

Relational practice in research:

what is it, why does it matter, and how does it impact wellbeing?

Discussion paper

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Overview

In autumn 2023, the [Public Engagement Unit](#) at the University of Bath commissioned Dr Jude Fransman (The Open University) and Dr Tigist Grieve (University of Bristol) to design and deliver an exploratory study into the features of relational work (often referred to as relationship-centred practice) within a research context and how that work impacts on welfare and wellbeing. This document puts the commissioned study into a wider context, provides an overview of the scope and approach of the study and summarises its key findings. This paper aims to raise awareness of relationship-centred practice and the issues around welfare and wellbeing uncovered through the study and stimulate further discussion on these subjects. The commission brief and study's full report are on the [Relational Practice and Welfare and Wellbeing in Research Settings publications page](#). The study is part of the Research England funded [ParticipatoryResearch@Bath](#) project.

Context

In recent years, the importance of improving the connections between research and society has increased across the sector. Funders, such as the research councils under the umbrella of UK Research and Innovation (UKRI), are placing increasing emphasis on ensuring the research they fund better meets the needs of society by enabling and empowering people to inform, shape, participate in, and use research¹.

Public involvement in research is moving away from a set of practices (e.g. Patient and Public Involvement and Engagement, Citizen Science, Public Engagement with Research) that deliver research objectives towards public involvement as a central approach that underpins a responsible, inclusive, trustworthy and thriving research culture². This approach aims to deliver high-quality and impactful research and ensure that peoples' voices are heard and the issues that matter to them are addressed. Delivering research that involves and is in collaboration with diverse publics requires researchers and research enablers to adopt a more relational approach (often referred to as relationship-centred practice) to their work. The importance of this approach will only increase as funding allocations reflect the strategic shift in focus by funders.

Relational practice

What do we mean when we talk about relationships?

The term 'relationship' is broad and all-encompassing. We have drawn on the [Relationships Project's](#) work to define relationships³:

A good relationship is characterised as being fair, trusting, mutually beneficial and reliable. It's unscripted, organic and empathetic. It develops over time as value is created and carried forward from one interaction to the next.

When we talk about relationships at the Public Engagement Unit and in the *ParticipatoryResearch@Bath* project, we are referring to relationships between people from civil society organisations and community groups and researchers and research enablers at universities.

¹[Research and Innovation For All: UKRI's public engagement strategy \(Nov 2023\)](#)

²[MRC Public Involvement Landscape Review \(Feb 2023\)](#)

³<https://relationshipsproject.org/what-we-mean-by-good-relationships/>

What is relational practice?

Relational practice emphasises the importance of building relationships, it is about putting “people before programme”⁴ and understanding that “relationships precede actions”⁵. With its roots in the traditions of community organising and adopted as a core principle by the community organising alliance Citizens UK, relational practice is described as

“positioning meaningful and effective relationships as the first order goal, both an end in itself and how other goals will be achieved”⁶.

Relationship-centred practice, the Relationships Project argues, is more than an instinct but a way of working that can be characterised by underpinning principles, characteristic behaviour and knowledge and skills (such as active listening, patience and empathy) that is either liberated or obstructed by the conditions within organisations where people carry out this practice.

What do we mean when we talk about participatory research?

At the University of Bath, participatory research is an approach to research that actively involves people whose lives are the subject of study in some or all parts of the research lifecycle (from research design through delivery to implementation)⁷, recognising the value of the knowledge, insight and expertise possessed by those people and communities. The *ParticipatoryResearch@Bath* project has established that there is no single way to undertake a participatory approach to research. Instead, the choices of when, how, and for what purpose to adopt participatory approaches should reflect factors such as academic career stage, experience of engagement, and disciplinary tradition and should also be grounded in the interests, needs, and goals of communities.

What is the issue around relational practice in participatory research?

Cultivating fair and mutually beneficial relationships between researchers and diverse publics is at the heart of successful, high-quality participatory research. Involving people meaningfully in research requires time to establish connections and trust and find areas of common interest that leads to the forming of genuine relationships.

The purpose of renewed focus on improving the connections between research and society is to make research relevant and accessible to everyone, including those who have been traditionally overlooked, have been actively rejected or for whom research isn't a priority or of interest. This requires a step-change in practice. This will focus less on instrumental practices and more on the work that puts relationships first.

Due to the often invisible nature of working to build and sustain relationships, the effort, benefits, and risks of this work are in danger of being overlooked. If the ambition of strengthening the connections between society and research by bringing more people into the research and innovation ecosystem is to be realised, we need to anticipate what the impacts could be on research staff, research enablers, and the publics involved.

⁴ <https://www.britishecienceassociation.org/blog/building-community-connections-from-the-ground-up>

⁵ <https://changemakerspodcast.org/arnie-graf-community-organiser-changemaker-chats/>

⁶ <https://relationshipsproject.org/what-we-mean-by-relationship-centred-practice/>

⁷ Banks, S. and Brydon-Miller, M. (2019) Ethics in Participatory Research for Health and Social Well-being. Cases and Commentaries. Routledge, London

Study scope

The Public Engagement Unit commissioned the study to address a key finding from the University of Bath's *ParticipatoryResearch@Bath* project: there appears to be a high degree of 'emotional investment and labour' by those undertaking relational work in collaborative or participatory research projects⁸.

The scope of the study was to explore the relationship between welfare and wellbeing and relational practice in the context of the UK's higher education research system. Through the iterative approach to the study (outlined below), the following areas were identified to explore in more detail:

- review understandings of 'relational practice', 'welfare', and 'wellbeing',
- identify the positive and negative features of relational work in research contexts as well as the benefits and risks to welfare/wellbeing,
- explore support for welfare/wellbeing in relational work and identify gaps in provision and potential responses.

The study's focus relates to those undertaking relational work as part of research collaborations, even when the work is relatively benign, and who are in professional services or research enabler roles. This group play significant relational roles in universities but are under-recognised in the research and receive less targeted support than other groups (i.e. students or researchers at risk of secondary and/or vicarious trauma due to the nature of their research area⁹).

Approach

The study was conducted in an iterative, participatory, and ethically conscious way, which involved:

- a rapid review and synthesis of the academic and grey literature to identify language and understandings, emerging themes, and recent policy,
- two workshops with a group of professional and support staff from 13 UK-based universities to unpack their understandings, experiences, needs, and priorities,
- interviews with staff from four research-related organisations: a learned society responsible for a major participatory research programme (focussed on the UK context); a cultural umbrella association (working through institutions across the UK); an international NGO (involved in research with a range of countries from the global South); a network of research funders and policymakers (UK-based but working on international programmes),
- generating a series of recommendations for the University of Bath and the broader higher education sector.

⁸ <https://blogs.bath.ac.uk/publicengagement/2022/11/04/findings-from-phase-one-of-participatoryresearchbath/>

⁹ <https://researchportal.bath.ac.uk/en/projects/research-england-enhancing-researcher-wellbeing-by-acknowledging->

Findings

The commissioned study's findings are summarised in this section and split into three sub-sections:

1. understandings and experiences of relational practice,
2. impact of relational practice on welfare and wellbeing,
3. support for welfare and wellbeing in relational practice.

Due to this study's exploratory nature, the findings are considered an indicative reflection rather than a comprehensive summary of experiences across the sector. These will be further tested by presenting this work during the National Co-ordinating Centre for Public Engagement's (NCCPE) Engage Conference on Thursday 2 May 2024, and during a roundtable workshop on Thursday 11 July 2024.

1. Understandings and experiences of relational practice

Participants felt that their relational way of working is not always valued and recognised by academic colleagues.

The term 'relational practice' is rarely used in universities, with the terms 'stakeholder engagement', 'partnerships manager', and 'external relationship management' being more commonly used. However, whilst there was some concern around the specificity of the phrase, participants felt that 'relational practice' better encompasses their role in supporting the development and delivery of participatory research. The approach and language around relational practice ("collaborative", "connections", "patience") participants felt, was more inclusive and approachable and goes beyond the instrumental implication of other descriptions and terms.

Participants described that building and holding many different relationships across disciplines gave them a rich opportunity to deepen their knowledge of different research topics, create networks and gain new skills.

There was consensus from the literature and the participants' experiences on the importance of the role of "third space professionals" within the research ecosystem. These people hold the knowledge, skills and expertise around relationship-centred practice required for participatory and collaborative research and are found in many roles in research support services.

Participants outlined a range of skills and attributes associated with their relational practice (adaptive, supportive, personable, and open) in research that reflects those outlined by the Relationships Project as core to relationship-centred practitioners. Participants highlighted how this approach can "humanise" and navigate the culture of academia for people outside universities.

Adopting a richer form of relationship building encompassed by relational practice is a different and distinct way of working that participants felt reflected the reality of their role within research. However, this reality and the time-intensive nature of the work were at odds with the instrumental expectations of participants' roles by line managers and research leaders, which reflected their often limited understanding of what participants' work involves.

2. The impact of relational practice on welfare and wellbeing

Relationship building with communities and public groups brought participants a sense of pride, enjoyment, and satisfaction in their work by feeling they create and enable research to be making a positive contribution to both individuals and wider society. Relationships were also seen as a source of support and a means of collective action, generating feelings of solidarity.

However, the tension between relational ways of working (time-intensive, adaptative and responsive) and the culture (competitive) and funding (short-term) of academia, along with the structures and processes of HEIs (risk averse and rigid) has serious negative impacts. Participants highlighted several examples where their welfare and wellbeing were negatively impacted by this tension, including:

- feeling a profound sense of personal responsibility for public contributors when they enter the university research environment and the high degree of emotional toll as they seek to mitigate the impacts and shield them from its more negative aspects. This is especially heightened when the research involves sensitive topics and involves public contributors who are from 'vulnerable groups',
- feeling under pressure to successfully deliver work that meets the diverse needs of everyone involved in the relationship,
- feeling obliged to personally commit time and resources to repair relationships with communities and public groups that have been undermined and had trust damaged by institutional behaviours outside their control.

Employment conditions and job insecurity compound the negative impacts on welfare and wellbeing, e.g. the limits of part-time work and precarious contracts or the demands of working more than one role.

Participants highlighted the importance of boundary setting when working in a relational way because not doing so had a negative impact on work-life balance for some. The description of feeling 'burnt-out' was often a reflection of having to manage the competing demands on time management from communities and public groups who are involved in research participating outside of normal working hours on the one hand and the rhythms of academic life and the agency of researchers to choose their working hours on the other.

The make-up of the focus groups, their experiences, and the literature highlight that relational practice within research is disproportionately gendered. Women undertake most of this work, which carries with it the emotional politics of the affective labour of collaboration.

3. Support for welfare and wellbeing in relational practice

Reviewing the literature highlighted a range of resources and initiatives available for professional services to support their welfare and wellbeing at universities, such as Employee Assistance Programmes (EAPs), self-help resources, formal and informal networks, mental health first aiders, and therapeutic services¹⁰. However, participants in the focus groups felt how the sometimes disjointed coordination of this service, the lack of responsiveness to their specific needs, and how poorly the provision was communicated impacted their perception of the quality and relevance of this service.

¹⁰ <https://www.bath.ac.uk/campaigns/be-well-at-bath>

The focus of the support available at universities also tends to be on corrective measures for those whose welfare and wellbeing are at risk rather than on nurturing supportive environments that promote positive welfare and wellbeing.

Participants valued self-directed strategies and formal and informal support networks that promote positive welfare and wellbeing. Institutional initiatives often enable these strategies, but participants felt these were often ad-hoc, time-limited, and lacked strategic purpose.

The interrelated issues of resourcing (both support for welfare and wellbeing and relational practices) and working conditions (casualisation and part-time contracts) result in the burden of responsibility for developing strategies for care falling disproportionately on individuals. Participants felt that these self-care strategies often get deprioritised because of the pressure and time constraints of their roles. Participants highlighted the need for a better balance between self-directed self-care and an institutional culture that promotes positive welfare and wellbeing.

Participants felt the lack of understanding and recognition of the nature of relational practice and its impacts on welfare and wellbeing resulted in line managers being inadequately equipped to support them. As a result, people felt reluctant to seek formal support for fear of judgement and perceived negative repercussions on their careers.

Recommendations

The report from the commissioned study outlines a series of five recommendations. These recommendations mostly relate to institutional and sector-level improvements that need to be implemented to recognise and support the roles of research enablers working relationally. These can be found in the study's full report on the [Relational Practice and Welfare and Wellbeing in Research Settings publication page](#).

Conclusions

The exploratory study's report has been a valuable resource that has helped us at the University of Bath's Public Engagement Unit to understand relational practice further. It has also helped raise this issue more widely, and we are working with sector-level bodies such as the NCCPE and the Association of Research Managers and Administrators (ARMA) to investigate some of the issues raised.

The report has also prompted us to think more deeply about relational practice and welfare and wellbeing issues. It highlighted a framework, Sarah White's¹¹ three dimensions of wellbeing, that we feel could be useful for research enablers to understand their welfare and wellbeing. It outlines how creating a nurturing and supportive environment for relational work to be practised requires an interrelationship and balance between:

- **personal experiences** – how you understand your personal values and motivations, your knowledge, skills and practice of relational work and how you perceive that work is valued and recognised,

¹¹ **White, S. C.** (2010). Analysing Wellbeing: A Framework for Development Policy and Practice. *Development in Practice* 20(2): 158–172.

- **material environments** – this includes employment conditions, the presence or absence of support and resources, the timing and spaces where relational work takes place, the resourcing of relational work, and attitudes towards relational practice,
- **social systems** – such as institutional structures and processes that enable or obstruct relational work

We have taken these dimensions and created a series of questions for each that we are interested in exploring further with colleagues from across the sector:

1. Personal experience

How do we raise awareness of relational practice in research and increase the recognition of this way of working?

There are times when we don't need to be relational or when the costs of relational working may outweigh the benefits – how do we know when this is (especially for people who are “naturally” relational)?

How do we demonstrate the value of this type of work (especially maintaining relationships before or after a project)?

Can we train people to be relational?

2. Material environments

How do we get the balance right between institutional support and the role of the individual?

Where's the balance between creating a preventative environment and corrective interventions for those whose welfare and wellbeing is at risk?

What type of infrastructure is needed to support relational work across institutional contexts, where should this be located, and how should it be resourced?

3. Social systems

What tools do we need to help enable relational practice? For example, it helps us understand our own / others' boundaries.

How does support for relational work in universities relate to broader campaigns around mental health, care and decent work?

These are some of the questions we will explore during the NCCPE's Engage Conference on Thursday 2 May 2024, and during a roundtable workshop on Thursday 11 July 2024.

Get involved

We'd love to hear from you if you are interested in contributing to this discussion.

Add any responses to our questions, insights or experience or any question that you're thinking on by filling in this simple form (which you have the option to do anonymously):

<https://forms.office.com/e/Y70Jkcu6X3>

Or by dropping us a line on public-engagement@bath.ac.uk.