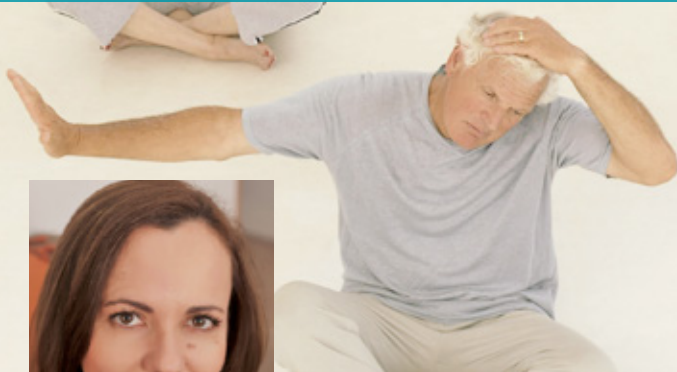


Public Engagement with Research Case Studies



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The Research

Afroditi's research aims to develop a better understanding of the determinants of participation in physical activity, particularly amongst older people. As part of the population, older people are the least active and Afroditi is interested as to why – what are the barriers to, and facilitators of, physical activity amongst this group? Through such research, she aims to devise better strategies and interventions to support people to become more physically active in their old age.

The Engagement:

The key 'publics': Older people; Public sector organisations; Charities (e.g. Age UK); Community groups (e.g. LinkAge).

The type of engagement: Receiving from these specialist 'publics' views, skills, knowledge and experiences that can be used to shape research and maximise its impact.

Afroditi takes three different approaches to engaged research, approaches spanning the research lifecycle:

1) Informing others about her research – At the dissemination end of the research lifecycle, Afroditi is active in delivering talks and seminars about her research findings to relevant organisations and groups, with the hope of influencing their practice in light of the evidence presented.¹

2) Consulting others about her research – In undertaking qualitative research, Afroditi is keen to draw on the knowledge and lived experiences of various publics through consultations and interviews. This engagement can come right at the outset of the research lifecycle, thereby informing research questions and design:

"Having the help of different communities can shape your research right from the start. Consulting with others on your plans helps you refine them; your community contacts are best placed to understand the needs and circumstances of the groups you're researching."

Such consultation helps to minimise the risk of your research design failing, and maximises the likelihood that your research will have an impact on the intended beneficiaries.²

3) Collaborating with others on her research – This is an evolving area of Afroditi's engagement practice but one that she is enthused by:

"Bringing people on-board to work together through the entire research lifecycle, from conception through to publication and dissemination, is the most exciting aspect of engaging for me."

Afroditi has worked on projects where organisations and community groups are named in grant applications as collaborators; their input is evident right from the outset. She believes there is mutual benefit to be had from such research collaborations, with researchers gaining easy access to research participants and organisations able to evidence the success of specific interventions.³

¹For details of a recent lecture Afroditi gave, see: <http://www.bath.ac.uk/about/community/lectures/stathi.html>

²For an example of a piece of research that involved consulting various stakeholders about best strategies for promotion of active ageing, see: <http://ageactionalliance.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/AVONet-report-2014-March.pdf>

³Project ACE, a collaborative project undertaken with LinkAge, has been highlighted as an example of research with impact by the Medical Research Council. See: <http://www.mrc.ac.uk/Ourresearch/ResearchInitiatives/LLHW/impacts/index.htm>

The Motivation:

Afroditi is driven by a desire to understand how the 'real world' operates and began engaging when she became struck by an apparent dislocation between big research trials and 'real world' impact:

"When you try to translate findings from big research trials to community programmes, they often fall apart as the intensive support provided during the trial cannot be replicated in the community setting due to restricted resources."

With a focus on ensuring the sustainability of her research within community settings, Afroditi has been careful to understand the specific community context – local barriers and facilitators of physical activity. She has situated her research within this context to maximise the prospect that her findings will be of relevance to, and maintained by, the community.

The Professional Development:

Engagement of others in research conception and design has, Afroditi feels, ensured both the feasibility of her research and its relevance to intended beneficiaries. She has also found that networking with community partners opens up avenues for recruitment of research participants:

"Community partners act as gatekeepers to a whole range of community resources and networks inaccessible to me as a researcher if I just stay in my office!"

Through undertaking engaged research, Afroditi has become more attuned to the challenges that different societal groups and organisations face which in turn, has meant she has become more sensitive to their needs through the research process.

Furthermore, through close engagement with others, Afroditi has witnessed the impact of her research:

"I was working with an organisation struggling to draw older people to their activity programmes. My research had shown that health messages scared some people off exercise. Rather, it was better to emphasise messages around socialising and having fun. The organisation acted on my advice and subsequently, saw participant numbers on their activity programmes rise."

Top tip:

"Only engage if you're 100% sure that you want to engage; don't just do it because it's the current fashion! You need a strong personal motive to engage where you can see the value of the engagement both for yourself and the public that you wish to engage with."



Afroditi engaging with older adults, teaching them that moderate intensity of walking is based on the number of steps they do in one minute.



Afroditi training older volunteers to contribute to one of her research projects

"My research needs to be relevant and translatable to the communities that I work with. Engagement throughout the research process helps me to achieve this."

The Learning:

It can be easy to fall into the trap of using academic jargon when engaging others, creating an 'us' versus 'them' atmosphere. Afroditi has learnt a helpful rule when engaging in group settings – never use a word of more than eight letters! Essentially, it is important to speak a language that everyone can understand, and the same is true for community partners.

Good communication skills, active listening and an empathy for why people have chosen to engage with you is important:

"Ensure that the engagement isn't one-way otherwise you risk your partner feeling used. Show an awareness of what they're gaining from the engagement and always value their input."

The time required to build effective partnerships is challenging and there is often a high turnover in community roles; someone you have established a constructive relationship with can move on at any time, leaving you back at square one. There is also a danger of being accused of being detached from communities' realities:

"Before engaging with any new group or organisation, I always read up on them. What issues do they face? What are their aims, their agenda? Through doing this, I'm able to relate to my partners and this leads to more effective engagement."