

# Service users as peer research interviewers: why bother?

*Rachel Harding, Grahame Whitfield and Neil Stillwell*

## Introduction

Drawing on two studies completed within the social housing sector, this chapter asks if there are advantages to peer interviewing, whereby those currently or recently receiving services interview their peers as part of a research project. Contribution is made to the broader methodological debate of how service users should be involved in research about their lives. Along with contributions from a peer interviewer, we examine the benefits to peer interviewers themselves, and whether there are any positive differences for the people being interviewed. This chapter argues that there are clear methodological advantages to peer interviewing as it can lend vital insights from rapport with those often regarded as ‘hardest to reach’. The chapter also discusses peer interviewing in terms of strategic risk and limitations, as well as practical and ethical considerations. Ways of developing peer research in general are also suggested.

## What is peer interviewing?

Historically, ‘professional researchers’ determined what data were to be collected, how they were to be collected, how they were analysed and what the findings meant (Hanley, 2005; Beresford, 2007). This structural exclusion of the perspective of people being researched (in this case service users) and the notion of them as only having a voice as ‘subjects’ has increasingly become a problematic issue, particularly in applied social policy research and in research about how health and social services interventions are delivered (Smith, 2004; Thornicroft and Tansella, 2005).

However, service user involvement – and peer research specifically – is an increasingly debated area in social research (McLaughlin, 2005). The focus of this chapter is on peer interviewing, but support for it and user involvement more generally falls into three broad camps (Becker et al, 2006). Some champion it as the only meaningful way to do applied social policy research. Others have serious reservations about its effectiveness. Still more feel they ought to engage with this approach but do not know exactly how. Peer research thus has the potential to engage or alienate researchers as well as policy makers and service providers.

Peer research has been termed ‘participatory action research’ in methodological literature (Becker and Bryman, 2004). Peer *interviewing* concentrates on one approach to fieldwork, particularly qualitative fieldwork. It is one aspect of peer research and should be viewed in context of the wider debates on peer research but distinct from ‘user-led’ research. The distinction lies in that ‘user-led’ research is managed by service users and sometimes without professional input, whereas peer research is often managed by professional researchers but includes roles for service users as part of a project’s design. Peer research therefore involves people who are currently (or have recently been) receiving services as interviewers of others receiving similar services. It is the gathering of data from interviews alongside people who share experiences with those who are themselves being interviewed. It is a process of joint interviewing between a researcher and someone who has direct experience of the issue being explored.

Beresford (2002) identifies two approaches to research with ‘user’ involvement that are inherently conflicting. The *consumerist* approach seeks to manage the delivery of services, while the *democratic* approach offers empowerment to those receiving services. One retains power for the ‘professional’, while the other seeks to share it with service users. In many ways, peer interviewing can be considered a methodological approach that aims to facilitate the data gathering of research. However, while not disregarding the empowering process that peer interviewers find beneficial, the focus is on enabling the person being interviewed to do so on common ground. There is also an underlying assumption that this also produces better quality (‘more grounded’) data.

In this chapter, the term ‘peer interviewer’ is preferred to ‘service user’, ‘user’ or ‘client’ interviewer. This is in recognition of the fact that those interviewing alongside professional researchers might no longer be in receipt of services. It is the commonality of experience and its benefits and limitations that is explored here, whether or not that experience of receiving services is concurrent with the role undertaken

as an interviewer. Taylor (2005) rightly raises concerns of inadvertently stigmatising peer researchers. It would be a hindrance to identify peer interviewers as part of the social 'problem' studied *only* in order that they qualify as people to be involved at all. Furthermore, McLaughlin (2005) writes that it is difficult to draw boundaries between 'users' and 'professionals' given that some 'users' might become professionals, and some professionals might themselves become or already be (or have been) 'users'. In addition, in this chapter, the term 'researchers' denotes professionally trained members of the project team with responsibility for the project's success and all peer interviewer involvement.

### **An overview of the studies and how the peer interviewing worked**

This chapter draws on two studies conducted in the field of homelessness research. The first was funded by Nottingham City Council to explore day centre services for homeless and vulnerably housed people, namely those who held their own tenancy or owned their own home but were nevertheless at risk of becoming homeless through complex needs from substance use to debts and arrears (Smith and Harding, 2005). The second investigated tenancy support for formerly homeless substance users (Harding et al, 2007; Bowpitt and Harding, 2009) and was funded by a service provider. Peer interviewing was a core feature of the design of both studies, with formerly homeless people being joint interviewers alongside the researchers. Thus those who had been homeless and were using services at one day centre were recruited to joint interviews at other day centres (Smith and Harding, 2005). In this way, and having been a user of the tenancy support service for street homeless people with substance use problems, a contributor to this chapter was recruited to joint interview in the study (Harding et al, 2007; Bowpitt and Harding, 2009).

This was a deliberate attempt to undertake the research with homeless people as equal partners in the conduct of the research, so that people with experience of the subject of the study undertook a vital role in its design and specifically the fieldwork. Research *with* those who are usually seen as recipients of social welfare is an aim of other studies. For example, Dwyer and Hardhill (2008) recruited older people as peer interviewers of a study about older people; Sutton et al (2007) designed research fieldwork with the distinct groups of young people being studied to include and share ownership of the methods.

Considerable preparation was made in advance of the actual interviews to ensure both peer interviewers and project researchers were clear as to their respective roles during the interview. It was also necessary to ensure the peer interviewers were equipped with the interviewing skills required, since these cannot be assumed by virtue of their being 'service users' themselves (Smith et al, 2002; McLaughlin, 2005). It was not expected that peer interviewers would have the same set of skills as the project researchers, and neither was it anticipated that the project researchers would have the same immediate insights as the peer interviewers. It was found, however, that the 'professional' and 'service user' perspectives could complement each other for a more comprehensive interviewing strategy. It was not assumed that the peer interviewers would or should cope with sole responsibility for the interviews, given that the pressure to do so could well be unfair (see Clark et al, 2005), potentially exploitative and difficult given their limited research skills. As such, while responsibility for managing the interview situation remained with the project researchers, the emphasis in the interview was that the homeless people being interviewed should be able to respond directly to the peer researcher as much as possible.

To support the peer interviewers in doing this, a meeting was held to agree the interview schedule, and amendments to the draft topic guide were made accordingly regarding the wording, objectives and sequence of the questions. Openness to the peer interviewer's views at this early planning stage was crucial in striving towards seeking knowledge from both the '(outside) professional' and the '(inside) service user' world (Warren, 2000). The peer interviewers then familiarised themselves with the agreed semi-structured qualitative schedule, practising on each other and suggesting final amendments as necessary. Clark et al (2005) comment that the opportunity to learn (or re-learn) research and interviewing skills can be exciting, rewarding and enormously empowering for peer researchers and can offer a significant contribution to a project's success.

During the ensuing interviews, the peer interviewers introduced the interviewee to the aim of the research, explaining what would be involved and seeking their informed consent. They also undertook the specific role of leading on the interview questions. In this way, the homeless person being interviewed was able to respond directly to another who had also experienced homelessness. Their significant contribution lay in allowing those with personal experience of the issue being studied to take the lead in the interview situation (Smith et al, 2002). Any prompting, re-wording or re-phrasing was undertaken by

the project researchers as appropriate. Thus the project researchers only became involved when they felt departure from the prepared interview schedule was necessary to elicit sufficient data in answering the research questions, when peer researchers had raised pertinent new issues that it was felt needed to be explored in more detail or when peer interviewers got into difficulties. Effectively, the project researchers were assuming the role of immediate 'support person' (Smith, 2004), enabling the peer interviewers to carry out their task effectively and satisfactorily.

During the interviews, the peer interviewers were careful not to assume a commonality of experience with the people being interviewed (Smith et al, 2002). There was an emphasis on listening as a key component to the qualitative interviewing process (Mason, 2002). Professionalism was thus upheld, with each interview seeking to uncover the articulated experiences of others (Arksey and Knight, 1999), and not subject them to having to appreciate the views of an interviewer. The peer interviewers also contributed to the research project as a whole, for example approving the report for accessibility and offering valuable criticism, a task identified in other participatory studies (Smith, 2004; McLaughlin, 2005; Northway and Wheeler, 2005).

### **Benefits to peer interviewers: a personal reflection**

This section explores the personal benefit of peer interviewing from the perspective of a peer interviewer. While Neil was initially recruited as a service user, he is no longer in formal receipt of the services he jointly researched. However, he continues to be called on as a peer interviewer. The text in this section is the result of several discussions to set down not only the benefits but also the possible risks to a service user becoming a peer interviewer. Neil asked for this section to be co-written in the first person rather than by means of the use of selective quotes to convey his experience more effectively. Therefore, while not directly authored by himself, he has approved it for this publication as an accurate representation of his experiences and views.

#### *Self-esteem and 'giving back'*

As someone involved as a peer interviewer, I have benefited from the experience in a number of different ways. Taking part in research interviewing is often a tremendous boost to my individual confidence and self-esteem. But it was also a chance to return through interviewing something of what I had earlier received when a service user.

Taking part in the interviewing was an opportunity to turn what I would call the negative experience of homelessness into something positive and useful. It's not that interviewing equates to that of a support worker's task, but there is clearly a satisfaction in having a turn to enable another homeless person to express their views about their experiences and aspirations. Whereas being homeless had been a profound experience of exclusion, peer interviewing allowed me to be included on relatively equal footing within a team of professionals.

However, there is the issue of addressing the vulnerability of peer interviewers, given that there can be a personal history of not succeeding, and then giving up, lacking the resources to try again. My nature has always been, if I cannot succeed the first time, I stop. As long as I do not feel out of my depth with the interview, I can give it my best.

For this reason, preparation is crucial for me. It is very important that this is done professionally and thoroughly so that peer interviewers have a minimum amount of worry about carrying out an interview. Equipping peer interviewers with clear guidelines so that they know what to do and how to do it, and checking that they feel able to do such a task is essential. It's about making everyone safe and removing as much as possible the risk of things going wrong. Imbuing people with a feeling that it is something they will find manageable and achievable is much more likely to produce a good peer interview.

### *Participating and responsibility*

The participatory role in itself is not to be underestimated for those undertaking peer interviews. My own personal story includes receiving sufficient personal encouragement from support staff to gain a sense of positive self-esteem and confidence. Having benefited from such support, the process of contributing to the research team is a continuation of this personal encouragement. In particular, it was having research professionals *trusting* me with leading on a peer interview that was a very meaningful benefit to undertaking the task. It gave me a feeling of pride and affirmation, an enormous sense of well-being that experts or 'research professionals' had trust in my ability to do the job. And after interviewing, de-briefing not only gives the chance to divest of any stress from hearing current homeless people's accounts, but also because it is affirming and being appreciated for having done the job well.

However, although I had been homeless, my experience is personal and particular to me. In no way is it helpful to assume a commonality, because it is not going to do anything or achieve anything to say 'I know

how you feel' or 'I know what you're going through'. It can, in fact, be quite patronising to make these assumptions, and it's more likely to risk offending the person being interviewed. This in itself could irrevocably damage the integrity of the interview. Everybody's experience or struggle with homelessness is completely unique; even if they are going through the same sort of things as I went through, it will be unique for them in the way they react to the situation.

It's also crucial that I am able to listen to what other homeless people had to say and not assume I would 'know' by virtue of having been homeless once myself. Whatever the apparent commonality of experiences, interviewing requires basic skills of listening and respect for another's view. It is important to listen because everybody's going to face things differently, to see them differently. Peer interviewers must be able to listen when undertaking interviewing to contribute to the success of the fieldwork.

### *Empathy versus stigma*

Of course there are potential dangers of former homeless people judging others who are currently homeless. It is not uncommon for such stigma to occur even if someone has experienced something like homelessness for themselves. They can display discriminatory behaviour against another in a similar situation. Being empathic and non-judgemental are two desirable qualities in a peer interviewer. When faced with a homeless person, it would be damaging to the interview, and indeed the project as a whole, if the peer interviewer were to reveal scorn or dislike towards the social status of a homeless person being interviewed. My own feelings are along the lines that because I have been there, and I have been homeless, I have seen what goes on and how nasty being homeless really is. It's important to have the tools to avoid negative behaviour towards those who remain homeless.

As said above, personal confidence and self-value have come from the support I received. As a peer interviewer, I have been able to face what I have been through and utilise the experience positively. After all, it is an integrity that would benefit any member, professional or service user, of any research team.

## **Perceived benefits to those interviewed by their peers**

Probably the least understood area of peer research, and one that lacks substantial empirical study to date, is whether those interviewed by their peers do in fact benefit in any way. Unpicking (as far as possible) what was done in the two studies discussed in this chapter does shed some light on the question.

All those interviewed for the research studies by a peer interviewer alongside a researcher gave their informed consent for this. All were also offered the choice of being interviewed by a researcher only. Interestingly, all chose to be interviewed with a peer interviewer. Having a peer interviewer appeared to facilitate the interview in two ways.

First, there was an immediate and relaxed manner on the part of the person being interviewed. It would appear that there was indeed a methodological advantage to peer interviewing, as opposed to being interviewed by researchers alone. Smith et al (2002) have similarly noticed this on the part of the peer interviewers. While it might be unjustified to suggest that without the peer interviewer the interview would have been difficult, there was a perceived benefit in assuming a commonality of language. Less experienced interviewers of homeless people might require secondary questions eliciting explanations of specific language. The 'street language' or terminology, namely jargon peculiar to sleeping rough, drug and alcohol use and so on, can inhibit the natural flow of an interview if it is interrupted with a need for clarification with 'non-homeless' phraseology or language.

Having a peer interviewer did not necessitate such 'translations', and the interview was able to proceed with the interviewed person's own choice of words understood and recognised. Clarification was sought where an account was complex. For example, inasmuch as peer interviewing requires the interpretation of the social world within the vocabulary of those who have lived what is being researched, doing so with just such people lends integrity to a study. In this way, the terms of reference of those being researched were retained (Harding and Hamilton, 2009). This interpretation was led by the researchers, with contributions from the peer interviewers. As Smith et al (2002) writes, it should not always be assumed that peer interviewers themselves fully understand all that is told them by those they are interviewing.

Second, there was a notable levelling of power relations in the interview situation. Again, it is unhelpful to suggest that an interview by a professional and experienced researcher would not be a good one. However, that a homeless person was addressing a peer interviewer



who had themselves been homeless facilitated rapport. Essential to any qualitative interview, rapport facilitates a dialogue necessary for the gathering of rich data, even if the situation remains contrived (Duncombe and Jessop, 2002). Observing this dynamic of two people with the core experience of homelessness in common, the researchers were able to see an interview unfold that did not have the added ingredient of vulnerable people relating to professionals, academics or those 'outside' the direct experience of the social issue being investigated (Warren, 2000).

## **Methodological benefits**

In many ways, peer interviewing can be located within standpoint epistemology. Feminist standpoint epistemology, for example, is a particular understanding of the world to be researched, especially a woman's world, and engaging in this requires particular skill as well as specific experience. Harding (1987, p 185) writes of '... the intellectual and political struggles necessary to see nature and social life from the point of view of that disdained activity which produces women's social experiences...'. There is, it is argued, a distinctive experience of human relationships that is peculiar to women (Stanley and Wise, 1983). Thus, according to this argument, female researchers with this approach will uncover different data and in different ways from male researchers.

This kind of argument, while generally argued to have originated in feminist approaches, has been adopted and developed in respect of research on and involving people from different ethnic groups, religions, sexualities and in terms of disability and long-standing illness (Beresford, 2002). It is essentially a political 'participatory rhetoric' (Beresford and Croft, 2004, p 61). In respect of disability, particularly mental health and learning disability (Beresford, 2005; UFM, 2005), the often cited, 'Nothing about us without us' has been a powerful slogan used in campaign literature, research and by policy makers (DH, 2001).

A standpoint epistemology would therefore contend that homeless people are best placed to provide meaningful and informed insight into the experience of homelessness and to relate to other homeless people. This supports the use of peer interviewing as part of exploring the social world with the advantage of a particular point of view, namely that of people who themselves have specific experience of an issue or phenomenon. To see them as key to the research in question is to acknowledge their unique contribution to its answer. However, peer interviewing does not refer to standpoint epistemology alone. We would argue that this is

fundamentally about doing qualitative research with people in vulnerable or disadvantaged circumstances *properly*. It involves those belonging to the social issue studied in a positively democratic way. As Beresford (2005, p 12) says of 'user involvement': 'It is a systematic process of discussion and negotiation – which is what the best practice always has been'.

Doing this *with* homeless people themselves is the next step to understanding their social world as best as possible, a progress from data sources to joint data gatherers. It can be argued that if researchers want to gather data from homeless people, there is already an assumption that they have a specific contribution that must be included in a project's design. Carr (2007) points out that resisting this opportunity for participation would have effectively denied any such research discourse. Qualitative research undertaken with peer interviewers challenges academics, policy researchers, policy makers and service providers to appreciate in more depth what it is that other people have lived.

These challenges can be direct in terms of preferred methods but also result in a greater appreciation of research, its process and outputs (Smith et al, 2002). As mentioned above, peer research also suggests that those with a particular experience have a crucial role in its investigation. Peer interviewing is therefore about doing research (literally) alongside those who also belong with the people being studied.

For example, one interviewee listened to the short introduction of the peer interviewer stating they had been homeless themselves, and then commented, "Good – you've been through it too". There followed a short exchange comparing experiences and services used between interviewee and peer interviewer. This appeared to 'seal' the common ground and established a rapport that would not necessarily have been possible with a researcher alone.

Furthermore, another interview paused when an interviewee did not understand the prepared question being asked from the schedule. The researcher intervened and paraphrased, but only when the peer interviewer then put the paraphrased question into more familiar 'street' language did the interviewee understand. It is possible that the trained skills of a researcher would have failed where the added familiarity of street jargon from the peer interviewer succeeded in the homeless person being able to answer the interview question.

## **Validity and other issues**

It would be right to suggest that the impact of peer research and interviewing is still to be tested, and its value proved (Becker et al, 2006;

Taylor and Le Riche, 2006). It is important not to make too sweeping an assumption about how the benefits argued for here may be generalised; they remain perceived and not necessarily examined for themselves, and there is an inherent danger in assuming peer interviewing is good in respect of the people being interviewed in all circumstances (Smith et al, 2002). There is also a need to critique the benefits to ‘professionals’ which itself is not to be assumed (McLaughlin, 2005). It would certainly appear at the time of writing that formal evaluation of peer interviewing is still to be undertaken.

How to do this is, of course, another matter. Indeed, proving anything within qualitative research is fraught with difficulty, not least that qualitative researchers usually prefer terms such as ‘building theory’ or ‘suggesting evidence’, rather than ‘causation’ or ‘proof’ (Henn et al, 2006). Yet it would be possible to ask at the end of an interview why a person chose, and gave their consent to, being peer interviewed, and whether they would do so again.

Alternatively, a project could be organised into two groups, one with peer interviewers and one with professional researchers alone. Seeing whether data was richer from the peer interview group would help with a peer interview evaluation. Regarding homelessness in particular, exploring whether ‘hard-to-reach’ groups found it easier to participate because of having peer interviewers would add substantial argument to the advantage of peer research.

Examining peer research in this way would contribute to the literature ‘from the receiving end’. It would give a balance to the increasing number of publications written from the point of view of the academic supporters of peer researchers (Lowes and Hulatt, 2005). It would also enable the debate to move beyond the notion that peer research is about wanting to appear to do the right thing without necessarily undertaking anything of consequence (Steel, 2005).

## **Identifying and managing risks**

Certainly, peer interviewing brings its own complicated risks of having people with experience of a social problem (current or recent) interviewing those who are themselves defined and identified, if only for research purposes, by the same social phenomenon. For example, and following on from the above discussion of empathy and stigma, psychology literature includes theories about how stigma can be used to preserve the interests of self, whatever those interests and threats are perceived to be (Neuberg et al, 2003). Stigma can therefore be used to

bolster an individual's positive perception of themselves at the expense of an open and favourable attitude to others. Encountering homelessness in others can result in stigma and other negative or hostile attitudes, even when someone has been homeless themselves.

If there are indeed methodological benefits to researching *with* as well as researching *on* people, and these are largely reliant on theories of knowledge sources (Warren, 2000; McLaughlin, 2005), then the validity of a project is strengthened rather than weakened by including peer interviewing. Most of the concerns about peer interviewing, and peer research in general – trusting people to behave ethically and professionally – are usually present within any research team. These are justified concerns, yet not insurmountable ones: the management of a research team with peer interviewers might be more taxing, but essentially it remains similar to managing a team of professionals alone (Smith et al, 2002).

The way that the peer interviewers contributed to the project teams described here is quite specific. In many ways it is hierarchical and sits with the 'collaborative' user involvement type identified by Hanley et al (2004, quoted in McLaughlin, 2005), and critiqued by Rose (2003). The 'pairing' of the 'professional' with a 'service user' interviewer model lends itself to the project researchers having a more controlling and superior role than the peer interviewers.

While this did not assign menial tasks (Smith et al, 2002) to the 'service users' in the projects described earlier, given the methodological significance of the interview dynamic observed, neither was it to exercise any functional dichotomy within the team overall, depending on 'professional' or 'service user' status. The point of assigning these different roles was to demonstrate clear accountability to funders and to offer the necessary supportive structure to the peer interviewers themselves (McLaughlin, 2005). It facilitated a supervisory framework that benefited the peer interviewers, most of whom were new to research, and this was a priority.

Unless proper consideration is given to *how* peer interviewers are to be meaningfully involved as well as to *what* their role could be, the responsibility of including 'service users' will remain questionable and risk undermining the power sharing sought within such an inclusive project (Cornwall and Jewkes, 1995; Smith, 2004). Nevertheless, user-led research projects seeking more autonomous roles for 'service users' with greater levels of control and involvement would still benefit from considering the various issues raised and discussed in this chapter.

## **Developing peer research**

Ultimately, peer interviewing is only one aspect of peer research. Involvement in other significant aspects such as proposals, design and planning, data analysis, report and publication writing (Birch and Miller, 2002) is not only called for but also sought by funders (McLaughlin, 2005). It is also not necessary to limit peer research to qualitative design, even though many peer research projects appear to have such a preference (Lewis and Lindsey, 2000), but make quantitative and mixed methods possible, within the abilities of the peer researchers themselves (Smith et al, 2002). To re-iterate, peer researchers would complement and not conflict with 'professionals', given that it is often impossible to suggest any demarcation along the lines of either skills or experience.

Given that funding bodies are moving towards considering research outcomes as much as the standard outputs (Burns and MacKeith, 2006), it can be argued that 'service users' should have a contribution as decision makers, grant approvers and application assessors as with other professionals. At this point in time it remains something of a vision; many formal bodies remain sceptical of funding 'user-controlled' research (Tew, 2008), and professionals might question the direction of change sought through participation (Stickley, 2006). Yet, as Smith et al (2002, p 199) write, it is about 'the encouragement of insight and creativity in the research act'.

## **Limitations and responsibilities of including peer interviewers**

Peer interviewing remains limited in a number of ways. Regarding homeless people, the selection of suitable interviewers demands applying a criteria of reliability, individual personal confidence and sufficient stamina. It could be disastrous for a research project if a homeless person's substance use, drinking levels or housing situation left them unfit or too mentally and physically exhausted to be included. Significant delays in fieldwork can jeopardise the likely success of a project.

Furthermore, there are ethical considerations of inadvertently exploiting vulnerable people for the sake of including them as peer interviewers, which would not only be morally questionable but also tantamount to sheer tokenism (Hodge, 2005). As Smith (2004, p 337) writes, 'Good intentions are not enough'. It is therefore usually people who have survived homelessness successfully enough who get selected as peer interviewers. Often, they are no longer homeless themselves

or with any accompanying issues, but sober, intelligent, physically and mentally well, housed individuals with enough confidence to undertake such a challenge. It is also necessary to add that being suggested or nominated by a well-meaning support worker is not sufficient to assume the individual is sufficiently motivated to deliver the peer researcher role to the standard required.

Briefing and de-briefing is critical to protecting the well-being of a peer interviewer. They must be aware that they can hear difficult stories, particularly accounts that might evoke personal or even painful memories of being homeless themselves. Although each person's homelessness is unique, hearing accounts of common themes (for example insecurity, fear, shame, stigma and sheer physical and mental hardship) can remind someone of the panic of being homeless. Coping with these and other feelings as a peer interviewer can be difficult. Ensuring effective briefing both before and after an interview must be part of the responsibility of a researcher in involving peer interviewers.

It is also important to pace the interviews appropriately. The demands of qualitative interviewing can be significant for a peer interviewer (Clark et al, 2005). This can be the case with all qualitative interviewers, and sometimes the demands may cause difficulties or require adjustments to the fieldwork. Avoiding unnecessary risks associated with tiredness of some of the peer interviewers will help maximise the benefits for all involved in the research. Simply reducing the number of interviews carried out in a day will contribute significantly towards the most effective collection of qualitative data.

To carry out peer interviewing it is necessary to secure resources of both time and funding (Smith et al, 2002; McLaughlin, 2005). Fieldwork might well take longer with peer interviewers than without, and this should be accounted for in planning the research timetable. Having a group of peer interviewers rather than just one individual would help share the commitment and responsibility of joining 'professional' researchers in the fieldwork. This would also allow for peer support within the peer interviewers group; additional support would be gained from meeting and discussing with the other interviewers. Sufficient funding would pay for financial acknowledgement of the peer interviewers' time and work on the research project. While it remains discretionary as to how much each peer interviewer is to be paid, it is advisable to keep a record as to the number of interviews completed, or the number of training, question design and analysis sessions attended. This way a 'one-off' payment can be made on completion of the person's time with the project. Provided the sum amount does not

exceed individual capital of £6,000, payment in the form of gift or store vouchers for example, will be considered 'irregular (one-off) charitable or voluntary payments' (CPAG, 2007, p 921) rather than regular income and therefore not jeopardise benefit claims. In both projects mentioned, peer interviewers were also given an open reference to assist with employment and/or voluntary work applications on satisfactory completion of their interviewing role.

### **Further ethical issues**

Ethical dilemmas associated with peer interviewing include that of confidentiality. Of the two studies on which this chapter draws, the day centres review included one such organisation that refused to have peer interviewers because of concerns of confidentiality. The research team accepted the decision made by the centre but were aware that this was likely being made with at least some degree of prejudice. There is, of course, no guarantee that a peer interviewer would treat the personal accounts and details of those they interview as confidential (Smith et al, 2002), any more than such a guarantee can be assumed with 'professional' researchers. While it would be the researchers' decision that the project was suitable for peer interviewing, a risk potentially remains.

It is accepted that the world of homelessness is not only tightly knit, but it also carries its own danger and potential to intimidate and harm those vulnerable within it (Johnsen et al, 2005). Careful selection, preparation, training and briefing will go some way to minimise this risk. However, it is possible to make those being invited for interview aware of the risks without undermining the peer interviewers at the point of consent. This would perhaps be a statement of greater integrity than offering any *guarantee* of confidentiality (see Bryman, 2004). While not wanting to shift ethical responsibility from the researcher to the researched, peer interviewing should be agreed by all parties. Ultimately, it is the researchers managing the project who would be accountable for any issues arising from including peer interviewers.

Intellectual property and ownership of the project, its outputs and any outcomes is also a potentially contentious area. Smith et al (2002) write of how the young people involved as 'co-researchers' wanted to own the dissemination process as much as the academic team, given that it was detailed accounts of their lives and experiences that were to be presented and disseminated. It is essential to negotiate ownership of these from the outset, signing agreements if necessary.

Even so, it is not always possible to anticipate issues that can arise from any research project, and not everything can be agreed by all parties in advance. In the two Nottingham projects, peer interviewers were brought in after securing funding. Peer interviewers in one project were anonymously acknowledged in the research report. With the other, the peer interviewer's name was included as author of the report as he had assisted with its final draft, but not included on an academic chapter to which he had not contributed.

## Conclusion

The benefits of peer interviewing are therefore that it complements academic professionalism with knowledge from those who have first-hand experiences as service users. The methodological advantages of peer interviewing in gaining data from people who might otherwise be 'hard to reach' are vital for social research. Peer interviewing can be managed as with any other research team issue through lines of accountability by project leaders, thus satisfying funding requirements for risk minimisation. While it remains 'untested', peer interviewing also appears to benefit those being interviewed, particularly regarding rapport. For these reasons, even taking into account the potential risks and uncertainties, peer interviewing is worthy of serious consideration when designing social research.

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