Research on an Equal Footing? A UK Collaborative Inquiry into Community and Academic Knowledge

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ABSTRACT
Scholarly research has a long history of appropriating people's experience. This paper describes a reflexive process which brings together academic researchers and community groups to explore the most effective means of sharing knowledge in research projects in such a way that a balanced exchange takes place. In doing so, it raises many of the ethical and practical challenges that occur in power structures which do not support the meeting of all interests equally when working with different kinds of expertise and understandings of knowledge construction. It touches on four themes: informed consent, exchange, voice and shared credit, and identifies the learning to be had from considering community needs when conducting participatory design.

Categories and Subject Descriptors
H5.m. Information interfaces and presentation (e.g., HCI): Miscellaneous.

Keywords
Participation, ethics, ownership, reflexivity, creative commons.

1. INTRODUCTION
Our interest, in this paper, is the extent to which conventionally trained professional researchers can collaborate on an equal footing with others who largely lack formal research training, but have built expertise by experience. As approaches to research based on co-operation with the communities being researched are themselves becoming the focus of study, we approach the ethical questions this raises as a collaborative empirical study.

1.1 A Historical Challenge for Researchers
Tensions between researchers and those they are researching have existed since Galenic medicine of 100AD. Initially these were ethical – balancing the benefits to some humans of cutting open others' bodies, versus the rights of those others. In social research, the academic boom in the 1960s and 70s saw potential conflicts between the epistemological and political interests of researchers and their subjects increasingly discussed (e.g. [35]). Work with indigenous peoples has detected a widespread hostility to the prospect of research among communities who have encountered it over many decades ([4],[25]). Denzin and Lincoln, indeed, begin their handbook on qualitative research with a positioning of research as a key tool that made colonization possible:

The agenda was clear-cut. The observer went to a foreign setting to study the culture, customs and habits of another human group. Often this was a group that stood in the way of white settlers. Ethnographic reports of these groups were incorporated into colonizing strategies, ways of controlling the foreign, deviant, or troublesome Other. [4:2]

It will not surprise us then to learn that epistemological power has traditionally been on the side of the researcher, with the right to choose a methodology, interpret the data, ascertain a meaning and report on it for whatever ends, resulting in several asymmetries. How indigenous people might think or know was of little interest, except perhaps for its curiosity value – it was not regarded as in any way equivalent to the processes of knowing employed by those researching. Further, issues of epistemology were hidden by the inherited assumptions from modernist science, that one perspective was more developed than another and that therefore it was possible to be right about both *how* to know and *what* was known [7].

The last 30 years have seen numerous challenges to this way of thinking. It has seen the rise of indigenous and post-colonial scholars whose mission has, in part, been to debunk assumptions, redress balance and offer insight into a broad range of experiences (e.g.[25],[26]). A new breed of researcher has grown up with more modest notions of what can be known and a greater interest in respecting other ways of knowing. And local people have been involved in research as leaders and shapers, though, all too often, still in support of some exogenous project.

Yet despite calls for shifts towards more co-operative modes of inquiry that respect different ways of knowing and knowledge construction, a majority of academics researching communities do not share this approach, instead holding allegiance to qualities such as remoteness, objectivity and/or expertise which affect the relations they establish with the social world that constitutes their subject ([4],[20]). This seeming distaste for engagement exacerbates the common perception of an inexorable divide between the abstract world of 'expert' researchers and the ordinary 'everyday' lives of the researched. And the divide is not just a feature of work conducted by travelling to investigate culture and custom, although 'parachuting in' is particularly prone to leaving local views aside. It is also present in much work where the lay people being researched are fellow citizens, whether formally indigenous or merely colonized by high-handed research tactics.

1.2 Indigenous Knowing

Indigenous communities, peoples and nations are those which, having a historical continuity with pre-invasion and pre-colonial societies that developed on their territories, consider themselves distinct from other sectors of the societies now prevailing on those territories, or parts of them. They form at present non-dominant sectors of society ... determined to preserve, develop and transmit to future generations their ancestral territories, and their ethnic identity, as the basis of their continued existence as peoples, in accordance with their own cultural patterns, social institutions and legal system. [29:2]

In this paper, we are not describing work with indigenous people as is commonly understood by the term. We are, however, focusing on power relations between researcher and researched, looking at the relative positioning of lay people being researched as 'communities'. We focus on the experience of participation for participants in academic research projects that have the underlying goal of designing *with* community. We see this as an important bridge to working sensitively with any group who is disenfranchised from the research process. And our groups (older East End Londoners, refugees, the residents of a neglected northern English housing estate, writing women) are all potentially representative of marginal voices and different types of knowing. All can claim to be '*non-dominant sectors of society*' who wish to '*preserve, develop and transmit to future generations their… identity, as the basis of their continued existence ... in accordance with their own cultural patterns [and] social institutions*'. Indeed, one challenge of the work we set ourselves was to bring different groups together to experience different understandings and learn from the diversity of interests, perspectives and approaches.

This paper discusses the planned engagement processes of a small project, *Participants United* (PU), which was wholly occupied with researching the experience of being engaged and researched. The project itself builds on several years of participatory work, particularly around technology, bringing together the research team with invited participants from our partner projects. We use the description of the project to underline our choices over the years to promote shared responsibility in starting to collaborate with community groups.

So, we write this paper to examine the ethical and pragmatic reasons for an action research approach to co-investigating responsible participatory practices in projects about the design of technology. And we do so in a reflexive way, including our ambitions and experiences as researchers. Indeed, this paper is predicated on the belief that we must be thoughtful and open before, during and after any research engagement for which we invite other people to join us and that we should only speak of what we know. Therefore, in this paper, we give only the experiences of the academic research team, with the intention of writing collaboratively about other experiences as they arise. We talk below about how we have become participants as well as how we offer this invitation to (and hope to structure the process for) others.

As a research project, and therefore as a paper, we are specifically addressing social responsibility *during* research, starting with that which comes out of a considerate engagement process, above and beyond any impact that research can have beyond these bounds. This might seem a limited topic, but we argue that what follows and its impact on participants and the wider communities around us is highly determined by how these relations are built. This is evidenced in work ([13], [21], [31]), describing the process of how the ownership of a techno-centric project moved from the research team to become a community initiative.

Consequently, although developed in the context of an interest in how technology is developed, this process we describe is not particular only to technology design activity. We are not reporting findings of a project that has been designed around producing social change directly. Rather, PU reflects on the research process itself and its ability to include non-researchers as equals. Most of the paper is taken up with discussing the reasoning behind our research design to draw attention to the shaping of the research processes and provide a rationale for them in social, political and ethical terms. We do so in the knowledge that what marks out effective community/academic projects in complex field of ICT design, development and use is an investment in balancing power, sharing ownership of ideas and generating mutual respect.

And although we are working together as participants in a quest that casts us in particular roles and relations, we also heed the words of Sen [24]:

[*T]he disparate pulls – of history, culture, language, politics, profession, family, comradeship, and so on – have to be adequately recognized, and they cannot all be drowned in a single-minded celebration only of community.* [24:38]

We have emphasized process because we see these roles as flexible, as negotiated and as formative. They are formative of the groups we are engaged with, of who we understand ourselves to be and also because they create the potential for outcomes as product of these interactions. So we identify some key transferable learning to emerge from bringing everyone together:

- how to support the diverse meaning-making that must inevitably take place in a project where formal researchers meet groups with other priorities, and

- how to give this meaning-making space, time and permission to flourish and become a focus.

1.3 Project Overview

The project is devised so that the principal research takes place when participants (academic researchers and community groups) assemble for two days of reflective social and creative activities in a summit. Participants at the summit have all previously been involved in academic research either as initiators, or subjects of research inquiry or as active participants working with researchers to explore issues together using a series of participatory action research methods to do so. Four groups of collaborators were

invited to the summit to share their experiences of participating in academic research, to document their thoughts and discuss how to continue their involvement in the reporting stage. The resulting learning will be made available to participants, policy makers and community groups to promote equitable and effective research.

2. CONCEPTS IN CO-INQUIRY

Woodhouse and Patton [33] mount a searing critique of much user engagement in technological design in their discussion of 'design by society'. They challenge us to ask three questions when taking any step in technological innovation:

1 Who shall participate in making decisions about new design initiatives (and in revising existing activities)?
2 How shall the benefits of design be distributed?
3 For what range of outcomes do designers assume responsibility — and accountability? [33]

In looking at processes of engagement, we hope to offer new insights as to how to address these considerations, since the alternative is, in Woodhouse and Patton's words:

1 A tendency for technological innovation to proceed without sufficient contestation and deliberation;
2 Great inequalities in who gets the benefits of designers' energies and skills; and
3 Nontrivial side effects, synergisms, and second-order effects that no one is responsible for foreseeing and preempting. [33]

2.1 Participatory Action Research

The approach we use for *Participants United* is one of participatory action research (PAR). Wadsworth defines this as

research which involves all relevant parties in actively examining together current action (which they experience as problematic) in order to change and improve it. They do this by critically reflecting on the historical, political, cultural, economic, geographic and other contexts which make sense of it. ... Participatory action research is not just research which is hoped that will be followed by action. It is action which is researched, changed and re-researched, within the research process by participants. Nor is it simply an exotic variant of consultation. Instead, it aims to be active co-research, by and for those to be helped. Nor can it be used by one group of people to get another group of people to do what is thought best for them - whether that is to implement a central policy or an organisational or service change. Instead it tries to be a genuinely democratic or non-coercive process whereby those to be helped, determine the purposes and outcomes of their own inquiry. [30]

The "research" aspects of PAR attempt to avoid the traditional "extractive" research carried out by universities and governments where "experts" go to a community, study their subjects, and take away their data to write their papers, reports and theses. Research in PAR is ideally conducted by local people and takes place for local people. Research is designed to address specific issues identified by local people and the results are directly applied to the problems at hand.

PAR proceeds through repeated cycles in which researchers and the community start with the identification of major issues, concerns and problems; initiate research; originate action; learn about this action and proceed to a new research and action cycle. This process is a continuous one: participants continuously reflect on their learning from the actions and proceed to initiate new actions on the spot. Outcomes are hard to predict from the outset,

challenges are sizeable and achievements depend to a large extent on researchers' commitment, creativity and imagination.

Depending on one's disciplinary alliances, research through participation is a more or less acceptable undertaking. A strong movement in design of interactive systems - and product design more generally - is to involve potential and actual users [17]. However, much involvement of informants is to reveal problems with proposed design in practical ways, such as finding usability problems or spotting occasions when tacit knowledge has been ignored, rather than social and cultural perspectives that might be seen as community-based or democratic. There are notable exceptions to this in participatory design work (as, for instance, Greenbaum and Kyng [5] document), where the context of use and impacts of change form a key part of the research. Participatory design adopts the same philosophical commitments as PAR, and most often is used to design systems with the people that will use them. However increasingly 'typical' users are being involved as participants in the design of products and services with broader application – the co-design of a web application would be a case in point, where use might be world-wide and the tool might not be implemented for and given back to the lay co-designers. This raises the problem that there is no immediate benefit to participants who are standing in place of a number of other future users, all of whom benefit from insights that arose through the work of their peers. This fundamentally changes the nature of participatory design and makes PAR techniques more complicated in ethical terms.

ICT design is not alone in attempting to navigate complex issues in participation. Geography's adherents to participation, such as Pain and Kindon [18], suggest that critical, feminist and postcolonial social and environmental geographies are being strengthened by this means of putting principles and politics into action, but that no orthodoxies have yet evolved as to how. For Pain and Kindon, who bring a feminist perspective:

Ownership of the research is shared with participants, who negotiate processes with the academic researcher. The approaches emphasise social action as a valuable part of research. They are necessarily unpredictable, exploratory, and relational. Thus participatory approaches have been heralded as offering opportunities for more emancipatory and empowering geographies with transformative development as their key objective. [18]

By contrast, Cooke and Kothari [3] point to many dangers with claiming to emancipate through participatory processes, pointing out that they necessarily involve power imbalances and also often substantial constraints in what is being offered by way of ownership to others, rendering promises unrealistic.

In traditional sociology (and also some anthropology), participation is treated with caution not because of unmet promises but because it is seen to call into question the whole epistemological basis of study. Taking an approach that adopts the distance of the natural scientist who explores inert phenomena, the social scientist seeks to gain research legitimacy by judging actions from outside the social processes that are the object of study. Indeed, the defence of PAR mounted by Krimerman [9] in asking should social inquiry be conducted democratically is illustrative of the degree to which engagement is seen as a form of defeat: partial, opinionated, 'gone native', subjective… These are all seen as unprofessional by researchers whose interest is more in abstracting than answering situated questions.

Schutz, on the other hand, gives a cogent argument for why sociology is not the study of phenomena outside the self in the same way that physics may be:

The social world is not essentially structureless. It has a particular meaning and relevance structure for the human beings living, thinking, and acting therein. They have preselected and preinterpreted this world by a series of common-sense constructs of the reality of daily life, and it's these thought objects which determine their behavior… The thought objects constructed by the social scientists refer to and are founded upon the thought objects constructed by the common-sense thought of man [sic] living his everyday life. [23:6]

Such a view goes beyond merely including the subject of the research in the research activity. It resituates the knowledge of different partners, offering a common platform from which to study social phenomena and de-privileging the researcher. In Schutz' view, understanding the meaning of a phenomenon for researchers should be carried out with deference to the meaning-making processes that are already taking place. 'The social scientist can construct typified models of social activity' because every member of society has intimate access to these common-sense constructs and members of a scientific community are in 'a position to engage in publicly controllable interpretative activity' [8:50]. Further, they cannot afford to ignore them.

A crude reading of this position has the potential to ignore much of what Cooke and Kothari's book [3] illustrates: that knowing is always contextual and prone to power relations. And Potter and Wetherell [22] discuss at length why researchers are challenged to speak for the processes they are observing, while Spivak [26] calls into question the validity of any attempt to speak for a less powerful group. However, here we adopt Schutz' fundamental position that we are all meaning-makers, while acknowledging later post-colonial and postmodern perspectives on the political nature of knowing and giving voice to knowledge. In this way, we are able to produce a strong argument for an extremely embodied, situated and engaged form of research, in which social phenomena are constructed and analyzed by participants as part of making the research happen.

Jones [6] undertakes to find a theoretical position which accepts the postmodern view of knowledge as partial, constructed and imbued with power relations and integrate this into the construction of political projects and actions, attempting to resolve a tension raised by the viewing knowledge as relative but needing to take decisive political action beyond the individual [6]. He advocates the development of contextual theories:

where the concepts used incorporate formalized flexibility… concepts only become fully developed in their implementation in specific contexts. And most significantly, contextual theories do not prioritise any ontological field in this process of theory construction: context is simultaneously spatial, temporal and social. [6]

With these positions in mind, the authors describe the acts of *researching* and *being researched* as examples of a kind of practice:

- that requires extensive meaning-making by both researchers and partners (ie all participants involved),
- which produces situated knowledge rather than abstract information, and, thus,

- where the value of what is learnt must be in the process as well as any final outcomes. Indeed, one outcome may be *many* descriptions of process.

Clearly this also has implications for researcher reflexivity. We argue that the socially responsible position for this work is one in which the author/researcher speaks as a participant rather than a person outside the process being described. And we undertake to do so, both in setting out our stall – in writing here – and in reporting back to the funding councils that have supported this work and to whom we wish to address our learning – amongst others – about being researched.

This is not a new position for researchers with certain political/ theoretical commitments. For instance, feminist research rejects the objectivity of mainstream social inquiry, adopting instead a variety of situated orientations such as those advocated by Trauth et al [27], where seeking to speak from the margins is a key precept. That we must all explain our positions so fully reflects its contrast to much of what comprises social research.

In sum, we have two arguments for avoiding an artificial separation between academic researchers and other participants: the first is that they are also researchers and to underestimate this tendency is to disadvantage the research; the second is that we have no justification to take time and ideas from others as our right. We are, like those who inform us, committed to certain practices of inquiry as part of our daily lives.

2.2 Avoiding a Positivist Approach

Taking the views of participants (and their rights to be treated as equals) seriously has major implications for research design.

A common assumption made by those trained in positivist science or bureaucratic cultures is that there will be a particular research methodology - a 'magic bullet' - that can be devised to facilitate collaboration. In reality, we have found that participatory initiatives are most effective when they acknowledge that each situation will require a different design, using a new combination of tools as part of a continuous cycle of action and reflection (e.g. [31]). Because any participatory initiative contains a unique mix of people and institutions, each process will necessarily include elements from a range of approaches and methodologies. Misguided attempts to strictly standardize and replicate protocols, in line with conventional scientific practice, can only undermine the participatory process.

When describing an experiment, it is vital to explain the context in which that experiment takes place. Were the plants in test tubes or in a farmer's field? This logic also applies in attempts to interpret a participatory process, and is roughly analogous to the conditions of an experiment. To be effective in achieving its aims, each process needs to proceed from an understanding of its political, scientific, institutional and practical constraints.

In designing a participatory initiative, any particular methodology - for example, a scenario workshop, participatory video, citizens' jury or stakeholder panel - will be partial and incomplete. An effective process is achieved by combining a variety of individual approaches that together give rigor and credibility to the whole exercise. Getting the balance of techniques right in any particular context becomes easier as everyone involved in the process reflects with each other on what worked in the past.

Instead of recommending a single mechanism or optimal formula, our project's aim is to outline areas for consideration for individuals and organizations when attempting research/design

collaborations on an equal footing. Light ([10], [12]) argues that much method breaks down when working with communities on designing social change projects. Gone are the formal structures that ensure repeatability. These priorities are replaced by accountability to the intended beneficiaries. She suggests that:

This is not a call to ... abandon political and cultural shrewdness or sensitivity to one's own position in a group. It is rather an acknowledgement that others in the room operate with these qualities too. [10]

When working in community contexts, purism of methodology and comparability of technique are the least of researchers' concerns. Work with communities, in particular that involving social change, requires researchers to 'get involved, be flexible, make friends, stay honest, choose sides (selectively), muck in and deliver' [10]. And Winschiers-Theophilus et al [34] illuminate the complexity of cross-cultural participatory design activities as part of re-thinking concepts and methods in the era of globalization. They seek to keep the core values of participatory design but strip them of unconscious cultural biases in their discussion of being participated. So, very far from maintaining the distance and objectivity that can be understood as integrity in representing knowledge to the research community, to succeed at all, work with communities requires integrity in its dealings with others involved directly in the research question.

Perspectives on collaboration and participation in research from the arts are an important adjunct to those approaches the origins of which come from the social research traditions. Perspectives from those who study performance are useful in looking how different actors struggle for control within a participatory process by performing solidarity with particular participants if, for example, they want to build a collective voice. By contrast, scientists and facilitators in such workshop processes have a tendency to perform as experts, even when participants without professional training in the relevant discipline may know more than the person speaking.

Social psychologists have made detailed studies of manipulation of participatory process by facilitators ('facipulation') in a range of settings (e.g. [2]). Rather than the people convening the process being predisposed to controlling a process for the sake of it, such facipulation is more commonly the product of those funding or managing the researchers feeling that they are required to direct the process because of the objectives set for them by a funder or decision-making body. The influence of research funders on participatory processes, and its impact on their legitimacy and creativity, is a contentious and under-researched issue [32]. In the context of academic research, the need for research to conform to university research norms and academic funding objectives is often a hidden factor behind participatory research projects ([15], [19],[20]).

2.3 Reflexivity, Action and Trust

Researchers on the PU project were drawn together because they share – with others – the notion that the creativity and experience of communities, residents, groups and individuals is equally valuable to that of academics, other professionals and those in power over them. As researchers, each of us endeavors to work collaboratively with communities and individuals, participating in academic research projects to find ways of ensuring all voices are heard, that they are listened to, and that credit is given where it is due. As a further goal all are committed to designing projects that lead to change in the ways that participants are included in, or

become responsible for, the decisions that affect their lives. The group shares a strong desire to communicate this to the academy, informing and improving the way universities engage with communities through research. But, as researchers operating in the context of the British academy, we may also prioritize the exploration of potential new questions for other researchers, funders, or policy-makers to address.

A desire for productive change may inspire other participants more absolutely. There is evidence that citizens get involved in a process either because they want to personally experience a transformation, such as through an arts-based project, or they want to bring about positive change in the world, through having a more effective voice in decisions that affect the common good.

Being clear about what each groups wants out of the process is key to building mutual respect among the different participants in a process. Even if people have different personal or professional goals, an open discussion of these, and the externally constraints on the process, allows a trust in the process to develop.

3. Ethics and Consent

Compared to traditional social research, a PAR approach makes questions relating to what it is to have an ethical approach to research much clearer. It makes explicit the need to negotiate the shape of a research program with communities, such as:

- details of how the data will be collected and with whom;
- potential impacts of everything involved in the research;
- the mechanisms whereby all participants will be in partnership throughout the process.

We have designed PU on the pioneering work by Meskell and Pels [16], who argue that ethics cannot be abstracted from the way in which research is practiced. The dichotomy between research on the one hand, and its ethical practice on the other is the result of a conception of ethics based on a code of professional conduct and the institution of an ethics committee that monitors this conduct by peer review. This conception turns the ethical code into a kind of 'constitution' for the profession and the professional into an adjudicator who, on the basis of this ethical constitution and their mastery of ethical information, assumes a position of unquestioned (and often implicit) superiority.

Such sovereignty, based on the assumption of expertise and supported by the presumption of the expert's autonomy in ethical matters, is often fictional, usually tenuous, and, more often than not, out of place. If guidelines for conduct are needed, they should not take the shape of rules for judging expert sovereignty in an ethical way (for this would assume the value of expertise beforehand, out of context), but facilitate the negotiation of expertise. This approach embeds ethics in research practice at the same time as it opens up research practice to the negotiation of the interests of the individuals and organizations with which it must deal – sponsors, university administrations, governments, the people studied and doing the studying, the media and the public. Researchers might therefore redefine their goal as a search, not for transcendent truth opposed to local or particular interests, but for significant truths about materials and sites in an open-ended negotiation. This allows for the recognition of values other than the pursuit of evidence. Particular interventions are thus 'performances' in a particular setting, rather than transcendent information or ethical rules that go beyond reformulation and public negotiation.

Our approach is thus distinctly different from the standard ones in which we - and/or our ethics committees – would have made judgments about what we believe to be ethical. Traditional approaches to informed consent - deriving from an institution's need to protect itself and those it temporarily embraces - contain the basic contradiction that researchers are told to get consent before research has started, but research is often the only way to find out how to achieve informed consent, which may differ in each context. Conventional research ethics also enshrine modernist values of individualism, legalism and nationalism – a conception of knowledge as the possession of a kind of 'expert' commodity – the property of information. It has a tendency to dismiss other moralities of research (e.g. trust or social learning) in favor of scholarly puzzle solving and finding an ultimate truth.

As part of our overall approach, our intention has been to ensure those participating understand fully to what they are being invited to commit whilst being reassured they are under no pressure to do so. In Britain, we are expected to gain informed consent from any participant in a research project. Emanating from medical research, the standard forms and processes involved in gaining this consent tend to position the recruited participants in three ways that we deplore:

1) as vulnerable subjects to researcher procedure,
2) as in need of anonymity so that personal information and views cannot be associated back to them, and
3) as donors of information rather than co-creators of knowledge or as researchers in their own right.

Our engagement structure was designed to allow us work towards a form of consent that does not function retrospectively (as participants find out what is planned for them on the day and can take it or leave it at that point). We invited participants to a half-day meeting prior to our two-day summit to promote discussion of the ramifications and opportunities of participation (meeting other groups, going 'on record', helping to write ensuing guidance in whatever way seems appropriate). Our intention was to explore participation as a slow and thoughtful process. This approach will be enabled by the existing working relations between groups who are used to participating in research, and who will be engaging with researchers and facilitators with whom some trust is already established.

The impact of this existing relationship is also of interest. The white-coated researchers of clinical trials who are interested only in people's bodies are a long way from the known facilitators and partners of community research who are interested in the thoughts and actions of the groups and propose long-term relationships. The 'white coats' are the anonymous uniform of researchers to be judged on their trustworthiness as experts. We are judged on more personal criteria and – since we have worked together with our groups before – on their previous experience of us. So this very trust – yet another kind of knowledge - also goes against the spirit of the written consent form.

We cannot ensure that 'informed' means understanding what will happen rather than merely trusting us. We can never produce an information stream free of the social relations involved. It may be sensible and fair that any judgment made in a workshop situation is about the people as much as the activities, but it again resists the impartiality of formal notions of consent.

Although it is apparent from the discussion that we are drawing together opinion from four preparatory workshops and therefore acting as mediators, we can, at least, by running these workshops,

include the modifications that arise from engaging with participants on more familiar ground than the joint summit, both in terms of location and of intellectual commitments.

3.1 Anonymity

As noted, we do not subscribe to the conventional ethics process that attempts to make all participants anonymous. While we fully accept that personal information such as addresses should not be rendered public through our actions, we have made it a condition of participation in our summit that participants are willing to go on record – either in film or written form – as the owners of their information and ideas. We would like to quote them and their affiliations as part of acknowledging their contribution. In the best of all possible worlds, this condition would itself have been part of the negotiation of opinions to happen at the summit. However, if willingness to represent oneself is made a summit entry condition, then some element of choice remains. The groups will only send people happy in the role of spokespeople to the event. This situates the choice: it becomes a matter of who attends, rather than defining the event they are attending. This is symptomatic of the way that the limits of time and the dynamics of the funding process play out in the research design and move choice towards increasingly superficial aspects of the project.

3.2 Exchange

The preceding sections have talked about giving participant status to everyone involved (including academic researchers) and respecting their point of view without favor. But there is another facet to respecting research participants. It is not necessarily sufficient to accord all participants credit for having a viewpoint and a way of understanding knowledge and knowing. There will be different value placed on articulating these positions within the discussions. As noted earlier, formal researchers rely on information for their livelihood and can expect to gain professional benefit from their engagement, whereas other participants may receive less tangible benefits from their involvement.

Given that the goal of understanding more about participation is another occasion we ask something from the groups that will benefit the researchers more than other participants (who probably do not stand to gain from the publications that ensue), thinking of the summit as an exchange might help redress the balance. It allows us to plan benefits for those present in the room, in case other benefits do not accrue from getting involved over the wider project.

Another merit of the preparatory session, then, exists in enabling the organizers of the summit to make it of more tangible value to the range of groups participating. As well as organizing travel, accommodation, dietary requirements etc. researchers holding these workshops are inviting their groups to identify ways that benefit might be returned to the community group, either through inviting guests that will further the group's aims, or by dealing with themes that are pertinent to the community, or, indeed, by recognizing the need for payment in lieu of earnings. The social good of participation can be seen specifically in the shape of what is offered back to participants *here and now* as well as to some notional group that will benefit in the fullness of time. We intend to make an explicit acknowledgement that all of us can have interests in the work and that all of us are committing valuable time and thought to it.

4. Voice, Technology and Change

Woodhouse and Patton [33] describe how lay people allow experts in science, engineering, and medicine to do whatever is technically and financially feasible, rather than what is best for wider society. In the *Democratising Technology* project (one forerunner of this study - see [13] and [14] - that involved the East End London pensioners who became engaged in PU), community groups worked with academic researchers to challenge the lack of access that most people have to discussion about technological design.

The project identified several aspects as necessary to participate in designing 'the network age' and, therefore, to make a change:

Forum – a space to contribute and people to listen
Motivation – the desire to contribute
Articulacy – the vocabulary and fluency to present one's ideas in a particular domain
Confidence – the assurance to become involved
Knowledge – enough understanding to have an opinion
Agency – an awareness that change is possible and of oneself as an agent of change
Association – the ability to interpret things together or see links, such as: old and new, people and things, etc.
Transformation – the act of combining to make new ideas, concepts and associations [13].

Work between community groups and researchers focused on these largely internal aspects of participating. Gaining in confidence and sense of agency, participants gave voice to more articulated judgments about society and technology ([11],[13]) and in some cases took related action (see http://www.express.co.uk/posts/view/222061/The-Geezers-We-won-t-grow-old-gracefully).

One of the stated objectives of PU was to work over a two-day summit with members of the four community groups we brought together to identify whose views are heard and whose are not in the process of participating in research, whilst defining what communities interpret as 'being heard'. This is to look outwards at forum and those external factors that make participation feel meaningful and fully fledged.

What does 'being heard' amount to? What is forum? Even among the research team, opinion differs and our answers are highly contextual. Further, it would not be desirable to give one definition; we have already noted that multiple perspectives are inevitable and surely 'being heard' means valuing individuals' contributions. We can juxtapose this notion of participation with one that emphasizes a more generic notion of power; as that of being in control.

Arnstein's ladder [1] was designed principally for shaping health policy over 40 years ago and has been highly influential. It describes types of participation in terms of the power they assign to participants. It supposes that there is power to hand over, and, like Cooke and Kothari [3], it offers a critique of tokenism. In Arnstein's model only the top three rungs of the ladder (partnership, delegated power and citizen control) demonstrate the transfer of power from broker to citizen. Preceding rungs reflect engagement with citizens without the surrender or transfer of power or control. Arnstein's focus on power has been criticized for undermining the potential for user involvement [28] as it assumes that power has a common basis for users, policymakers and - in the context of Arnstein's work - healthcare providers. As Tritter and McCallum [28] note, it also discounts the action of participation as a goal in its own right.

In our project, considering the ladder highlights other tensions: for instance, we might treat all participants as equal partners, but the funding body will treat us – and only us - as accountable for our funding. Further, we might hear the views of our partners and thus give the impression that academia is listening, but the discussion might not have impact by continuing into other orbits. So our own power is in question and we are far from able to ensure that the world listens or that, even as the initiators of the project, we are capable of being more than token partners ourselves. We may manifest as powerful – and we have to ensure we do not exploit this – but we may, in reality, offer a glimpse of a system that, far from treating academic knowledge as sacrosanct, actually involves a complex web of alliances and power games. Honesty about our status is part of what we are attempting to share in talking openly about the nature of activities and likely outcomes, both here and in all our dealings with our partners. In doing so, we hope to situate the knowledge(s) we are dealing with and open a discussion on what kinds of power communities can aspire to. Thus, our involvement at the summit can be seen as a means of sharing in the audit of audiences, messages and forum.

4.1 Sharing credit

This discussion of voice clearly raises the issue that processes of engagement, however transparent, like the tools themselves, are not neutral. A low level of literacy in one community ought to preclude written consultation, but replacing written consultation with another method or technology is little more than displacement. All participants in a process ought to share in the pursuit of the creation of new knowledge and its dissemination, or, more problematically for research institutions, they ought to share ownership of any intellectual property developed through their involvement in research. And they ought to benefit financially from its exploitation (rungs 6 – 8 of the ladder). Equally, participants must be recognized and credited with any changes to policy or incremental developments in technology, arts or science knowledge to which they have contributed through direct involvement in research.

Whilst the statement below - an amalgamation of University research guidelines drawn from three UK based institutions as part of a typical collaboration agreement – suggests positive values of openness and transparency, it fails to address or even recognize the fundamental importance and significance of the people participating in research as either the subjects of research projects or active participants working with researchers to explore issues together.

Whilst recognising the need for researchers to protect their academic research interests in the process of planning of research, carrying out and writing up research and, where appropriate, handling intellectual property rights (IPR), the academy encourages all researchers to be open as possible in discussing their work with other researchers and with the public. Once results have been published, researchers are expected to make available relevant data and materials to other researchers, on request, provided that this is consistent with any ethical approvals and consents which cover the data and materials, and any intellectual property rights in them. (Egglestone, team notes, 2010)

Just like the consent form that ignores participants as contributors, it supposes that knowledge is an academic preserve. But instead,

we might see this IPR as perhaps this is the most relevant forum that, as academics, we can share as we go forward in creating findings together. And while we do not predict patents in the current project, we do extend the politics of the commons as being relevant to all such endeavors.

A Creative Commons (CC) agreement, drafted by all parties involved in a research project at the outset of the process could make provision to address some power imbalances with researchers. This project is committed to using CC as a way of enabling all parties to own the data generated, the stories and films produced and the written outcomes that will go to the different audiences, such as policy makers and academic journals.

5. Conclusion

We describe here a project premised on social engagement which extends beyond the conventional parameters of participatory design. The project, *Participants United*, brings participants (denoting both researchers and community members) together to create a summit at which the process of participation is the topic of research and process issues are foregrounded so we may consider how balance can be established and gain can ensue for all stakeholders in the exchange of value. The measures outlined above are aimed at encouraging members of our partner groups to see themselves as co-researchers and people whose interests, knowledge, opinions and ways of experiencing research are welcome in the project, and particularly at the principal research event of it, in doing exercises alongside the research group.

We have described our aims in such a way that we draw attention to many knowledge construction and sharing processes involved in the project and discuss several aspects of this:

informed consent – do participants understand the motives of the research, their potential contribution and what flexibility exists to shape it, own it and/or abandon it as any participant sees fit?

exchange – is knowledge exchanged in a context where inquiry is seen as belonging to all? Are all participants recognized as equal in coming together to learn from each other, further their interests and share understandings?

voice – have we attended to the power imbalances that exist in this group, as in any group, and by raising these issues, made them part of the knowledge to be discussed and shared?

credit – are participants able to contribute exactly as much and as little as they would like to the summit in such a way that they get an appropriate degree of credit for participating?

Whilst the discussions above tackle the process and outputs of collaborative research, the co-design of methods (or the agreement to reject research methods) is crucial to the success of any engagement. Current research enquiry procedures make this aspect difficult. Research projects require research questions before commencing field studies or identifying and consulting with research subjects. Whilst this approach is not unreasonable it has weaknesses in placing the emphasis on the importance of the researcher framing the research topic, the body commissioning the research and the institution contracted to deliver the outputs and evaluation. All three are gatekeepers by default. All parties must 'sign-up' to the research project before the researcher identifies any participants. Participants are then research subjects in the colonial sense of the word. Even adopting the most well-meaning and equitable ways of working, it is what Light and Miskelly [12] have called *benign imposition*. PU has worked within the current system of pursuing funding, then involving partners and gaining

consent, but it has used the processes of the research to open up a critical space and time for discussion of them to try and lessen imposition in the future.

Nonetheless, the imbalance of power is inherent in the current process and it is difficult to imagine any improvement without first dismantling the hierarchical commissioning structures and dispensing with the requirement to start research with a research question. Enabling individuals, groups and communities to set their own research agenda by framing the questions they would like to ask is fundamental to notions of agency and ability to design the engagement process. We have been striving to incorporate this in a small way, represented most clearly by the plan for sessions where partners' purposes are pursued, and the structures put in place to share ownership of outputs, such as the Creative Commons licence.

This paper, then, is a description of how we have applied our theoretical commitments and operationalized them as ethical and politically informed empirical research. We have aspired to integrate phenomenological (Schutz) and participatory approaches to knowledge by adopting an action research agenda. We have made space, time and permission for different interpretations to appear at all stages of the process, even though we have not been able to build in as much collaborative development as we would wish. And, beyond method, we have looked at opening the mechanisms of research to appropriation by all participants.

We have acknowledged the power relations in working in this way, building on the former work of each member of the team, but refusing to allow a belief in situated knowledge and the need for contextualization to cripple our ambitions to produce change. We have instead shown how we have constituted ourselves, as academic researchers, as fund-holders and as participants, and detailed our plan to offer informed participant status to our partners. This is only the first installment. The voices in this paper are those of these early participants. Our final output will include the thoughts and expressions of a range of individuals and community groups, captured together using new devices of record and dissemination (such as blogs and flipcam video), speaking about their experiences and concerns, in potentially conflicting plurality. We offer these initial thoughts here as a platform on which we hope to build the kind of listening needed to undertake design projects that produce reflective work; that allow insights into knowledge and values; and that make ICTs more meaningful in use.

6. ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

7. References

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