CHAPTER 3

PEER RESEARCHERS IN QUALITATIVE RESEARCH ON HOMELESSNESS AND MENTAL HEALTH: A REFLEXIVE JOURNEY FROM DATA VALIDITY TO RELATIONS OF ETHICAL LABOUR

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ABSTRACT

Peer research, in which people with lived experience of the phenomenon under study participate as researchers, is growing in popularity, especially in the social and health sciences. While peer research is meant to democratise knowledge-making, enhance the validity of collected data, and help to gain access to hard-to-reach populations, its mainstreaming has introduced new challenges surrounding the co-optation of lived experience. This chapter reflects on an ongoing longitudinal research project on homelessness and mental health services in the Netherlands, in which pairs of academic and peer researchers have, to date, conducted 956 interviews with people with client experience of these services. A randomised subsample of 30 interviews was coded specifically to analyse peer research methodology and its impact on data validity as well as

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the daily ethical dimensions of a research project involving vulnerable participants. This chapter analyses the interview strategies, including 'self-disclosure' and 'establishing common ground', of members of our research team as well as the benefits and challenges of doing peer research as they unfold in intersecting relations of ethical labour. Writing this prompted beneficial reflection on the extent to which striving for data validity is compatible with the aim of peer research to achieve social justice. While the team offers training, support, and feedback sessions to reflect on interviewing practice, is this enough? It is my hope that the additional value of peer research is evident in this chapter. Still, I wish to highlight that peer research requires additional institutional support and is not for 'free'.

Keywords: Expert by experience; homelessness; peer researcher; research ethics in practice; community-based research practice

INTRODUCTION

Peer research requires collaboration with people from different walks of life and reflection on one's positionality, responsibilities, and assumptions about what research entails. All came into play in the writing of this chapter: starting as an inquiry into the validity of data produced by peer research, it morphed into a more reflexive account of employing peer researchers in a longitudinal research project on homelessness and sheltered living as well as the possibilities and challenges presented by this methodology.

Involving Community Members and Peers in Research

The past two decades have witnessed growing recognition of the value of experiential knowledge in processes of recovery, in implementing social policy, and in social scientific and health research (Devotta et al., 2016; Fortuna et al., 2022; Voronka, 2019). The engagement of community members is the animating idea behind community-based (participatory) research (Israel et al., 1998), which generally aims to involve groups that have historically been excluded from 'knowledge-making'. Peer involvement in research – in short, 'peer research' – involves people with lived experience of the group or phenomenon being studied in various stages of the research process. By bringing lived experience into the research setting, peer research potentially challenges the role of the neutral researcher who objectively collects data and does not interfere in the lives of research participants as well as the underlying positivist paradigm that assumes an objective reality and knowledge about this reality (Israel et al., 1998).

Community-based research often has emancipatory goals. Committed to benefiting participants 'either through direct intervention or by using the results to inform action for change' (Israel et al., 1998, p. 175), it strives to democratise knowledge-making. Community-based peer research has also been lauded for offering capacity building and financial opportunities to people from marginalised

communities. Since it is undertaken by, or together with, people with lived experience, the method can also improve research access to hard-to-reach populations (Elliott et al., 2002; Warr et al., 2011).

Peer researchers often play key roles in recruiting participants; they can also more easily handle sensitive issues that arise during qualitative research on subjects such as homelessness and mental health (Devotta et al., 2016; Elliott et al., 2002). Much has been written about the ethical dilemmas that accompany the raising of sensitive issues in interviews, especially among researchers who also have a counselling profession (cf. Johnson & Clarke, 2003). DeWalt and DeWalt (2002), for instance, emphasise the need to protect the scientific integrity of the interview by not offering help to research participants. While supportive of this view, Johnson and Clarke (2003) detail the many ethical dilemmas researchers struggle with when pursuing research among vulnerable participants.

Peer researchers commonly have three implicit tasks: the disclosure of personal experience and undertaking of emotional labour and (often) advocacy (Devotta et al., 2016; Edwards & Alexander, 2011). Their involvement in the research process spans the collection and analysis of data, especially the contextualisation of findings (Devotta et al., 2016). One article in which a group of peer researchers analysed data from a larger study focused on the 'messy text' that would have been overlooked in non-peer research (Voronka et al., 2014, p. 257); the discussion suggests that peer researchers, with appropriate and adequate resources, are often better placed to access and analyse data on sensitive or emotional topics that can be inaccessible to research teams that do not include experts by experience. Peer research thus interrogates the role of the researcher in qualitative research.

Several scholars have written about the ethical challenges of working with peer researchers (Banks et al., 2013; Devotta et al., 2016; Greene, 2013; Greene et al., 2009; Guta et al., 2013). Recurrent concerns include unequal power relations, the precarity of their labour, uneven financial compensation, and insufficient support from academic researchers and universities.

Mainstreaming Peer Work and Research

Peer work has become increasingly mainstream in mental health services as well as in policy-making and research. The recovery movement, which grew out of the 'patient' movement of the 1980s, advocated for involving people with experiential expertise in systems of care (Voronka, 2017). Although peer work grew out of this movement to challenge dominant practices in mental health and social services, Voronka, who identifies as a peer researcher, now argues that peer workers have become part of the system governing clients. She writes: 'the meaning and practice of recovery and peer support are significantly recalibrated when they move from "movements" into "models", and such models […] are absorbed into dominant mental health practices' (Voronka, 2017, p. 334). As peer work becomes mainstream, it runs the risk of losing its emancipatory and transformative goals. Voronka even argues that peer work has become a way to manage madness and to make it marketable. There is a body of literature specifically dealing with the pros and cons of mainstreaming innovations. Here I find the concept of

isomorphism (Di Maggio & Powel, 1983) helpful, since this literature deals with the phenomenon that 'once a set of organizations emerges as a field, a paradox arises: rational actors make their organizations increasingly similar as they try to change them' (p. 147). In this way, it also describes the upscaling of initiatives such as peer work well, noting that this may come with some good things, like the importance of acknowledgement or acquired income. It also accounts for risk, like the pressure of legal frameworks and professional norms from the for-profit private or public sectors being imposed. These tensions are clearly visible in the mainstreaming of peer work.

Similar considerations arise in peer research, where the goals of capacity building and empowering community-based researchers risk becoming instruments of governance. Like other peer workers, and peer researchers, being able to contribute through their lived experiences and relate to those of the respondents adds a specific value to the data collected and the expertise in the research team (Guta et al., 2013). Lived experiences of distress are thereby instrumentalised to enhance research. Training or capacity building is not always pursued in dialogue with peer researchers, which means it does not always align with their interests, thereby undermining the emancipatory aims of peer research (Greene et al., 2009; Guta et al., 2013).

A further challenge in working with peer researchers is the risk of essentialising or homogenising the diversity of experience (Devotta et al., 2016; Greene et al., 2009; Guta et al., 2013; Voronka, 2016). Peer researchers of course bring a wide range of experiences and positionalities to their work. Greene et al. (2009) note that the identity of the peer researcher is complex and that they are not always 'insiders' in the hard-to-reach populations, since this is influenced by a number of factors such as history of community involvement and experience of one's self; the boundary between 'insider' and 'outsider' – for both peer and academic researchers – is fluid. Maintaining the distinction between academic and peer researcher can also 'unintentionally strengthen the problematic "us" and "them" assumptions of biomedical psychiatry' (Tseris et al., 2022, p. 719), once again casting the peer researcher in the role of the 'other'. This point will appear highly relevant in this chapter, where I will show why the ostensible binary opposition of peer versus academic researcher may be ultimately unattainable.

We have seen above how involving community members and peers in research has become a more commonly used approach, improving research access to hard-to-reach populations and to some extent democratising knowledge-making. At the same time, peer research potentially challenges the role of the neutral researcher. We see mainstreaming peer work and research identifying a need for appropriate and adequate resources to support peer research. Scholars have also identified a risk of instrumentalisation of peer researchers and their lived experience in scientific research. This may interfere with the interests of peer researchers, for example, by homogenising the diversity of experience or explicitly casting the peer researcher in the role of the 'other'. In the above, it has been well illustrated how focusing solely on the outcome of research and not on the process of the research risks overlooking some of the strengths and weaknesses of peer research (Guta et al., 2014). In what follows, I will formulate answers to the question as to

how exactly strategies deployed by peer researchers in interviews may affect the validity of the obtained data as well as the ethical process of conducting research. To better understand this question, I analyse data from a peer research project on homelessness and sheltered living in the Netherlands.

METHOD

Participatory Research in the Netherlands

Participatory research, in which community members including peers participate in research, is becoming more common in the Netherlands, although it primarily takes place outside of universities. Several projects involving peer researchers in the Netherlands are discussed in a recent PhD thesis on the ethics of participatory health research (Groot-Sluijsmans, 2021). While the Netherlands Institute for Health Services Research has made the participation of stakeholders, including those making use of health services, one of its criteria for relevance,[1] to date its website only mentions education and training, not research, as peer-to-peer activities. Community-based research in the Netherlands suffers from a lack of continuity and possibilities for tenure for peer researchers. Groot-Sluijsmans (2021) describes the development of peer research in the country, in partnership with health institutions and service-user organisations. She writes:

> […] in The Netherlands, most academics are not educated in the practice of involving people with lived experiences in research. There are only a few workshops that train researchers how to involve people in this way, and these tend to focus on practical knowledge and tips and tricks. Rather than draw on an established methodology, most academics practice with an approach based on trial and error. (pp. 10–11)

Although universities are well-positioned to – and would benefit from – supporting peer research, this rarely happens. As a result, research in the Netherlands has yet to address the involvement of peer researchers in research settings.

A Longitudinal Project on Homelessness and Mental Health

Our longitudinal research project on homelessness and sheltered living in several Dutch regions was initiated and led by the author of this chapter. Between 2018 and 2022, a total of 956 semi-structured interviews[2] were conducted by pairs of academic and peer researchers.[3] Most of the academic researchers and one peer researcher were employed by the university, while others were interns.

Peer researchers have 'lived experience' of the issues or systems being studied. In our project, peer researchers have lived experience of homelessness, sheltered living, and/or use of mental health services. Some have been part of the project since 2018; some joined later while others have since left. At the time of writing, nine peer researchers are active in the project. Upon joining, they participate in a specially designed training programme covering the basic principles of research and interviewing as well as the ethical dilemmas often encountered over the course of research. The entire research team regularly participates in these training sessions as well as in intervision, which entails taking part in intercollegiate

meetings led by an outside mediator and focused on personal dilemmas encountered at work. Individual peer researchers also take part in the university's executive programmes for professionals on 'Homelessness and Mental Health' as well as a second programme on 'Mental Health Innovations in the Social Domain'. The aim here is to transfer knowledge to team members and to create professional opportunities beyond their volunteer work as peer researchers.

The primary task of peer researchers in our project is to conduct interviews with people with experience of homelessness and/or sheltered living. Part of the protocol for interviewing is that peer researchers themselves decide on self-disclosure, which can also mean they only mention being an expert at the beginning of the interview. Additionally, peer researchers are involved, to varying degrees, in other stages of the research. While our project most closely aligns with what Roche et al. (2010) call the 'employment model' in which peer researchers participate in various stages of research, the peer researchers in our project (with a single exception) are not employed by the university but work as volunteers in the project. They have volunteer agreements with the university and receive allowances in line with Dutch law.[4]

Analysis

A simple randomised sample of 30 interviews was selected for the purpose of analysing the methodology of working with peer researchers. Inclusion criteria were a peer interviewer being present during the interview and the participant giving consent that their data be used for other research. The focus of this analysis was on the strategies of peer researchers, academic researchers, and participants. We also looked at the dynamic among these three groups to see exactly how the strategies used by peer researchers in interviews may affect the validity of the obtained data, as well as the ethical process of conducting research.

The transcripts of these interviews were coded using Atlas.ti version 22. A total of 8 main codes and 55 subcodes were developed inductively. After 15 interviews, we developed an initial outline of the most prominent codes, which we used for the remaining 15 interviews. As additional codes including self-disclosure, experiences with support services, recognition, and compliments still emerged, a second round of coding ensured that all interviews were coded using the same coding outline. Several academic researchers, including the author, were involved in this process to ensure intercoder reliability. When relevant, audio files of the interviews allowed us to include tone of voice and laughter in the analysis, although nonverbal cues such as body language remain absent. Analysis focused on the interactions between peer researchers and research participants and the strategies of peer researchers in the interviews to use their knowledge of the experience being researched – in this case, of homelessness.

Guta et al. (2013, p. 443) argue that the mainstreaming of community-based peer research, especially in public health, can be at odds with its emancipatory goals as community engagement and social justice often take a backseat to administrative and financial constraints. When this happens, 'lived experience' can become an administrative box to tick rather than a meaningful engagement with

experiential knowledge. Reflexivity – better understanding how the researcher's presence and influence construct research and knowledge (Finlay, 2002) – is key to peer research (Devotta et al., 2016), while paying attention to its day-to-day ethical dilemmas strengthens this. To this end, I analysed the sampled interviews within the everyday reality of the research project. Here I relied on my own diary, the personal experiences of other team members, documents produced by the university's ethics review board and research team members, and an additional interview with one of our peer researchers participating in one of the university's executive programmes for professionals.

RESULTS

Analysis of the strategies and dynamics in 30 interviews found that peer researchers frequently relied on specific strategies of 'self-disclosure' and 'establishing common ground' to encourage research participants to share information, specifically on sensitive topics such as trauma, the impact of homelessness, and the difficulties of recovery. Also, some academic researchers were found to be disclosing their lived experiences, showcasing the porous boundaries between roles in the project. Still, another strategy was observed that blocked participants from sharing their stories, negotiating validation. This section elaborates on these strategies, their strengths, as well as weaknesses. I further situate these strategies in the context of the research project, the dilemmas encountered in peer research, and academic intervision.

Self-disclosure

Some form of explicit or implicit self-disclosure is expected of peer researchers (Ibáñez-Carrasco et al., 2019). Practices here vary greatly (Guta et al., 2013). Some regularly mention their personal experiences during interviews; others state that they are peer researchers in the introduction and rarely share personal experiences thereafter.

Self-disclosure commences with the introductions at the start of each interview. These introductions are not always included in the transcripts as they often occur before consent is given and recording begins. Peer researchers always disclose that they are present in the role of peer researcher, sometimes offering specifics about their experiences with mental health care or homelessness. Following the introduction, only in a few instances was there direct mention of the experiences or position of the peer researcher. One participant responded to the peer researcher's introduction: 'Yes, well, beautiful. Good that you want to help people. Wonderful'. Another participant also responded with praise: 'Wow, that's good, you turned it around well'. More often, interviews proceeded and participants began to introduce themselves.

In the introduction phase of the interview, academic researchers usually mention their qualifications to establish themselves as scientific researchers. This is in line with expectations in the literature and possibly with those of research

participants (cf. DeWalt & DeWalt, 2002; Johnson & Clarke, 2003). But peer research challenges the role of the scientific researcher as a neutral observer. Our sample of interviews contained an instance of an academic researcher, after introducing the study, mentioning that she is visually impaired: 'So that's what I do and I also always tell people that I'm visually impaired, so that I work slightly differently from my colleagues'. The participant's response was very positive: 'Well, I think it's very clever what you're doing', 'you are a go-getter', 'and you're probably good at it too, what more could you want?' Both peer and academic researchers received praise for their work.

Peer researchers at times explicitly talked about their personal experiences. In one interview, peer researcher James interviewed Raymond together with an academic researcher; the academic researcher kept track of the topic list while James delved deeper into specific topics such as help with finances to encourage free-flowing conversation. At the time of the interview, Raymond was 'couch surfing' and was receiving support from a specialised care organisation to search for a home. Towards the end of the interview, James asks Raymond whether he thinks he will need support once he has a place of his own. Raymond responds that he will not, but that the Dutch system forces him to accept support to gain access to social services. James responds:

> This is why I asked, Raymond. I recognize much in the way you experience and look at things […] The question I just asked you, whether you will need support when you have a house of your own; if I would have been asked that question at the time, I would have, with the knowledge I have about myself now, answered: I need to learn to structure my finances and household.

James continues by offering an example of how old patterns continue to reverberate in his current life. Raymond responds by saying that he understands what James means and returns to an earlier question about his social network. He also elaborates on his previous answer about not needing support, that he would prefer if possible to remain with his current social worker as he trusts her and she motivates him. James 'cashes in' on the rapport that has been building over the course of the interview and shares something personal, hoping it will resonate with Raymond and create transparency in the how and why of his questioning. Raymond responds to James' disclosure by deepening his answers.

Researchers sometimes mention their own experiences to support or empower the participant. In this example, James' decision to disclose a personal story can be seen as an effort to motivate Raymond to consider using support services once he is securely housed. Peer researchers are often motivated by a drive for social and political justice and by empathy for research participants, which may result in wanting to improve their lives (Greene et al., 2009, p. 370). Indeed, peer researchers sometimes struggle to *not* offer help or advice (Devotta et al., 2016).

Some peer researchers in our project are also peer workers in organisations where they directly support clients, while several academic researchers have a professional background in social work or mental health care. Both academic and peer researchers in the project thus regularly encounter questions of whether, when, and to what extent to offer support to participants. While academic researchers have generally had more training to reflect on their role as researchers,

maintaining distance and refraining from interfering in their participants' lives, these themes are also covered in our training sessions for peer researchers. Indeed, most researchers struggle with these issues and bring them up in team meetings, training sessions, and intervision.

Porous Boundaries Between Roles in the Project

The role of academic researcher does not require the self-disclosure of personal experience. Nevertheless, the sampled interviews included two instances of academic researchers disclosing their lived experiences. Such self-disclosure by academic researchers suggests that the binary opposition of peer and academic researcher can be misleading. During interviews, academic researchers use the same strategies – self-disclosure, naming recognition, acknowledging participants' experiences, diverging from the interview guide – although in general they do so less frequently. Academic researchers are also motivated in their work by lived experience. While their experiences and how they affect interactions with research participants of course differs between individuals, neither peer nor academic researcher is a clear-cut identity and role. Although academic researchers may disclose their lived experiences to close colleagues during the training programme as well as during interviews, this is rare. When it happens during interviews, academic researchers do the work that comes with being a peer researcher. But more often, this role in the team is explicitly accorded to the peer researcher.

On several occasions, the academic members of our team were warned by their teachers or colleagues – including by scholars with experiential expertise – not to go public with their personal experiences, in large part to 'safeguard scientific objectivity'. At other times, the researchers in question were deemed academic oddities and risked being recognised in their careers for their experiential expertise alone, which they objected to. One team member, who is often supported by the university's communications department in interacting with outside media, asked for advice to the communications department on how they would see this member going public. The response from this department was: Where do you draw the line of the personal? How do you prevent it from only being about your background? and How do you safeguard scientific objectivity?

The ostensible duality of peer and academic researchers, that appeared to be less clear-cut, was both challenged and confirmed by the set-up of the research project. While the valuing of experiential knowledge motivated the team to involve peer researchers in the study, its institutional questioning (safeguarding scientific objectivity, risking being seen as an academic oddity, or attention only being about this background) has led our academic researchers with experiential knowledge to downplay the personal to safeguard their careers.

Establishing Common Ground

While the previous examples of self-disclosure were initiated by interviewers, establishing common ground is a form of self-disclosure that generally happens in response to something expressed by the participant. In what follows, I discuss an

example of a peer researcher more directly responding to something mentioned by the participant. Peer researchers frequently express recognition about daily concerns, such as being bothered by a neighbour who plays a musical instrument, sharing a certain taste in music, having a past job in common, or having children and worrying about them. Although academic researchers sometimes also share such moments of recognition, in our sample of interviews, they did so less often than peer researchers. This again points to the different roles in the interviews, with peer researchers having greater liberty to diverge from the interview guide. Moreover, minimal self-disclosure is part of the peer researcher's job, meaning they will be required to share information about themselves, e.g. about being a peer researcher, to establish connection with participants based on shared experience.

In the following example, the peer interviewer sought to establish common ground with a participant to make him more comfortable and to deepen the conversation. Struggling to explain why he still needs therapy, the participant gradually falls into silence. The academic interviewer asks whether he is still all right. The peer researcher then intervenes, joking by asking about last night's dinner and that he'll check with the chef. All three begin laughing out loud, releasing some of the built-up tension. The peer interviewer then resumes the interview by recounting an experience of his own:

Peer researcher:	But I understand, when you've experienced psychosis somewhere and you don't feel comfortable there, I would … For instance, I once had an anxiety attack at Zeeman [a retail clothing store] and collapsed and sat there for one and a half hours. So I never go to Zeeman anymore. I can't go in there …
Participant:	Yes, that area is just …
Peer researcher:	Yes.
Participant:	And then something happens. It can be colours, I can be smells …
Peer researcher:	Yes, it can be smells, yes.

This passage is a callback to the participant's narrative on avoiding spaces where he had previously experienced crises. Throughout the interview, both the academic and peer researcher are sensitive to the participant's predicament, never expressing judgement. By sharing the experience of not wanting to re-enter a space that holds traumatic memory, the peer researcher validates the participant's experience and creates rapport between them. The participant continues to disclose feeling dissatisfied with himself and the need to recover, for his own good and that of his daughter. Devotta et al. (2016, p. 669) describe peer research as a challenging craft, which is fully on display in this interview: the peer researcher employs humour, personal experience, and sensitivity to help the participant feel safe enough to tell his story.

Participants' experiences with the social or (mental) health services and complaints about waiting lists for services and treatment were often met with recognition by peer researchers. For instance, participants and peer researchers often

shared their experiences of staying in night shelters and the insecurity of such unstable living arrangements. Sharing such experiences and expressing recognition can build rapport, create a sense of safety in interviews, and offer validation to participants. In one interview, the participant talked about the constant changes in institutions, shelters, and available support. It is a difficult interview; the participant carries a lot of trauma and the peer researcher struggles to find common ground as their lives have unfolded in very different ways. At one point, the peer researcher states that he recognises the impact of constantly having to move: 'I really feel that, Mark. I had that for one and a half years. From crisis shelter to crisis shelter. One and a half years. In every place you could stay, six or three months, at most'. The participant responds by stating that these changes are not normal, that constantly encountering new people and places is draining. The academic researcher responds with 'While you desire a little stability', which the participant affirms, saying that he is now content to be in a place where he can stay for longer. In this case, the peer and academic researcher together are able to facilitate conversation on the impact of unstable housing by validating the participant's critique. Like the previous example, it shows interviewing to be a craft, with peer interviewers holding the difficult task of sensing when it is suitable to share personal experiences and when to further probe participants.

Peer researchers also risk becoming too directive through their comments about policy, society, or the public services. We see this in an interview with a lot of interaction between the peer researcher and participant. The participant repeatedly expresses recognition of the peer researcher and his lived experience; they find common ground throughout the interview. At one point, the participant is detailing his negative experiences in a certain shelter, of how things are organised there, to which the peer researcher repeatedly responds: 'It shouldn't be like that', which the participant acknowledges. The peer researcher's focus on how things should be – and how the participant's experiences contradict policy – while possibly experienced as validations, may have deterred the participant from sharing further details about his experience. At one point, the peer researcher asks: 'What was your name there? Number so many?', referring to the sense clients sometimes have of being treated like numbers rather than persons by the social or health services. The participant replies by stating that he was 'Victor'. This question by the peer researcher can be seen as leading the participant's narrative, blurring the nuance in his experience. These examples again illustrate the risk of assuming common ground or a shared interpretation of experience.

Negotiating Validation

In the interviews, peer as well as academic researchers often offer acknowledgement to participants, for instance, stating that they understand an experience must have been hard. Such acknowledgement can take the form of compliments, for instance, that they are impressed by how the participant has dealt with a situation. While acknowledgement and compliments can function as prompts for participants to keep talking as well as to help them feel safe enough to share their stories, there were a few occasions when compliments seemed to block

participants from sharing their stories. This could entail an interviewer assuming how a participant experienced an event – instances that can be seen as undermining the interview's validity. In the passage below, the peer researcher compliments the participant on becoming the chair of a client council:

Peer researcher:	A beautiful step forwards.
Participant:	Yes, definitely.
Peer researcher:	A good step for yourself also. That must give you a good feeling, right?
Participant:	I want to deliver good work.
Peer researcher:	You apparently do so, because otherwise you wouldn't be chair, right?
Participant:	No, that's right.

In the above passage the peer researcher assumes what the participant must be feeling about his new position ('it must give a good feeling') and then checks this assumption with him. The participant replies that he wants to deliver good work, suggesting he may harbour insecurities about this topic or that his feelings about the new position are ambiguous. But rather than using this comment as a prompt for further inquiry, another compliment follows. The trail of compliments arguably hampers the conversation and leaves insufficient space for the participant to delve into his experience. Towards the end of the interview, the subject of work resurfaces. The participant states that while he receives compliments about his work as chair, he wants to do more and would prefer a paid job. The peer researcher assures him that his current work is worthwhile and that it must be a 'boost'. The participant keeps repeating that he wants something more, which the peer researcher acknowledges by expressing hope that he will find a job that suits him. In this interview, repeated reassurances and compliments by the peer researcher may have obscured the participant's negative or difficult feelings.

Space for Feedback and Learning

This last example emphasises the need for training and intervision on open, curiosity-driven research skills. During training sessions, researchers discuss interview transcripts to improve their skills; how to best ask open questions is a recurring theme. Besides regular training, intervision, and team meetings, academic and peer researcher debrief after interviews, discussing what they heard and experienced, what went well, and what could be improved. But it is not always easy to give feedback to fellow researchers, a process complicated by the dynamics between different roles in the project. Academic researchers were at times hesitant to offer critical feedback to peer researchers, which requires skills that not everybody is trained in. When an interviewing pair is newly established, they are still building trust and getting to know each other, which makes it more difficult to have open debriefing sessions. Academic researchers sometimes do not want to burden peer researchers with feedback, especially since they work in the project as volunteers.

Pointing to the positive dimensions in participants' stories, for instance, through compliments, is one way to deal with the emotional intensity of the interviews. Participants' stories can be tragic and hard to process for both peer and academic researchers. In such situations, debriefing is a much-needed opportunity to emotionally process what was said during the interview.

Intersecting Relations of Ethical Labour

We begin this section with a vignette from a conversation between one of our peer colleagues and a (former) team member:

> I just keep it concrete and say, 'I'm an expert by experience and I work for FACT', and that is enough. Very occasionally, they tell us something and then I think, okay, it would be functional to refer to my own experience. I then tell them and that builds a bridge. Very occasionally I get background stories from people in advance and if I see that someone has been in a women's shelter, I tell them that I have worked in such a shelter. If I see that someone has been addicted, I tell them that I have also been addicted.
>
> Usually, if you say you're an expert by experience, they already know that your role has changed, that you have gone through recovery, and that you've been where not everyone else has been, you know? That already creates a bond. Then you already have something reciprocal. That's what such a conversation should be: a kind of reciprocity. You show vulnerability and then they trust you and show you some of their vulnerability back. 'Expert by experience' is very abstract. It's just like the reciprocity that we have with people, that people feel. It's just as difficult to explain to someone what humour is or what love is.
>
> I think it's a perfect combination, because I notice that a lot of people, once you start talking, like to tell their story. There's indignation or sadness in it and they can express that to us, without having to be afraid of anything. Then I notice that they like the fact that there is an expert by experience, and then they think: okay, there is a bit of reciprocity and familiarity in that, but also that there is, let's say, this sounds very strange, but a 'normal' person who is interested and wants to hear their story.

Peer researchers perform emotional labour to make participants feel at ease and comfortable enough to share their story (Hardt & Negri, 2004; Voronka, 2017). While interviewing can be emotionally draining for academic and peer researchers alike, for peer researchers, the stories often hit closer to home.

The above vignette shows that peer researchers practise self-disclosure in different ways. Our colleague above prefers to keep things 'concrete' by mentioning at the outset that she is an expert by experience and then only occasionally referring to her own experiences thereafter. She feels that sharing such personal information creates a bond of reciprocity with participants and appreciates the method of working in pairs consisting of a peer and academic researcher. The peer researcher creates reciprocity and familiarity, while the academic researcher is the 'normal' person whose openness to hearing the participant's story validates it.

Academic and peer researchers also often enter into relations of reciprocity. The continuation of the above vignette illustrates this in a telling way:

> I've heard so many sad stories. It sounds really lame, but I've become kind of immune to them. I've had one or two occasions where I just thought about it a bit. Then the two of us talked about it for a while and it was fine.

> I think it's the best work I've ever done. I wish it really was a normal job. I'm learning a lot, so there's a lot of knowledge transfer. I can go to conferences and meetings, so yes, I think that's really great. Yes, I'm really someone who is always very hungry for knowledge, so I try to absorb as much as possible.

> We are, so to speak, driven and we like it. Otherwise, most of the people I know say: 'I'm not going to do that for nothing'. And especially because it used to carry a bit of stigma. Experts by experience would come for a candy bar and a bouquet of flowers, you know? Yes, they want to get rid of that stigma.

Saara Greene (2013) observes that although academic researchers generally acknowledge the emotional risks of participating in research, this is less the case for the risks run by peer researchers. Greene calls on her fellow academics who work with peer researchers to better understand how they benefit from the emotional labour of community members, what impact emotional labour has on peer researchers, and their ethical and moral responsibility towards peer researchers, including supporting them in this role (Greene, 2013, p. 146).

While practices such as debriefing after interviews allow reflection and emotionally processing of what was said and heard, Greene argues that measures such as organising training and debriefing sessions only take the edge off more pernicious problems (Greene, 2013, p. 147). The gratitude expressed to her by one of her peer colleagues clearly revealed the imbalance of risks and benefits. While this colleague benefited from her peer research work in that she found it therapeutic and felt valued and appreciated, she ran considerable risks due to her position, with insider knowledge and being placed in situations rife with conflicts of interest (Greene, 2013, p. 145).

Our peer colleague had a different balance sheet, one with many benefits and no risks. She can attend meetings and conferences while she has developed 'immunity' to sad stories, while our practice of working in pairs enables immediate debriefing following interviews. At the same time, she wishes she could do this work as a normal job. Her reference to the refusal of other peer researchers to work voluntarily may be an indirect critique of the unpaid nature of her work. Either way, is it fair that an 'expert by experience' is rewarded with a candy bar and a bouquet of flowers? Academic researchers involve experts by experience in their research not only because they are committed to capacity building and social change but to gain privileged access to hard-to-reach populations (Greene, 2013, p. 142). Peer and academic researchers enter a web of intersecting relations with each other and with research participants; all need to be recognised as relations of ethical labour.

Working Out Procedural Ethics

Maintaining the 'privacy' of research participants was a central concern in the university's ethical guidelines. Members of the research ethics committee (REC) were especially concerned that research participants and peer researchers residing in the same city might know each other:

> It seems important that they (peer-researchers) come from the same place as the respondents. If that is the case, they may already know each other, or they may meet again later. This may not be desirable for privacy reasons. (Research Ethics Committee, 2018)

It was thus agreed that peer researchers would not interview participants in their city of residence. This had four negative consequences for our research. First, peer researchers' knowledge of the local context was lost, thereby undermining one of the primary reasons to work with peer researchers in the first place. Second, the agreement complicated established bureaucratic procedures, in this case concerning travel costs; one peer researcher ended her involvement in the project when the university administration provided wrong information to the tax office, which set off a highly stressful chain of events. The third was that a peer researcher who when he was himself homeless at the time resorted to using homeless services in almost any large Dutch municipality. Every other night, he would use the phonebook to call night shelters in other cities to ask if they had a place to stay that night. So, this researcher felt he would not be able to interview anywhere. Fourth, a peer interviewer who had been part of our team for three years conducting interviews in a given region moved to that region; he was formally no longer allowed to be involved in follow-up interviews.

Universities surmounting such administrative barriers through more tailored agreements with peer researchers would show some genuine appreciation for their efforts. But given the lack of flexibility and recognition of the bandwidth within which choices are made in daily practice, our team members only experienced the demands of the university's ethical review as a hindrance to research and collaboration. Ideally, the committee would simultaneously take a more distant stance and contribute to strengthening the team's everyday knowledge of ethical issues in research.

Morgan et al. (2023) describe how they worked with their institutional research ethics board to ensure that their workshops for peer research assistants met the necessary requirements. Our team training programme for both peer and academic researchers, developed by this chapter's author and an external advisor, focuses on basic principles of research and interviewing as well as on ethical dilemmas that can be encountered over the course of research. Developing this training in collaboration with the university's research ethics board would have guaranteed meeting changing institutional requirements as well as the practical needs of the team in pursuing research.

Reflecting on ethical guidelines is part of an ongoing process of training and intervision. Prompted by an incident and a training session on the extent to which peer researchers should offer support or counsel participants outside of interview settings, a recent meeting of four peer and academic researchers discussed ethical dilemmas posed by suicidal participants, the offering of advice during interviews, and how to respond to participants asking for help. The meeting led to an open discussion, with the range of viewpoints illustrating the importance of having these conversations. The meeting deepened mutual understanding and brought up more questions.

The meeting led to a preliminary framework for addressing ethical dilemmas, delineating a 'lower limit' (answering questions, staying friendly) and an 'upper limit' for researchers to become involved in the life of research participants (participants remain responsible for their own lives, researchers remain researchers and do not become social workers). Both limits are deliberately vague as not

all situations can be codified. Our approach here aligns with that of relationship-based ethics, central to community-based research, which focuses on building relationships and trust (Banks et al., 2013). Banks et al. (2013) describe a process of 'everyday ethics' which acknowledges the 'dialectical tension between impartial principles and rules and the responsibilities that arise from relationships of trust and care and a commitment to working for a better world' (p. 274). Our aim is for the project's ethical framework to be a 'living document' that can facilitate further discussion of the many dilemmas encountered in conducting research among vulnerable persons.

Since all research ethics training to date has come from within the team, responsibility for the issues arising from the project remains with the team. While we have done our best to develop an ethical framework for research within the project, we are limited in our ability to review our own work. Here it would be helpful if the university's ethical review committee would, beyond focusing on the integrity of data, support the everyday ethics of doing research (cf. Carpenter, 2018).

CONCLUSION

This chapter critically examined the employment of peer researchers in a longitudinal research project on homelessness and sheltered living in the Netherlands. To analyse the possibilities and challenges of this methodology, we analysed a subsample of 30 interviews from this larger ongoing project, focusing on questions of both process and practical ethics.

We found that research participants appreciated the disclosure of personal experiences by both peer and academic researchers, which helped to build rapport and gain participants' trust in the interviews. The establishing of common ground by peer researchers – including their experiences of using the social or (mental) health services – validated participants' experiences, while the use of humour helped participants to feel safe enough to tell their stories. Devotta and colleagues see the demanding work of peer researchers – 'to be neutral yet personable, while using their discretion to go off script' (2016, p. 669) – as a craft, with peer interviewers responsible for sensing when it is suitable to share personal experiences and when to further probe participants.

Within this demanding craft, peer researchers run the risk of being too directive in their comments about policy, society, or the public services. In such instances, peer researchers can lead participant narratives and miss or blur the nuance in participants' experiences. Given the diverse intersections that shape individual experience, one risk is too easily assuming a commonality or a shared understanding of individual experience. Although acknowledging participants' experiences in interviews can help them to feel safe and encourage them to keep talking, we found that too readily offering a barrage of affirmations and compliments (arguably to place the researcher at ease) could get in the way of participants sharing their stories.

The motivation of researchers to disclose their personal experiences was often rooted in empathy for research participants and the wish to support or empower them. Peer researchers in particular struggled at times *not* to offer help or advice (cf. Devotta et al., 2016). Note, however, that in the analysed interviews, it was not only peer researchers who disclosed personal information or offered support, the institutional barriers towards being open about one's experiential knowledge as an academic notwithstanding. All this points to the conclusion that the binary opposition of peer versus academic researcher is ultimately unattainable.

This conclusion here is based on this particular research and not on specific other studies. The critical feminist literature has already successfully argued for 'Situated Knowledges' (Haraway, 1988). On the other hand, there have been experiences on several occasions, of academic team members, being warned by their teachers or colleagues – including by scholars with experiential expertise – not to go public with their personal experiences. This hints both at the widespread extent of relevant lived experience among academics and at the tenacious nature of this binary divide.

Peer and academic researchers engage in a web of intersecting, reciprocal relations, both with each other and with research participants. The ethical dimension of these relationships needs to be recognised. Peer researchers perform emotional labour to make research participants feel at ease, comfortable enough to share their stories (Hardt & Negri, 2004; Voronka, 2017). It is vital that academic researchers support their peer researcher colleagues in this role, and that power dynamics are acknowledged and discussed. While the ability to offer mutual feedback is crucial for the quality of research and collaboration, the university's ethical review board privileged the safeguarding of research participants' privacy above all else. Its 'solution' – that peer researchers do not interview participants in their city of residence – undermined one of the primary reasons to work with peer researchers in the first place: to access valuable local knowledge of context. At the time, ethical review boards were relatively new to Dutch universities, and it was not possible for researchers to have direct contact with this board and to have a dialogue.

Addressing the questions raised in this chapter remains an ongoing effort within our research project, in open discussions, and regular meetings focused on the 'everyday ethics' (Banks et al., 2013) of pursuing research. The dilemmas we encountered are not specific to peer research but can surface in any qualitative research project involving vulnerable participants. Having structures in place to address these issues – some of them predictable, others unexpected – is necessary. Within the team, reflecting on ethical guidelines is part of ongoing training and intervision, which unfortunately takes place without support from the university's current structures of ethics review.

While the external validity of this study is relatively high due to the large amount of data collected over a long period of time, the high number of participants, and the involvement of both peer and academic researchers, writing this chapter prompted useful reflection on the extent to which striving for data validity is compatible with the aim of peer research to achieve social justice. While the

team offers training, support, and feedback sessions to reflect on interviewing practice, is this enough? It is my hope that the additional value of peer research is evident in this chapter. Still, I wish to highlight that peer research requires additional institutional support and is not for 'free'.

NOTES

1. See their website for more information: https://www.nivel.nl/en.
2. The research project is ongoing, which means that more interviews are being conducted. Also see: nienkeboesveldt.com.
3. Throughout this chapter, we refer to 'peer researchers' and 'academic researchers'. Some peer researchers are academically trained, while some academic researchers have lived experience of the phenomenon they are studying. Although these categories are problematic, we retain the distinction to refer to researchers' primary roles in the project.
4. One peer researcher has a formal labour agreement with the university, mainly because he worked more hours than allowed by regulations. This meant he was unable to receive financial compensation for his work.

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