from certain spaces or altering spaces so they cannot skateboard or hangout together. To make matters worse, the austerity measures of the past decade have put pressure on local authorities to make tough financial decisions. Non-statutory services such as youth clubs have been closed in rural areas. Charities and the voluntary sector now provide the only youth work in rural communities, which results in a postcode lottery of service provision.

There are many villages I have worked in where organisations like the Scouts and Young Farmers or often church groups provide a youth club or a bus shelter (often with no bus stop) as places for young people to gather, but there remain great swathes of the countryside where youth services are either absent or services are uncoordinated and intermittent. As a youth worker for a charity recently said to me "there can be a lot going on and I think part of what we're trying to do is join it all up. It does tend to create a wonderful, glorious mess, chaos". This incoherence results in the lives of rural youth being in danger of neglect just at a time when young people need support as they adjust out of Covid-19 lockdowns and into what is commonly understood as a 'transition' to adulthood.

Not all young people who live in the countryside have supportive families or are afforded a childhood or have personal transport or indeed have access to ready cash. Although the veneer of rural gentrification presents a picture of unproblematic childhoods, the voices of those young people who struggle to live their lives are drowned out in the popular imaginary of the countryside. The reality of rural living for most rural youth means that they will grow up and move away as they have little chance of finding a job or an affordable home in their communities. Their futures are quite bleak: rural careers are in decline, training opportunities are difficult to access, rural homes far exceed a young person's earnings, and the cost of living in the countryside is soaring.

My research with rural youth offers a variety of different opinions on their lives; indeed I have showed that they are a diverse group who do not experience the same challenges or have the same opportunities. However, there are several common themes that illustrate the range of unique challenges they face. Rural youth are often positioned as being disadvantaged and marginalised as they face challenges such as social isolation, poverty, limited access to training and job opportunities, poor infrastructure, a lack of youth facilities, and lower levels of health and wellbeing. Their cultural identity is strongly rooted in the countryside and I have explored the ways in which they negotiate and maintain their cultural heritage in the face of societal changes. My work emphasises how rural youth are resilient and resourceful and how they can overcome obstacles through collective action. Lastly, my research has attempted to empower rural youth by focusing on the ways in which they can actively participate in decision-making and have a voice in shaping their communities and the world around them. Rural youth invariably have strong ties to their communities and hold the potential for leadership and entrepreneurship within future communities.

My concerns are grounded in an argument about how we care for and envision a future for young people. It's about enabling them to live in thriving rural communities through paying attention to their concerns and needs. They are the future of our rural places and we need to enable them to become the best of us. As a young women summed up in her ethnographic diary, "I am not ill, I don't need a doctor, stop telling me something is wrong with me or making me feel that there is something wrong. I need space, I need time and I need human connection. So don't leave me alone or let me be or treat me with your remedies. Gather me up into your world".

How to cite

Leyshon, M. (2023) Young people growing up in the countryside. Working with voluntary and community groups. Royal Geographical Society (with IBG) Guide. Available at: https://doi.org/10.55203/CZNG4869

Image by Michael Leyshon.

Recommendations for working with young people in rural areas

- We need to undertake more research that rethinks young people's place in our communities. What are our hopes and aspirations for them and how can we we address the challenges they are facing around careers, housing, and wellbeing?
- Future research needs to be conducted in ways that are culturally credible to young people. We need new methods and ways of writing that are engaging to young people and represent the stories of their lives... however, don't conflate messiness with irresponsibility. Can you help create new structures or networks to solidify loose-knit relationships, or design a modest, low-stakes project that can help you improve your own capacity or those of your partners? You likely have a lot of valuable skills that are needed. Deliver on your promises. Do a good job.

Working with street youth organisations

By Lorraine van Blerk, University of Dundee, Janine Hunter, University of Dundee, and Wayne Shand, University of Manchester/EDP Associates

The sometimes-harsh realities of life for children and youth growing up in cities only received significant attention in geographical research. It has come to acknowledge that daily life is organised through adult structures, oppressing some children and youth who lack fora for exercising agency. Further, the complexity of society means that experience varies with characteristics such as gender, race, class and, in the case of street children and youth, homelessness. Street young people challenge normative understandings of social life, are often considered out of place on the streets, but have much to teach geographers about the use of space and the blurring of public–private environments in cities, and therefore the way in which societies are, or should be, organised.

Growing up on the streets (GUOTS)

GUOTS is a researcher–practitioner collaboration that undertook co-produced longitudinal research with street youth in three African cities: Accra, Ghana; Bukavu, DRC and Harare, Zimbabwe. The research sought to understand the lived experiences for young people who grow up on the streets and their ability to build adult lives they value. GUOTS aimed to challenge current discourse around street young people as vulnerable (when children), or as deviant (through adolescence) and consequent policy to remove them from public space. Instead, GUOTS focused on young people's capabilities as applied within vulnerable situations rather than on vulnerabilities themselves. Pilot research highlighted key capabilities to explore the different aspects of street youth's daily life.

Across the cities research was co-produced with street youth and trusted organisations. Street youth researchers undertook ethnographic research with their peers over a three-year period. Each week they verbally reported their findings to a street worker who also provided regular support to the peer groups in their respective cities. Engaging third sector organisations and collaborating with frontline workers can embed research into practice. It also ensures research relevance for local and national contexts and policies, spotlighting issues important to young people. A triad of engagement between third sector organisations, youth and researchers can be an effective mechanism to develop evidence for best practice.

Embedding street work organisations in research: key lessons

- **Real-time change to practice:** engaging street workers in research allowed learning to be translated into action in real-time. In the quotation below, an Accra streetworker illustrates how GUOTS taught him to listen and ask the right questions and to learn new things that improved the effectiveness of support. For example, hairdressing training was considered effective, but after completing the programme many girls quickly stopped hairdressing. Through the ethnographic reports, the street worker learned that the girls had nowhere to keep their tools, which were often stolen before they were able to become established. A simple solution was to provide overnight storage enabling girls to continue hairdressing.

"It would be a great tragedy to assume that when it comes to the issue of street children, we know it all. My involvement in the Growing up on the Streets research has taught me that, we do not really know, or understand street children and youth" (Edward, Catholic Action for Street Children)

- **Creating a meaningful legacy**: social justice research often has an aspect of action or activism embedded within its purpose and goals. However, the long-term legacy can be limited by short-term research funding. Working with street organisations helped to fulfil GUOTS legacy by developing the capabilities needed by street youth for adult life. Third sector partners supported this through skills training, entrepreneurship support and by employing street youth researchers directly in their organisations.

"Street Empowerment Trust was created and employed Pesanai Chando and Goodwill Chipuriro as street workers, The Growing up on the Streets findings and approach influenced our approach to street work then as now." (SET, 6 July 2020)

- **Researcher–practitioner collaborative research can create policy change**: often research generates relevant evidence but fails to engage with the policy changemakers in any meaningful way. Yet, organisations can have long-established relationships with government and donors, but lack concrete evidence to lobby for change. In Bukavu, evidence generated through GUOTS indicated that street youth had negative experiences accessing healthcare and that their homeless status further compounded this. Utilising the ethnographic research evidence, the organisation was able to lobby regional government to implement a process for street youth to access healthcare.

"Regarding the promise made by the Minister of Health... to grant children in street situations certificates of indigence, PEDER has initiated contacts with the provincial Division of Social Affairs of South-Kivu to provide information on the care of street children in the health sector." (PEDER, 21 January 2021)

How to cite

Blerk, L., Hunter, J., and Shand, W. (2023) Working with street youth organisations. Working with voluntary and community groups. Royal Geographical Society (with IBG) Guide. Available at: https://doi.org/10.55203/FSXT6376

Image by Wayne Shand.

Summary

- Working with organisations can enable research to be embedded into practice in real-time as findings emerge.
- Collaborating with organisations can support legacy action on a longer-term basis, beyond the life of research.
- Embedding organisations in research can translate evidence into policy change through close working relations with government.

Working with refugee youth

By Sarah Mills, Loughborough University, Matt Baillie Smith, Northumbria University, Bianca Fadel, Northumbria University, Moses Okech, Makerere University

One of the most rewarding aspects of doing and communicating your geographical research is to work with community and voluntary groups. This was an important part of our own research which examined the lives of young refugees in Uganda and the role of volunteering for their livelihoods. As part of a wider international and collaborative project, we explored the relationships between volunteering, skills and employability for displaced young people. This work is important as forced displacement is a significant global challenge affecting millions of people worldwide. Uganda hosts around 1.5 million refugees, most of whom are children and young people. It is crucial that we understand the socio-economic inequalities young refugees experience and how these can intersect with diverse forms of volunteering, a popular activity and often a source of income within communities. There are a range of important considerations for researching refugee youth in different contexts (Huizinga et al., 2022), including any engagement with community and voluntary groups.

We engaged with these groups and relevant communities from the outset. We established youth advisory boards in each of the four sites for our mixed methods fieldwork and formed a wider stakeholder advisory group. We worked with young refugees to co-produce a definition of volunteering prior to designing our large-scale survey and series of interview guides. We also provided opportunities to collaborate, especially within our photovoice activities and workshops. We have learnt that it is essential to anchor geographical research within the community of practice. In our research, we worked collaboratively with civil society organizations that often engage young refugees as our partners from whom we drew valuable knowledge on successful community engagement approaches.

We have also communicated our research findings and recommendations to a range of community and voluntary groups in Uganda and beyond via a series of resources in different languages. These have included policy briefings and presentations, but also three interactive games and a photo exhibition. We believe visual and creative tools are important for communicating geographical research to these audiences in accessible ways, prompting people to actively engage with the evidence (sometimes without even realising they are doing it). By drawing upon data and findings from the project in Uganda, we can share new knowledge that can potentially shape people's understanding of a topic in a different setting. This requires us to recognise that our findings may be challenging for some stakeholders. It is also important to keep in mind the ways in which evidence from your research might be used to inform policy-making processes in the sector. As part of our research in Uganda, we developed key recommendations for stakeholders working with volunteers to address barriers to refugee participation, provide recognition and development of young refugees' skills, and promote volunteering in ways that reflect the realities of skills acquisition and employability amongst refugees.

It is important to take the time early on in a research project to carefully map the landscape of your research topic and potential case studies, especially if there are local community groups that have a long record of work in this space. These could be key contacts to engage with throughout your research and communicate your research findings too. We would recommend reaching out to them at an early stage to consider any opportunities for collaboration or reciprocal support, and also to identify if your research might cause any challenges for those actors. You should also reflect on the difference between, and ethics of, doing research on community and voluntary groups and doing research with community and voluntary groups. It is crucial to outline your involvement in any voluntary and community spaces and follow institutional and funder ethical guidelines. This is especially important if you are engaging with community and voluntary groups that support vulnerable populations, such as refugee youth.

We would encourage you to work with voluntary and community groups if appropriate within your research. Your findings and insights will reach new and important audiences. But you will also likely gain connections that enrich the experience of doing research and help you build your networks.

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How to cite

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Summary

- Carefully reflect on who might be an appropriate community or voluntary group to work with during your research project and how you will engage with them in ethical and reciprocal ways.
- Do not assume that voluntary and community groups will have the capacity or time to engage with your research, even if they are interested in it. Try to be empathetic and understand the pressures and commitments they have.
- Communicate with them throughout the research process and, if possible, provide them with opportunities to shape research design, analysis and communication. Always acknowledge partners and collaborators (funded or unfunded) in your research activities, especially at the end of the project if you have committed to producing outputs.
- Consider producing different types of outputs from your research that might be relevant to different audiences, from one-page summaries to visual outputs that can communicate your academic findings in accessible and creative ways.

Image by Rostyslav Savchyn on Unsplash.

Researching geographies of violence

By Rachel Pain, Newcastle University, and Jessica Wild, University of Westminster

Community and voluntary organisations work on the frontline of many topics of interest to geographers. Both of us have done much of our research on geographies of violence in collaboration with this sector. For Rachel, this includes Victim Support, Rape Crisis, domestic abuse services, youth charities, and refugee support organisations. For Jess, it has included homelessness, domestic abuse, substance use, and mental health services.

We use feminist approaches in our work. This means we are commited to practicing research in ways that are more ethical, caring, and participatory, and which has tangible benefits for organisations. Central to this is avoiding an 'extractivist' type of engagement in favour of one that is reciprocal and mutually beneficial. At a minimum, this means conducting research that is of interest and value to the lives and communities it features.

The advantages of working with community and voluntary organisations and the people they serve are wide-ranging. Most often, geographers seek help with recruiting research participants to hear directly from those experiencing the issues at stake, or they observe or participate to learn from people working on the ground. Given the ethical and risk management measures necessary for researching violence, services often play a crucial role in ensuring participants' wellbeing during and after the research process.

In return, geographers are well placed to produce useful outputs for organisations, such as summary reports, web resources, exhibitions, videos and other materials for campaigning. Producing freely accessible resources for workers' learning and development can also be beneficial - to this end, we've run workshops and training, and organised conferences. Ideally, our funding streams cover the costs of staff time, use of venues, refreshments and other resourcing, although we recognise this isn't always possible.

Sometimes, the greatest benefits are less easy to enumerate. In co-produced research there's often an exchange of ideas (theorising) in both directions. As activist scholars, we can align organising work with partner organisations. And we benefit hugely from the generosity, insight and creativity of their staff and service users in less discernible, but vitally important ways.

The challenges of this work are complex. Oftentimes they stem from the community or voluntary organisations' limited material and time resources, to the extent that research seems like a luxury. Research fatigue arising from frequent approaches from researchers and students can be common, and well-justified wariness about time-sapping extractive research. Organisations may feel understandably reticent about providing researcher access to their workplaces or the people they support because of concerns about participants' welfare, the impact of researchers' presence, and how organisations will be represented given the hostile funding and political environment that many face.

This wider social and political landscape also poses challenges for research with VCSE organisations. The sector itself has been under sustained attack, shrunken after a decade of austerity and facing additional pressures from squeezed public services and rising poverty. Services for victims and survivors of violence have seen huge cuts, and at the time of writing further austerity is likely.

Many sexual and domestic abuse support services have also had to negotiate harassment from the so-called 'culture wars'. One service for Black women had to close temporarily because of recent online abuse against its founder when she stood up against racism. And an unsubstantiated campaign that falsely positions trans survivors as a threat to other women survivors has targeted trans-inclusive services with threats of legal action and waves of hate on their helplines and social media. Consequently, valuable resources and time have been diverted to deal with these attacks; this deepens the emotional impact of this work, aggravates staff burnout, and obstructs the delivery of vital frontline service provision.

These contexts create a muddy field for geographers to enter, and underline the importance of asking not just 'how can community and voluntary organisations support our research?' but 'how can we ally with community and voluntary organisations to do research that bolsters and supports their valuable work?'

How to cite

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Guiding questions

- Discuss the research focus and possible questions early on and invite challenge and critique from VCSE partners. How might you create other opportunities for organisations to have meaningful input in shaping the study?
- Consider what you can offer the organisation in return - skills, knowledge, time, financial or other resources (see examples above). Consider how you will build relationships and create a climate of trust, e.g. through volunteering or making frequent visits to a service before any research takes place. Might you be able to continue the relationship so it outlasts the research project?
- If you are planning to recruit participants via 'gatekeeper' community and voluntary organisations, take time to map the measures you will put in place to ensure participants are supported and safe. Consider the impact recruitment will have upon organisations – does it create additional pressures?
- Think about how you might give back to individual participants. If you're involving them as 'co-researchers', can you create meaningful and accessible opportunities for learning or career development such as CV support, skills-building sessions, or providing employment references?

Image by Thirdman on Pexels.

Understanding gender-based violence on the margins

By Cathy McIlwaine, King's College London

Gender-based violence remains one of the most pressing issues of our times. This is illustrated by the fact that eliminating violence against women and girls is the first target (5.1) in the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 5 on gender equity. Yet, it still remains largely invisibilised due to widespread under-reporting and difficulties in researching it. This relates to the dangers of re-traumatising women who may be too afraid or upset to speak about physical, sexual and/or psychological hurt or not acknowledging abuse as violence. When women do agree to speak there are ethical implications of ensuring that immediate support and longer-term signposting to services are available beyond the interview domain. Therefore, conducting research on gender-based violence with integrity is only possible through a collaborative co-produced approach with third sector organisations, preferably those who work from an explicitly feminist perspective

Geographers, and especially feminist geographers, are very well-placed to conduct research on gender-based violence. These researchers identify the need to adopt a multiscalar perspective that can capture direct forms of intimate partner and interpersonal violence in both private and public spheres, together with indirect violence of state violence and gendered discrimination in the economy and society. This ensures a move away from 'victim-blaming' women for not reducing risk factors such as leaving violent partners or not walking alone at night, towards understanding the underlying structural causes of gendered violence. A geographical lens is especially insightful when considering relational experiences of women living in marginalised circumstances in cities of the global South or as migrants in cities of the global North, especially from an intersectional perspective (to include race, class, sexuality, sexual orientation, disability).

My own research has focused on the nature of and resistance to direct and indirect gender-based violence among women living in the favelas of Maré in Rio de Janeiro in Brazil and with Brazilian migrant women in London. In both locations, the research was identified as necessary by our collaborating partners from the third sector. In Rio de Janeiro, I have developed an ongoing relationship with the community-based human rights non-governmental organisation (NGO), Redes da Maré, especially with their Casa das Mulheres (Women's House) since 2016. I have also collaborated with the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro and the arts organisation, People's Palace Projects [PPP] at Queen Mary University of London. In London, I have been working with the feminist migrant organisation, Latin American Women's Rights Service (LAWRS) for over 20 years developing research, initially to raise the profile of the Latin American community in London through two projects (No Longer Invisible in 2011 and Towards Visibility in 2016).

In Brazil and the UK, this research was rooted in trust and partnerships developed over time to develop an approach that made sense for the NGOs in terms of creating relevant data that they required in order to address evidence gaps. All the research was co-designed with the organisations and conducted with them through combinations of academic researchers (myself and other researchers) and with local field researchers from the organisations (Jiménez-Yañez and McIlwaine, 2021; Rizzini Ansari et al., 2023). When researching sensitive issues such as gender-based violence it is inappropriate for 'outsider' university researchers to 'parachute' into communities and extract data from research subjects as a one-off process. Collaborations must be fostered at the outset so that the research is conducted in a co-produced manner. Of course, this takes time, often involving potentially working as a volunteer and/or trustee, attending events and building rapport with organisations. This can be challenging for students and early career scholars, but certainly not impossible.

A key aspect of working with civil society organisations, particularly on gender-based violence, is ensuring that research findings are available as open-access and easy-to-read reports. In the London research, we published these in long and abbreviated forms, as well as in English and Portugese. Likewise, in Rio de Janeiro, we published multiple reports in English and Portugese. Also integral to our approach to visibilise gender-based violence through ethical and collaborative partnerships, has been engaging with the arts. This has included working with Brazilian artists who have produced creative interpretations of our research. In London, Gaël Le Cornec created a play, Efêmera, which also became a film, Ana, while in Rio, Bia Lessa developed a multi-media installation, SCAR, as part of the Women of the World Festival in 2018. I have also developed work with survivors using applied arts methods through my collaboration with Migrants in Action who produced a creative reinterpretation of the research in London. In Rio, we developed digital storytelling exploring how community artists community artists resisted gender-based violence in partnership with Redes and an online Museum, Museu da Pessoa. Finally, another collaboration with the Latin America Bureau brought all this research together through creating a multilingual (English, Spanish and Portuguese) podcast series on Women Resisting Violence (including a blog and book).

This type of collaborative geographical research is time-consuming and does not generally get recognised within an academic system that generally requires peer-reviewed research in specific outlets. Yet, it is not only essential in order to conduct ethical and meaningful research that can transform how people think about gender-based violence, but it is also incredibly rewarding.

How to cite

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Summary

- A feminist geographical approach provides important insights into thinking relationally about direct and indirect gender-based violence among those living on the margins.
- Conducting ethically sound research on gender-based violence is only possible through a collaborative co-produced approach with third sector organisations developed over time.
- Results of research on gender-based violence need to be shared in open-access, easy-to-read, and multilingual formats. Engagements with artists and arts organisations provide rewarding ways of communicating and understanding gender-based violence.

Working with groups opposing violence against women

By Janet Bowstead, currently working on the Women's Journeyscapes project. Find out more about the project.

Violence against women is common, but it is an uncomfortable topic to talk about or do work about. It can feel difficult to get the language 'right', and to be both honest and sensitive. It may feel easier to avoid the subject altogether or talk in general terms that do not recognise why violence against women is a geographical issue.

Though violence against women is a human rights violation, recognised worldwide in all societies, that does not mean that geography doesn't matter. Gender-based violence matters because it matters that most violence in personal relationships is male violence against women (just as it matters that most violence in public and between strangers is male violence against other men). Geography needs to be concerned with such significant societal processes – with the scale of the impact on both individuals and society – and to be able to consider the similarities and differences in and through place and space.

However, any geographical concern with violence against women needs to recognise that the 'topic' is already the lived experience of millions worldwide, and that geographical work must build upon the hard-won knowledge of those individuals, as well as researchers and activists over many decades. So, the 'how' of this work really matters – including the importance of working with community, voluntary and third sector groups.

If you come to the issue of violence against women from personal experience, then it is important to reflect on others' experiences too; and any other motivation for concern will also need to be grounded in lived experience. That will not always be comfortable, and one of the unhelpful ways of coping with discomfort is to develop a jargon that creates distance from what is being talked about. No one simple term can cover the realities of violence against women, gender-based violence, domestic abuse, interpersonal violence, intimate partner violence, or domestic violence, so it is important to use a wide range of terms to keep alive and alert to what is being talked about. For that reason, it is also better to avoid acronyms (VAW, GBV, DA, IPV, DV) and to draw instead on a range of language to keep engaged and grounded.

In addition, much has already been written about violence against women, including personal testimony, and it honours those hard-won insights and experience to draw on such work. This includes respecting the knowledge that often does not make its way into academic literature, because the individuals are too busy living and working with violence and abuse to be part of that limited conversation. Working with community, voluntary and third sector groups helps widen the conversations, and bring together knowledge and insights over time.

Work or research with or for community, voluntary or third sector groups may be termed 'participatory research' or 'co-production' but it is important to recognise that all projects and research with people involves their participation; it is the engagement (or not) with issues of power, social justice and inequality that matters. Rather than a one-off consideration of 'ethics', it is about self-questioning the quality of interactions from the start of thinking about the work right the way through.

My research on women's relocation journeys due to domestic abuse has involved data from service providers and creative groupwork hosted and supported by women's organisations which are domestic abuse specialists. There was a long lead-in time to agree how the organisations would support the women, and how it would be funded, and this built on my background (and credibility) of working for such organisations in the past.

Key aspects of the research design

- Making sure that the work is of value to the women as a process – including a comfortable space and food – regardless of any outcomes or outputs.
- Listening and responding to the different priorities of the individuals and organisations and being honest about my priorities.
- Allowing time and flexibility, and accepting that some things will not be possible.
- Funding both the organisations' time and input and to ensure that the women were not out of pocket e.g. childcare and travel.

How to cite

Bowstead, J. (2023) Violence against women. Working with voluntary and community groups. Royal Geographical Society (with IBG) Guide. Available at: https://doi.org/10.55203/CKWK5401

Image by Amy/Solace Women's Aid/Janet Bowstead.

Key recommendations / suggestions

- Build contacts that are mutually beneficial – not just short-term and extractive.
- Be careful and specific in language – grounding it in lived experience of sex and gender and recognising the limitations.
- Take seriously providing practical and material benefits and compensation for the individuals and organisations involved.

Doing research with LGBTQ+ community organisations

By Ale Boussalem, University of St Andrews

Geographers of gender and sexualities, and queer geographers, have shown the importance of observing how LGBTQ+ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Queer) people experience and relate to space and place. A focus on these experiences and relations allows us to better understand the impact of homo/bi/transphobia on the lives of LGBTQ+ people and to recognise how queer resistance to this oppression materialises in different spaces and communities. In dialogue and in intersection with geographies of race, religion, class and disability, research into spatialisations of gender, queerness and sexualities is fundamental to analyse the entanglements between identities, difference and space at different scales and across different contexts.

In my research, I focused on the intersections of racism, Islamophobia and homo/bi/transphobia in the lives and movements of LGBTQ+ people from a Muslim background living in Brussels. My collaboration with organisations in the field was a central element of this project. Merhaba, an organisation working with LGBTQ+ people from a migratory background living in Belgium, was the collaborative partner for the research. As part of our partnership, we had regular meetings while I was planning the study, and collecting and analysing data. We talked about a wide range of aspects of the study: strategies to recruit participants, ways of ensuring their safety and well-being, interpretations of preliminary findings and how to navigate the political tensions between different groups on the Brussels LGBTQ+ scene. Merhaba's feedback on my work was always fundamental in informing my next steps. In addition to these conversations, Merhaba supported me in recruiting participants, allowing me to access some of their activities. Towards the end of fieldwork, we co-organised and facilitated a weekend of participatory theatre activities for some members of the group.

Working directly with organisations and groups active in LGBTQ+ communities can be beneficial to geographers of gender and sexualities in different ways. Community organisations can help researchers recruit participants and give them access to spaces and activities. In addition to these practical aspects, organisations offer an extremely important perspective on the risks and potentials of researching LGBTQ+-related topics. In the case of research conducted in a specific location (as Brussels was for me), community organisations can share knowledge on the common challenges faced by the LGBTQ+ people, help map the solidarities and tensions between different groups in the community and give an overview on the different ways that identities and differences are collectively experienced, performed and narrated. Even more importantly, LGBTQ+ organisations can give researchers important instructions on how to conduct research ethically in the specific context – as the well-being of community members often is their priority, their insight into how to ensure that our research is not detrimental to it is invaluable.

Before embarking on my research, I naively thought that my clarity on the reasons why I wanted to have a collaborative partner and the fact that my intentions were 'good' would be enough to ensure a successful collaboration in the field. What I quickly realised in Brussels is that building and maintaining collaboration in research is a challenging task. Firstly, it takes time. Community organisations, especially those working with and for vulnerable people, are (rightly) protective of their spaces, activities and members. "Gaining access" (to spaces, communities, activities, events) often involves a lengthy process of building trust with community organisations. This timing is not always compatible with the pressures of timed fieldwork, quick data collection and funding requirements. Second, research and community priorities might differ considerably at any given time, even when their ultimate goal (e.g. social justice) is similar. A certain degree of compromise (a setting aside of research priorities) is sometimes necessary. Finally, to allow for the benefits of a sustained dialogue with community organisations, we need to make space for genuine feedback from them. While this can sometimes validate our choices and perspectives, at other times it is very critical. Integrating this feedback into our practice means re-thinking our choices, going back to the drawing board, problematising our approaches, positions and sometimes intentions. A true collaborative approach with community organisations asks us to create space to be challenged in our role as researchers – and it is in this challenge that the biggest benefit of collaboration often stems from.

How to cite

Boussalem, A. (2023) Doing research with LGBTQ+ community organisations. Working with voluntary and community groups. Royal Geographical Society (with IBG) Guide. Available at: https://doi.org/10.55203/WCWB2543

Suggestions for research

- Collaborative approaches can improve our research by making it more ethical and accurate.
- The benefits of this collaboration do not only entail practical aspects (recruitment and access) but also the specific insights and perspectives that are unique and specific to organisations working with LGBTQ+ people at the local level.
- One of the most important insights that researchers can benefit from is related to community organisations' understanding on how to do research in a way that is respectful of participants and their well-being.
- A collaborative approach is challenging – it requires time, a willingness to interrogate our role as researchers and our assumptions on how to do 'good research'.

Image by Papaioannou Kostas on Unsplash.

Geographies of, in and with austerity

By Sarah Marie Hall, Elizabeth Ackerley, Alison Briggs, Laura Fenton and Santiago Leyva del Río, University of Manchester

Austerity has become a topic high on the agenda of geography, as a set of policies, ideologies, contexts and experiences that now often form the backdrop to contemporary research. Austerity is not just a recent phenomenon, for the cutting of state spending to settle national debts has long been used as an economic strategy. These public spending cuts relate to public sector services, such as welfare, health, care and education, as well as the charitable and voluntary sector. As such, austerity is experienced across many parts of the world and with ranging place-based histories. However, austerity is much more than an economic strategy, it is also a very personal and intimate condition of severity and restraint. Acknowledging these overlapping and interacting elements of austerity as, at once, both social and personal is key for fully contemplating austerity's impacts.

Austerity shapes the people and places with whom geographers research, as well as the institutions, communities and lives of researchers. As such, austere conditions shape research interests, organisational structures, collaborative relationships and funding resources that underpin research. Austerity reconfigures the communities, sectors and institutions that may be collaborators, gatekeepers, participants and benefactors of geographical research. Moreover, and significantly, austerity can deeply impact people's lives, and the things they can do, the places they can go, and the futures they can imagine. Added to this, austerity is known to be a socially uneven process; it impacts some groups and people more harshly than others, especially women, working class people, racial and ethnic minorities and disabled people. Austerity is at the same time spatially uneven, between and across towns, cities and regions. Time is an important issue too; for the effects of austerity on people, places and policies will continue and will shape lives and futures in ways we do not yet fully understand. As such, austerity remains a key topic for human geography.

Our collective and individual research on austerity has largely focused on the UK and Europe, where austerity measures have proliferated following the Global Financial Crisis of 2008-2010. Many of these projects have also involved innovating with ethnographic, participatory and creative methods, as well as working in collaboration with community partners and organisations.

The focus of these projects has been on changing everyday lives in, with and in spite of austerity, and relates to the following core themes:

- **Social relationships and social reproduction.** The Everyday Austerity project, for example, involved two years of ethnographic research with six families in Greater Manchester (UK), investigating how and if relationships between family, friends and intimates had been shaped by austerity (Hall). An exhibition across Greater Manchester was supported and hosted by a range of local charitable organisations, including The Pankhurst Centre, Working Class Movement Library and Rochdale Pioneers Museum. A later project based in North East England (UK), on Reproduction and Austerity, explored how austerity was shaping people's decisions to have any or more children, and so shaping social, personal and intergenerational relations (Hall). Local voluntary groups were crucial to the success of the project in their support with participant recruitment.
- **Food insecurity, communities and care.** This includes a project on Food Insecurity and Charitable Food Aid in Stoke-on-Trent (UK). In drawing together understandings of food insecurity and the provision of charitable food aid at both a personal and organisational/community level, the research examined the ways in which this issue is felt as a personal and lived condition in everyday life, highlighting the role of food provision in gendered care responsibilities (Briggs). A report from the project builds on these findings in collaboration with voluntary and charitable organisations in Manchester and Stoke-on-Trent. We also led a project exploring the personal and political potential of cookery classes in low-income communities in Greater Manchester with Cracking Good Food, an outreach programme that encourages community cooking (Hall).

- **Life-courses and futures.** Research examining young people's conceptions and practices of activism across the life-course in the context of UK austerity was undertaken, considering how these activisms are supported and sustained by intergenerational relationships of solidarity and care (Ackerley). Our current and ongoing research takes places across Greater Manchester (UK), Sardinia (Italy) and Barcelona (Spain), studying how austerity alters life-courses and futures. It takes a close look at how austerity has been experienced by young people, and the reconfigurations this makes to the lives they imagine for themselves going forward (Hall, Ackerley, Fenton and Leyva del Río). We work with seven international charities and non-profit organisations – including women's organisation Inspire Oldham (UK), housing activists PAH (Spain) and youth engagement charity TDM 2000 International (Italy) – that assist in shaping our approach, supporting our activities and sharing in our findings.

From our experiences of conducting these projects, we can offer some recommendations to others doing geography on this topic and in these contexts. Firstly, we suggest to empirically approach austerity not as a moment in time or as a policy that has been enacted in the past, but as an ongoing condition. This involves a sensitivity to the lived experiences for people and communities at the sharpest end.

It also requires considering how austerity can shape relationships within fieldwork and the commitments that are possible to make within financially constrained circumstances. This includes making careful, context-specific decisions about payment for time, sharing resources to pay for community spaces, offering refreshments and food, arranging or covering childcare, ensuring spaces are inclusive and physically accessible, and so on. This will involve careful engagement with and listening to organisations and people already embedded within this work. The requirements of research should not place additional demands on people and communities.

Secondly, and related to this, methodologies need to account for austerity as an often-personal issue that may shape lives and futures. Methods should aim to capture the enduring, longitudinal legacies of austerity, as both a social and personal condition, which may include probing at difficult and often abstract questions about the future. Innovating with creative, participatory and reflexive methods can open up opportunities for people to engage with research in sensitive and accessible ways.

How to cite

Hall, S. M., Ackerley, E., Briggs, A., Fenton, L., and del Rio, S. L. (2023) Geographies of, in and with austerity. Working with voluntary and community groups. Royal Geographical Society (with IBG) Guide. Available at: https://doi.org/10.55203/ZNQA8346

Summary

- Austerity is a socially and spatially uneven condition that has deep consequences for some people and groups more than others, and which shapes social and personal lives.
- Research on, in and with austerity can highlight significant changes to relationships, responsibilities and life-courses.
- Austerity should be approached as an ongoing process with enduring impacts, which can shape research design, methods and praxis.

Co-producing knowledge with low-income fathers and multi-agency professionals

By Anna Tarrant, University of Lincoln

In my research with fathers and father figures living in impoverished places, I have long been interested in how people, and men specifically, 'do' family and how this is organised spatially and over time. In gaining a complex understanding of both, my research has necessarily involved consideration of how men's experiences are shaped by the places where they live and engage, and how places themselves are shaped by the individuals and communities that comprise them. In capturing and understanding men's experiences of family in low-income contexts, the need to understand and account for place-based poverty and the longitudinal dynamics of hardship has been essential.

In research about poverty and family life, it is difficult to ignore the significance of family engagements and interactions with community and third sector agencies (Tarrant, 2021; Hughes and Tarrant, 2023). It is in these locality-based encounters that low-income fathers seek to secure the resources they need to sustain their families over time and across the lifecourse. Attention to the dynamics of policy and place and how both interact to contour the family lives of low-income fathers and father figures, additionally supports alternative arguments about poverty than those that typically assume hardship and impoverishment to be the fault of families and individuals residing in low-income localities.

Turning our attention to the macro-dynamics that are productive of experiences of poverty e.g. of the geographies of austerity and deindustrialisation, of increasing labour market precarity and the reduction of welfare support, we are better able to comprehend why men experience family poverty in the ways that they do. These are all processes characterising the contemporary social world that geographers regularly subject to theoretical and conceptual development and critique. Geographically informed knowledge of these processes enables us to more effectively consider how we might promote and embed conditions that are more conducive to facilitating caregiving and the welfare of families in low-income contexts.

In their substantive and empirical focus, these kinds of questions are driven by justice driven agendas that aim to address social inequalities and their spatial and temporal manifestations. How we research these questions also has implications for the doing of geography and the methodologies that geographers implement and advance, prompting investments in research and methods designed to effect social change with and for the communities with whom geographers engage.

In my current research, we are using co-creation methodology to realise and interrogate processes of change with young fathers, a marginalised population that experiences high rates of social disadvantage. Co-creation is a transformative, participatory approach to research that involves multiple stakeholders working in creative, collaborative, and inclusive ways to address community identified needs. In the Following Young Fathers Further study, we are collaborating with young fathers and several third sector and community organisations to co-create and promote new and innovative models of training and education for professionals across the health and social care landscape that are inclusive of fathers and involve them directly in practice innovations.

As a participatory methodology, co-creation encourages attention to processes of democratisation in research, an approach that is principally concerned with flattening power dynamics in research processes, through more inclusive and justice-oriented approaches to methods. In supporting young fathers to advocate father-inclusive practice on behalf of themselves and others to an audience of professionals, they become directly involved in processes of change for their community. We have also sought to diversify the sample of young fathers with whom we work, engaging in anti-racist methodological practice to promote father-inclusion among professionals by improving outreach and support for minoritised young fathers. This work is underpinned by an awareness of intersectionality and the ways in which complex intersections of age, gender, race, and class contribute to the (in)visibility of particular experiences.

Geographers are well placed to advance participatory methodologies like co-creation in their research and practice. The brokering of new dialogues and trusting reciprocal relationships with communities through research processes have an important role to play in their transformation and the places that constitute them. Professionals working for third and voluntary sectors often hold a great wealth of knowledge about the localities within which they work, including both the populations who live there, their local cultures and the challenges they experience. They are also gatekeepers to communities enabling or restricting access to participants. To engage in participatory approaches in ways that are attentive to questions of inclusion and intersectionality, it is essential to identify and work with the broad range of stakeholders that have the capacity to address pertinent social issues. Commitment to employing methods that are driven by an ethic of care and a commitment to social justice are also likely to be the most effective in affecting transformations with communities and in place in ways that benefit them most.

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Hughes, K. and Tarrant, A. (2023) Men, Families and Poverty: Tracing the longitudinal trajectories of place-based hardship, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

How to cite

Tarrant, A. (2023) Co-producing knowledge with low-income fathers and multi-agency professionals. Working with voluntary and community groups. Royal Geographical Society (with IBG) Guide. Available at: https://doi.org/10.55203/YELV3256

Summary

- Community and third sector agencies are crucial in enabling low-income fathers and families to secure the resources they need to sustain their families over time and across the lifecourse.
- Research engagements with third sector agencies as key research partners can facilitate important insights into how people both experience and constitute the localities and places where they live, offering local knowledge that can transform geographical understanding.
- Participatory methods like co-creation are useful methods for 'doing geography', and for conducting transformative research in place that is attentive to democratising research relationships with communities and pursuing social justice agendas.

Image by Dylan Gillis on Unsplash.

Poverty and food insecurity

By Megan Blake, University of Sheffield

A common myth holds that people in economically wealthy countries are food secure, while those who live in poorer nations are food insecure. While economically wealthy nations generally have the capability to import or produce enough food for everyone, the system of distribution and access to food is not always one that provides for everyone. Indeed, some of the wealthiest countries are also some of the most unequal in term of how income is distributed within its population. A truer statement would be that the rates of food insecurity among people in economically unequal countries is greater compared to those where wealth is more equally distributed. The United Kingdom is an excellent example of an unequal society with high rates of food insecurity, and wealth inequalities have been increasing since the 1970s. While there is a long history of community-scale organisations that have tried to support those who are hungry or who struggle to have the food they need to live a healthy life, the prevalence, diversity and visibility of these organisations has increased in recent years.

Many consider poverty to be the situation of not having enough money to purchase necessities including food. This is the economic model and the solution is to fill an immediate need for that individual or household by either financial transfer or food aid. Some organisations subscribe to this view and provide support accordingly, for example food banks. However, in my research on poverty and food security I have worked with a wide range of community and voluntary organisations that adopt a different approach to supporting their communities.

Their social or development model derived from on-the-ground stories of difficulty and support aligns more closely with an understanding of poverty that recognises money is just one of the many resources people and communities needed to be able—to have the capability—to live well and be resilient in times of crisis. As a researcher I have been able to give a framework or shape to these lived experiences that communities have struggled to get outsiders to see. Also, as a researcher I can take a view from outside or above to identify patterns, similarities, commonalities and multiplicities that those living within did not know existed. Where people and communities thought they were alone, my researcher's perspective has enabled them to know that they are part of a bigger system. It also helps give them a voice and provide a platform for the solutions that they imagine and that work for them.

As a geographer, I also bring a specific understanding to my interpretation of these stories, experiences, and activities. My geographer's lens (after Massey) allows me to see the ways that places are produced through the layering of activities and the infrastructures that facilitate those activities and the values that motived them in the first place. This in turn has enabled me, for example, to explain why low nutrition foodscapes emerge alongside places where people struggle with poverty.

The people and community organisations I have worked with have demonstrated to me that poverty is a force that acts not only on people but also on the places within which they live. Poverty is concentrated in places. When you have little, getting the most out of very little involves making choices about how much food you can get for the number of people you must provide for and how full they will feel once they have eaten it. Alongside this, people use food to express care so it is not just about ensuring fullness, but that the food eaten has been satisfying and will not be wasted.

My research has enabled me to convince organisations that provide food support, local governments and even food retailers that to address poverty and food insecurity places must be repaired and the assets of those places must be enhanced. I have delivered workshops and been embedded in organisations, large and small. These interactions have been to build cultural infrastructures and strategies that enable repair and enhancement work to happen. People and communities have spoken of the need for dignity and reciprocity as well as a desire to determine their own lives and participate in a system that makes space for them and values their input. I have repeated these communications as I have been part of teams responsible for designing and introducing strategies and interventions and have sought to put these principles at the heart of what is done and delivered.

The challenges are many and the stories people tell can be difficult to hear but doing work with community organisations to uncover the causes and consequences of poverty, its related food insecurity, and their responses has revealed more that gives hope than is hopeless.

How to cite

Blake, M. (2023) Poverty and food insecurity. Working with voluntary and community groups. Royal Geographical Society (with IBG) Guide. Available at: https://doi.org/10.55203/UCSK4113

Guiding questions

- First ask yourself what skills and understanding you bring to the conversation and be clear about what these are to yourself and others. Then consider what assumptions are you bringing into the research and what are the possible implications of holding on to those? Are there ways you can guard against the negatives while maximising the positives that having you there can produce?
- Be confident to say what you do know and what you do not. I have found that saying 'I don't know' and explaining why can increase trust. When answering 'I don't know', are there ways that you can ask to collaboratively identify the answer to the problem or issue. What strategies will you employ to ensure that people feel able to speak their ideas and are you prepared to leave the room if you feel that would better enable discussion?
- Before you begin a workshop or planning session, ask yourself: Have I got enough people to help me keep the discussion going in the direction it needs to go? Have I created prompts or activities that enable people to feel they have been heard, but also enables consensus to be achieved and finds solutions that are more than one individual and are best for the community or group? Have I created an opportunity for people to let go of an us/them mentality and pre-conceived notions and see themselves as in the issue rather than just observing it? Have I structured the activities in a way that builds up to the conclusions and have I given these the right amount of time?
- Regardless of who the participants are or what role they play, ask yourself what participants get out of the process or engagement with you—Is what I am offering in return valuable or useful to them? Am I asking too much of them? Are my demands reasonable? What can I do so that they do not feel I am wasting their time?

Image by Joel Muniz on Unsplash.

Remaking worlds through craft

By Rebecca Whittle, Lancaster University

Like many of the best ideas, the possibility of combining craft and geography snuck up on me gradually. So much so that, when I first actively saw the connection, my initial feelings of surprise were followed almost immediately by another, quieter voice that said "oh yes, of course..."

Let me explain: my professional training is as a geographer but I'm also a knitter. When I started knitting, I was clear that this was not geography. I was going through a rocky patch and I just needed some people to hang out with and the therapeutic action of using my hands to create things. Yet, as the craft worked its magic and I began to mend, I realised that many of the conversations we were having at 'knit nights' had more than a hint of geography to them.

As many indigenous cultures have always known, any form of crafting is a process of cultivating relationships between ourselves, the world around us and the beings that we share it with. Working an item slowly with your hands is like a moving meditation: you start to really notice the properties of the materials that you are working with and this, in turn, invites questions about how they came into your hands, what kind of life they had and how this shapes how they – and you – show up in this moment. Asking questions in this way can be a form of activism as Sarah Corbett's work on 'craftivism' shows.

Inspired by these and many other influences, we held our first ever Crafternoon for Sustainability for the ESRC Festival of Social Science on Zoom in November 2020 (you can watch the event which is in two parts, here and here). With the country deep into lockdown #2 and craft proving more important than ever in sustaining people's sense of community and wellbeing, we set up three fabulous speakers, organised some related music and video contributions and invited everyone to bring their craft creations to work on while we talked. Using ideas of relationship and reciprocity from Robin Wall Kimmerer's Braiding Sweetgrass, we explored how making, mending and working with our hands can bring us into a more respectful relationship with the people and places that we share the planet with. Over 70 people came and many craft projects were shared both live on camera and on Instagram.

The feedback we got was even better than I had anticipated, with people saying things like "This is the sort of linked learning we all experience in the university of life but so lacking from mainstream education" and "I see it as a great model for what is possible - especially to engage people from all age groups, and varied cultural backgrounds and walks of life."

Buoyed by the success of the Crafternoon, we organised a second one a year later. This time we were able to host it in person. Being in a room together meant we were able to host a clothing swap as part of the event and there were demonstrations of darning and visible mending by the Sewing Café Lancaster team.

How to cite

Whittle, R. (2023) Remaking worlds through craft. Working with voluntary and community groups. Royal Geographical Society (with IBG) Guide. Available at: https://doi.org/10.55203/YNQG8813

Some points to highlight

- Be clear about who your audience is and design the event with them. In my case, my core audience was NOT geographers or committed environmentalists, but crafters who were doing geography and sustainability without realising it. Co-designing your event with local experts and respected practitioners also taps into their networks, so your participation increases!
- Give your audience a way to share their gifts and knowledge. This is crucial if you want your event to be genuinely conversational and interactive. Some of this is about how the event is designed and facilitated, but I also think the use of objects helps a lot here: if you're hosting an in-person event, have people bring something they are working on, get them to talk to a neighbour about it, then pop everything together as a display. If it's online, have them post photos of their event or hold things up using their camera.
- On a similar note, having lots of interesting objects in the room helps on so many levels – things that people can touch, pick up, and look at can provide an icebreaker for conversation, an inspiration for future projects and an instant route into geography.
- Whether your event is in person or online, recognise that not everyone is comfortable sitting still for long periods or talking about big issues face to face with someone. So be creative about how people get to participate. My top tip from the Crafternoon is that you can often listen and concentrate better if you're also using your hands – so even in regular meetings, why not encourage people to knit, mend, doodle, sketch?

Image by Imani on Unsplash.

Biodiversity conservation

By Sam Staddon, University of Edinburgh

Biodiversity conservation; or the protection of plants, animals and habitats, is important to doing geography. Conservation is ultimately about places and people, about relationships between nature and society, and about connections across space and time. It is about both physical and social processes, and so is of interest to both physical and human geography. Conservation, in fact, demonstrates the inherently interdisciplinary nature of geographic enquiry.

Right now, more than ever, conservation is an important consideration for geographers. Scientific data and so-called 'traditional' or 'local' ecological knowledge points to a 'biodiversity crisis'. Countless species are experiencing population declines, whilst habitats are being degraded and destroyed around the world. Not only is this a concern for non-human nature itself, but also for the people who depend on that nature for livelihoods and well-being. International initiatives and agendas are pushing for an increase in the amount of area set aside for conservation, namely the 30 x 30 campaign which aims to see 30% of the world's land and oceans set aside as 'protected areas' by the year 2030. Others are promoting 'rewilding', 'natural capital' and 'nature-based solutions' as ways in which to protect nature. Physical geographers can contribute to these goals through ecological and environmental survey work, and through expertise in geospatial and mapping technologies.

Conservation is about the management, allocation of and access to land and 'natural resources'. Ultimately, this impacts what or who benefits from land or sea, and what or who suffers the burdens of interventions in the name of conservation. Protection is thus inherently political, and human geographers can be interested in the social and cultural impacts of conservation, particularly that based on protected areas (if certain people are denied access to those spaces or resources), or where 'human-wildlife conflicts' occur. Along with 'political ecologists', human geography research can help expose and articulate the colonial, racist and violent practices and outcomes of some conservation. Human geographers can be interested in the knowledge and efforts of indigenous peoples and local communities in the maintenance of biodiversity such as through Indigenous and Community Conserved Areas, in 'alternative' approaches to conservation centred on social justice such as Convivial Conservation, and in attempts to 'decolonise' conservation. Human geographers are well placed for such research, working through a range of social science methods, as well as through efforts in story-telling and through 'Participatory Action Research'.

There is much great geographic research into conservation, both in the UK and around the world. My own interest in geographies of conservation stem from my early career and academic training as a conservationist, and from a belief that attempts to conserve biodiversity should not cause or reinforce social injustices. My work focuses on conservation in Scotland and in Nepal, and takes a critical social science perspective using qualitative human geography methods and theories from the related field of feminist political ecology. Some of my research has focused on the value of listening in and for conservation in order to promote inclusion and collaboration, and of the importance of dialogue and 'having a blether' (a colloquial Scottish expression for 'a friendly chat') to promote greater understanding across so-called 'silos' in nature conservation. My long term engagement in Nepal on the ways in which justice is recognised in conservation and forestry has developed into participatory action research that involves working with practitioners in collective 'critical reflective learning'. My interest in reflecting on the 'positionality' and power of conservationists and geographers is captured in a book chapter and through a session at the POLLEN Asynchronous Workshop series on Cultivating Critical Reflexivity for Conservation.

How to cite

Staddon, S. (2023) Biodiversity conservation. Working with voluntary and community groups. Royal Geographical Society (with IBG) Guide. Available at: https://doi.org/10.55203/PFWD5893

Recommendations and suggestions

- Conservation offers geographers from a wide range of sub-disciplines and methodologies a great topic of study, and one which is increasingly significant globally.
- Conservation is an inherently political issue as it is about choices in the use of and access to land and oceans; this should be recognised by all geographers working on conservation.
- Working with conservationists offers the best chance for your geographic research to have 'real world' impacts.

Image by Boys in Bristol Photography on Unsplash.

Using Citizen Science to monitor habitat conditions of estuaries in the UK

By Geraldene Wharton, Queen Mary University of London et al.

Estuaries are vitally important habitats. They are rich in biodiversity and provide essential ecosystem services including the storage of carbon, filtering of pollutants, and breeding and nursery grounds for fish. UK estuaries are also globally important by providing a refuge for wintering birds from across the northern hemisphere. But over decades and centuries many estuaries have been heavily modified and impacted by pollution, and now they are increasingly vulnerable to rising sea levels and coastal erosion caused by climate change.

n the absence of an approach for assessing and monitoring the habitat condition of UK estuaries to inform conservation and restoration initiatives we developed MoRPh Estuaries CSci. This is a field-based method designed for trained Citizen Scientists working with professionals to record the physical habitat characteristics of estuary margins. The Citizen Science approach enables habitat data to be collected at more locations, more frequently, and at a much lower cost than would be possible by statutory organisations and importantly helps connect communities to share their knowledge and build evidence to inform local decision-making. MoRPh Estuaries CSci complements MoRPh Rivers and together the tools provide an integrated approach to surveying a river's physical habitat from source to sea (Modular River Survey). Data collected in the field using a standardised survey form are stored, analysed to calculate a set of indices, and visualised in the online GIS-based platform, Cartographer.

The development of MoRPh Estuaries CSci has been funded through Queen Mary University of London Impact Funds and The Championing Coastal Coordination (3Cs) initiative. 3Cs is a programme of work led by the Environment Agency with support from Natural England, the Marine Management Organisation (MMO) and the Association of Inshore Fisheries and Conservation Authorities (IFCAs) seeking to improve the coordination for coastal sustainability and resilience in England. For our Championing MoRPh Estuaries project, 3Cs funding enabled a group of stakeholders to come together: School of Geography, QMUL; Cartographer; Environment Agency; The Rivers Trust; National Trust; Wyre Rivers Trust; Thames21; and the Institute of Fisheries Management.

In the 3Cs Pilot Study (2021-22) we tested the field survey forms and training materials through local trials in the Thames and Wyre estuaries working with Wyre Rivers Trust and Thames21. We worked with local Citizen Scientists, many of whom already had experience conducting other Citizen Science surveys such as BioBlitz and Plasticblitz. And we disseminated evidence of physical habitat condition and pressures to local stakeholders and shared information on how to access the method and tool through the Coastal Partnership Network communities. This dissemination has been aided by an online Storymap created by The Rivers Trust as a publicly available knowledge resource (MoRPh Estuaries Storymap). In the Wyre catchment, a team of 12 trained Citizen Scientists are working with the Wyre Rivers Trust team and other partners (RSPB, Lancashire Wildlife Trust, Fylde Bird Club, Environment Agency, Natural England, Wyre Council, Lancaster University and the Royal Society of Biology) and using MoRPh Estuaries CSci to monitor the saltmarsh restoration project at Arm Hill and assess the benefits for saltmarsh habitat. Further integrated research supported by 3Cs in the Wyre Estuary with the Institute of Fisheries Management will be exploring the associations between juvenile fish populations and habitat availability.

In 3Cs Phase 1 (2022-23) we began the process of extending the reach of MoRPh Estuaries CSci to become a national survey. We launched a questionnaire to assess the needs and opportunities of groups working in estuaries and shared the questionnaire through The Rivers Trust and CaBA Newsletters, Coastal Partnership Network, and the Modular River Survey website. Feedback from 60 respondents representing 36 organisations across all sectors is informing the next stages and a national webinar (April 2023) provided further information on the survey tool and training opportunities. In the same month we also presented MoRPh Estuaries CSci at the UK River Restoration Conference Annual Network Conference. Our aim foing forward is to identify MoRPh Estuaries CSci "champions" to work with us to grow a national network of trained Citizen Scientists and build support through regional hubs. Future MoRPh Estuary CSci field surveys will also help create a national database in Cartographer across the eight recognized estuary types in the UK (Bar Built, Coastal Plain, Ria, Barrier Beach, Fjord, Fjard, Embayment, and Complex) to build evidence on estuary habitat condition.

In parallel, we are developing a professional version (MoRPh Estuaries Pro) for use by statutory organisations and environmental consultants. This has been informed and made possible by the 3Cs pilot study and Phase 1 activities for MoRPh Estuaries. MoRPh Estuaries Pro calculates a greater number of indices and has an Estuary Condition Assessment. And through on-going consultations with Natural England and the Environment Agency we are working to align the survey with the government's Biodiversity Net Gain approach.

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Summary

- MoRPh Estuaries CSci is a field survey-based tool developed for trained Citizen Scientists working alongside professionals from third sector organisations to assess and monitor the physical habitat condition of estuary margins in the UK.
- Citizen Science brings invaluable local knowledge, allows surveys to be undertaken at a spatial and temporal frequency than would otherwise be possible, connects communities with an interest in their local estuaries, and builds evidence to inform local decision-making.
- Our next steps are to work with (a) MoRPh Estuaries CSci champions to grow regional hubs as the basis for establishing a national network of trained surveyors and (b) statutory organisations and environmental consultants to support the uptake of MoRPh Estuaries Pro nationally. For further information and updates please see **www.modularriversurvey.org.**

How to cite

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Image by Jacqueline Greef.

Working in partnership to restore upland peatlands

By Martin Evans, University of Manchester

My personal interest in peatlands began with a focus on their geomorphology. Upland peatlands, although rarely recognised as such, are amongst the most active geomorphological systems in the UK. Working on field sites in the Peak District required close collaboration with landowners and managers. Working closely with organisations such as Moors for the future and the National Trust I learnt about extensive efforts to restore eroding peatlands and my interests broadened to think about peatland restoration and the impact of both erosion and restoration on the ways in which peatland systems interact with wider society. The role of peatlands in carbon capture, flood mitigation and in the storage and release of pollutants were all part of this story and led to collaborations with the Environment Agency, water companies and a wide range of conservation bodies. Over time the relationship with partners deepened. We moved from partnership to co-production of research so that for many projects the underlying question has direct relevance for immediate challenges facing practitioners. This had significant benefits for all parties and was hugely rewarding, but like all relationships there are ups and downs and it requires work.

Making a start

As an early career researcher it can be challenging to find the niche where your work is valued and makes a difference. Networking is important. Senior colleagues may have contacts they can share and if there are industry or practitioner conferences in your area make the time to attend them. Direct approaches are often welcome as well. You may be surprised at the pent-up demand for the knowledge you can share and interesting invitations and opportunities can follow.

The benefits

The benefits in terms of a direct route for your research to impact the wider world are obvious, but there are other very significant positives that emerge from this way of working.

Firstly, academics have much to learn from practitioners both from their in-depth knowledge of the systems they work with but also from their expertise in the application of knowledge in their sphere. Working with partners can generate research which is both more able and more likely to make a difference. Over time as you build trust on both sides good partnerships move towards genuine co-production of research.

Secondly, working with partners opens up interesting funding opportunities to get your work done. In some cases, working with industry or with government this might mean direct funding but working with the third sector it is more likely to be opportunities for joint applications. Many grant funding sources are available to practitioners where an element of action research can be incorporated to the benefit of both partners. Third sector organisations are also very often supported in large part by grant funding, so they are experts in sourcing and accessing this funding.

Working with Moors for the Future and the National Trust in the Peak district has allowed peatland researchers in Manchester to run a major paired catchment experiment studying the impact of peatland restoration on downstream flood risk. The genesis of this work was a small contract which allowed the Manchester team to influence the restoration plan in order to develop a large-scale experiment. Small scale work with Moors for the Future over the preceding years was important in building trust which supported the award of this contract. Subsequently, a successful joint UKRI bid and EU support for further monitoring meant that we were able to expand this to a ten year experiment which has provided very clear evidence of the impact of sphagnum growth on slowing runoff from headwater peatlands. The power of this work in academic terms comes from the paired catchment design, the large scale of the experiment and the ten-year timespan. None of these would have been achievable by our partners or the Manchester team alone and the findings have significant academic impact but also from the point of view of Moors for the Future and National Trust underpin the case for future restoration.

Challenges

Not all of this is easy. Relationships are important and taking the time to nurture key relationships by checking in or attending events is key. In the world beyond academia people often move to new jobs on a fairly regular basis and so renewal of relationships as personnel change is an important but time-consuming task.

The nature of financial relationships can also be challenging. Universities are understandably keen to recover full costs, but these may be beyond the means of small partners. Negotiating ways to run pilot projects at relatively low cost is often the way into more lucrative joint bids.

Important to a successful partnership is recognising what your partners need from research. They need practical answers to questions relating to key areas of their operations and often they need these answers to tight reporting deadlines. They will also be keen to publicise the work you are doing. Often this is about influencing a policy agenda but for grant funded organisations keeping their name in front of key industry decision makers can also be critical. These imperatives can sometimes run counter to the steady pace of publication and to academics' natural caution. Clarity on what you have found and levels of certainty are critical here.

It is also important to ensure that you do not fall into the trap of delivering service research which meets the needs of the partner but may not advance your academic agendas.

Overall working with external partners to co-produce research that makes a difference is to the benefit of both sides. It is a time-consuming process - time is required to build trust and to work together to build and fund projects – but the benefits to participants and society can be very significant.

How to cite

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Images by Professor T.E.H. Allott.

Flooding and communities

By Lindsey McEwen, University of the West of England

Increasingly managing floods is not only about designing engineering measures but also about developing integrated place-based approaches to managing flood risk that involve working with local community and voluntary groups. Measures to deal with risk range in scale from nature-based solutions to flooding in river catchments and in cities, to flood warning, flood insurance and individual property level protection. All need understanding of the interactions of communities and hydrological and technical processes to be effective. Indeed, community-based flood risk management needs to have communities and concern for local inequalities at its core - working with individual citizens and increasingly community action groups and NGOs alongside organisations with statutory flood risk management responsibilities.

Geographers explore how human and physical processes overlay, interact and change in space and time. Both floods and communities are becoming more complex with climate change and urban development. Causes of flooding in the UK are diverse and increasingly compound, including rivers - large and small, tides and storm surges, alongside increased surface water flooding off urban surfaces. Social vulnerability and inequalities in impacts are also increasing and vary over space and time in flood risk settings. Time is an important element – with the main focus in flood risk management shifting from 'the event' to understanding the whole flood risk management cycle (including recovery and preparation) and where interventions might be made to increase community resilience.

Geographers have traditionally paid strong attention to how they communicate with different groups in the places they study. The number of stakeholders involved in local flood risk management has grown - with NGOs like the National Flood Forum, Groundwork and others increasingly supporting communities, building capacities and sharing best practices in local resilience building. Geographers are well-placed to contribute to such place-based dialogue.

Here, I draw on my own work with at-risk communities in a variety of settings, particularly in towns along the lower River Severn valley, southwest UK, like Tewkesbury and Gloucester.

Co-working with communities in research and practice in flood risk management requires strong attention to building of trust and positive relationships, in what is often a stressful and tensioned space. I have found that participatory methods in research involving repeat engagements and dialogue can be particularly valuable. I have also coproduced research on flood experiences and adaptation with communities and other local stakeholders. Meaningful coproduction involves early discussion between academics (geographers and other disciplines), communities and other stakeholders about defining the research questions about floods and communities, and how to approach their investigation in particular places.

I have found issues in working with at-risk communities include those of fatigue from being 'over researched' by students and academics from universities. There can also be tensions between active remembering and active forgetting about floods in communities that have been previously affected by floods. For example, some affected residents form flood action groups while others actively try to forget for various reasons such as worry/trauma or in getting back to 'business as usual'.

The timeline is important in any study of floods and communities. In communities that have not been affected by flooding recently and lack inter-generational flood memory, there may also be a lack of willingness to engage. This may be due to lack of connection with flood risk as an issue. There are also communities that have more recently become exposed to flooding due to urban development and climate change.

How to cite

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Key recommendations

1. Be familiar with a range of methods for data gathering in research. Participatory methods have high value - particularly when delivered over more than one session - to building trust and relationships.
2. Co-working with arts and humanities brings new opportunities to gather local stories of flood experiences and adaptive practices that are strongly tied to place. This process can be invaluable for both communities and those geographers studying risk and resilience.
3. Research experiences of both recovery and preparation in finding out the challenges and opportunities for building community resilience of all members of communities Historically research in flooding has focused just on speaking to people during and after extreme events.
4. Timing and the approach to working with communities is essential. This involves concern for ethics in approaching people who have been recently flooded, methods of data gathering that also build trust, and the positioning of any study in relation to actual floods, recovery and preparation.

Image by Mika Baumeister on Unsplash.

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