



Behind the Process: How Facilitator Reflection Shapes Meaningful Participation

Acknowledgements

First and foremost, I want to acknowledge the **facilitators** who shared their experiences and insights so openly for this report. It was an absolute privilege to share final reflection time with you all, and I hope this report stands as a testament to your compassion, thoughtfulness, and the journey we've been on together.

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Abstract

This report explores the role of reflection in enabling facilitators to carry out meaningful participation during a peer research project at Justlife.

Based on qualitative interviews with three facilitators, the findings explore how reflection drove person-centred iteration, provided a means by which emotional labour could be processed, and enabled facilitators to understand power, inequality and positionality during the process.

The findings are a glimpse into the experience of meaningful participation from the perspective of those who facilitated the process, and an insight into the vital role that reflection played in the project's success.

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Introduction

Summary – This Research Report

01

This report shares the findings of interviews with facilitators, exploring their experiences of reflection in a peer research project. It demonstrates how reflective processes influenced the way the project was run and was able to achieve it's outcomes, and how they affected the psychological safety of the project.

The findings can be read in detail from **page 8** and the recommendations from **page 17**. These been written for Justlife, but could be relevant to any organization looking to structurally embed participatory lived experience led work.

While a 'facilitator' can be broadly be described as someone who build relationships and enables participation (Kagan et. al., 2011, p.345), the facilitators of this project described their day to day roles as incredibly diverse: overseeing training and project planning, while supporting co-production, participant well-being, research, logistics, admin and advocacy.

This vast on the ground and behind the scenes involvement in a project has led to nuanced and valuable insights, yet these perspectives are rarely explored as a source of knowledge production in participatory research (Emke et. al., 2024).

Additionally, while there is some research exploring facilitator's emotional labour in participatory research projects in academic settings (Oliver et. al., 2019), how this plays out in participatory projects within the voluntary, community and social enterprise sector (VCSE) is well less explored.

This report summarises that experience; seeing facilitators unique perspectives as a source of knowledge to be built upon to further strengthen the growing understanding of participatory approaches.

While this report focuses on project facilitators, it can be read alongside the research, reflective blogs and manual produced by Justlife's peer researchers, as part of the wider learning from that project, all of which are available on the Justlife website:

<https://www.justlife.org.uk/our-work/lived-experience/peer-research>

The following introductory subsections will explain the context of Justlife, the peer research project and the participatory action research (PAR) – the framework it was built.

Justlife, temporary accommodation & lived experience

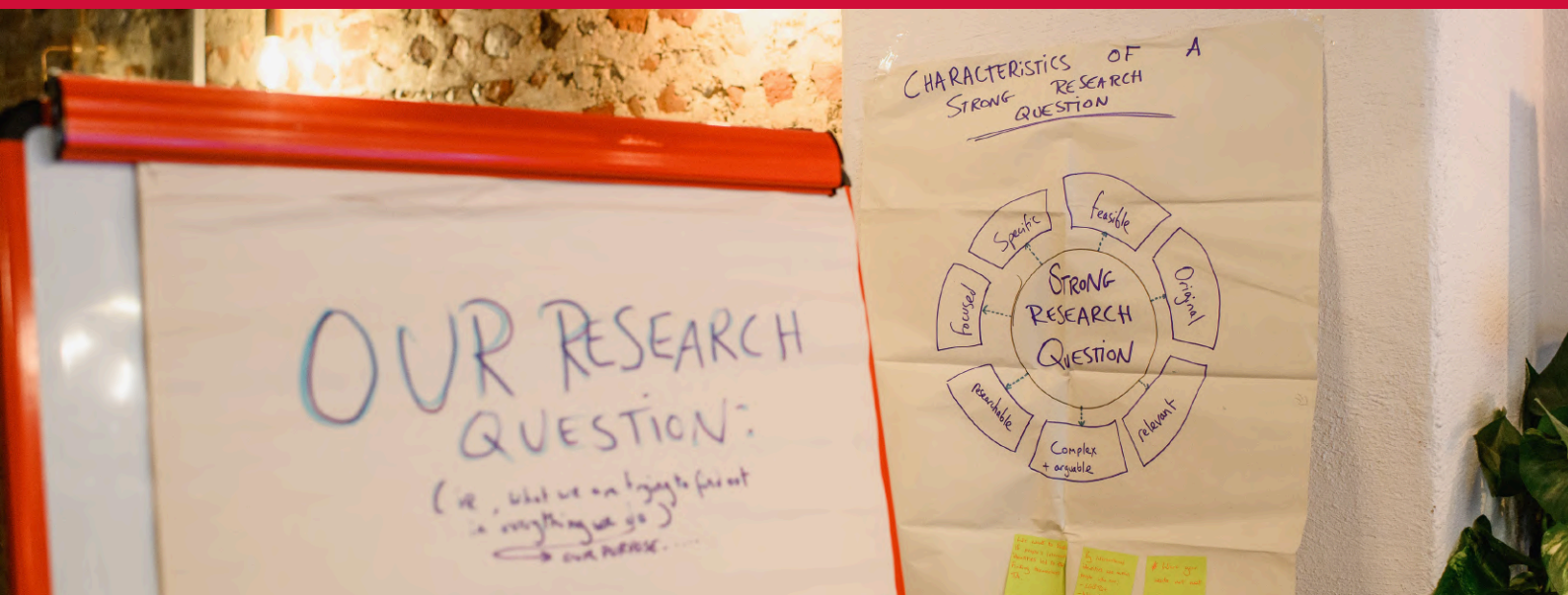


There are an estimated 127,890 homeless households in Temporary Accommodation (TA) in England – an all time high that is trending upwards (Tebbs, 2025). TA is any type of accommodation people stay in while experiencing homelessness. Official TA used by local authorities for people they support includes hostels or emergency accommodation. Unofficial, or ‘unsupported temporary accommodation’ includes bed and breakfast, hotels, overcrowded houses in multiple occupation, and sofa-surfing, to name but a few. (Justlife, 2025c)

A vastly unregulated sector, conditions in TA are often incredibly unhealthy and unsafe for occupants due to issues such as mold and damp, buildings in disrepair, support services being stretched and unable to provide the specific help needed. Due to a lack of social housing and inaccessibility of the PRS sector, people’s stays can end up being anything but temporary, lasting years or decades, often leading to worsening health outcomes. (Emma et. al, 2025).

Justlife is a charity working to make stays in TA shorter, safer and healthier. They provide one-to-one client health support, advocacy and befriending in Brighton and Manchester; whilst campaigning for national and local systemic change. (Justlife, 2025a) In this, Justlife is committed to centring people with lived experience in all they do in an ethical and psychologically safe way. ‘Lived experience’ describes a first-hand experience of a life event or social issue – at Justlife, it refers to people who have first-hand experience of homelessness (Justlife, 2025b).

Peer research: A new way of working at Justlife



In 2023, Justlife launched a UKRI funded peer research project, aimed at growing the sectors understanding of the most marginalised populations of the homeless community. This was in direct response to sector wide research showing that certain intersectional identities – particularly race, sexuality and disability – were underrepresented in existing data, despite being more likely to experience homelessness, and experience discrimination while in the homelessness system (Bramley et.al, 2022; Gosmann, 2022; Tunåker et. al., 2025)

The pilot was a huge success, and a 2nd, phase of the project was initiated. Overall, nine people who had lived experience of homelessness and intersecting experiences (such as racialisation, gender, sexual identity, age, neurodivergence and disability) were recruited to be peer researchers. (Sailor & Jones, 2024)

Figure 1 (Procter, 2025) is a visual project timeline, and gives some insight into the projects complexity.

Key achievements included:

- 9 peer researchers trained in-house
- A co-produced, accessible manual: “How to set up a Peer Research Group” designed by group one, iterated by the second group and external partners.
- 2 research projects designed and carried out by each group.

Readers wanting a deeper context for this report are encouraged to explore the peer research publications, reflective blogs by the peers and the co-produced “How to Set Up a Peer Research Group”, all of which are available on the Justlife website:

<https://www.justlife.org.uk/our-work/lived-experience/peer-research>

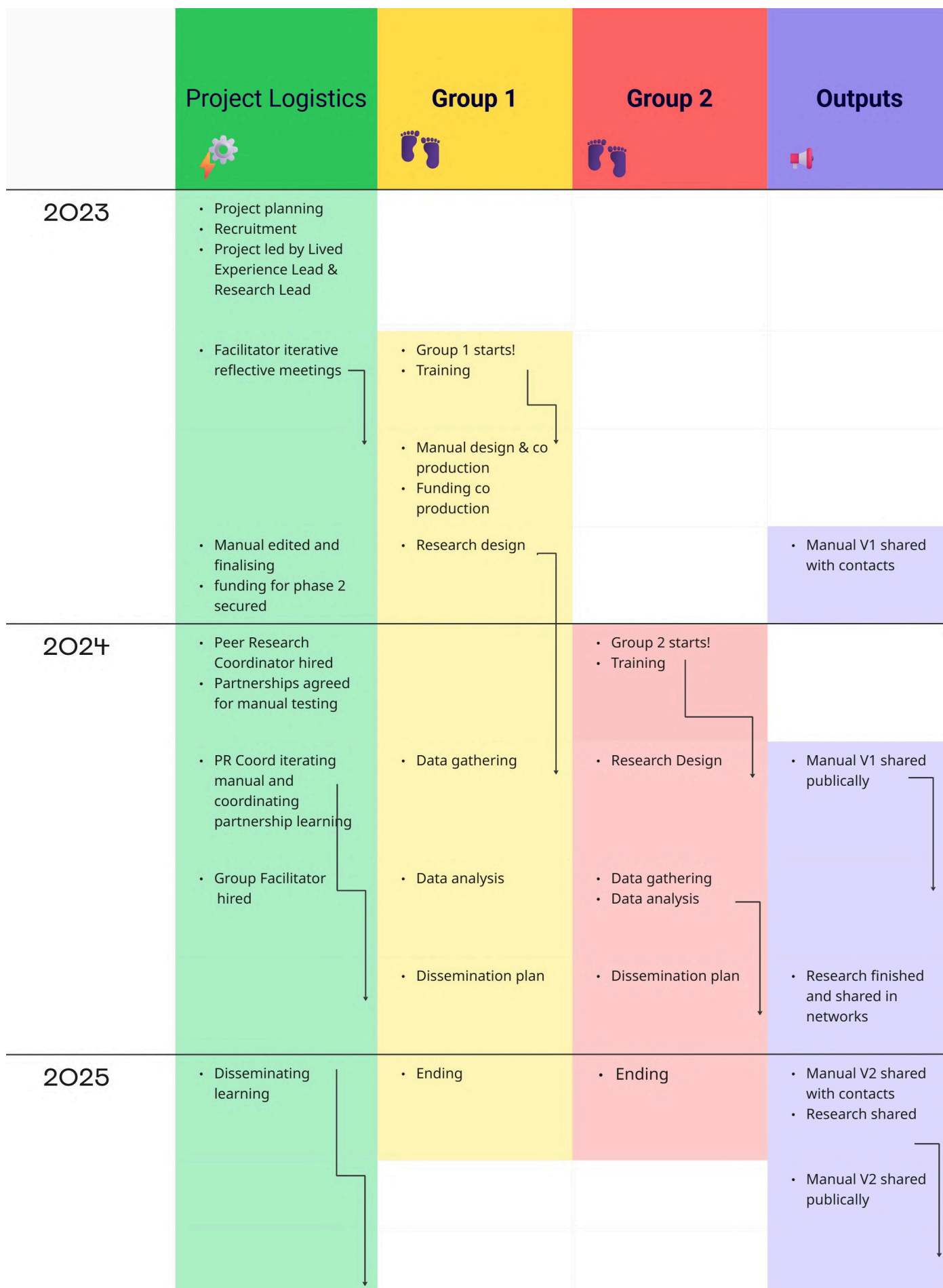


Figure 1 – Retrospective Project Timeline

The role of facilitation & reflection

In service design focused participatory activities Justlife carried out prior to this research work, facilitator teams supported the process by providing emotional and psychological support for participants, as well as logistical and project admin support. The decision was taken to replicate this approach for the peer research project.

The aim of this project was research rather than service design – so facilitators' would also provide training for the peers in the research skills. Additionally, they would document everything happening in the project to assess what worked well.

Participatory action research (PAR) was used as blueprint for the project structure. PAR is a research framework that cycles through stages: plan, act, observe, reflect – demonstrated in Figure 2 (Brown et. al., 2012). PAR is rooted in the work of Paulo Freire (1970/2017), modelled on his concept of 'praxis', a continuous cycle of action and reflection.

Freire argued community learning can lead to disruption or changing of oppressive systems through 'consciousness raising', whereby learning themes raised by the community are approached by collective 'problem-posing'. Learners develop insights about their context and how that affects their reality, which in turn becomes part of the learning process through praxis (Campos & Anderson, 2021).

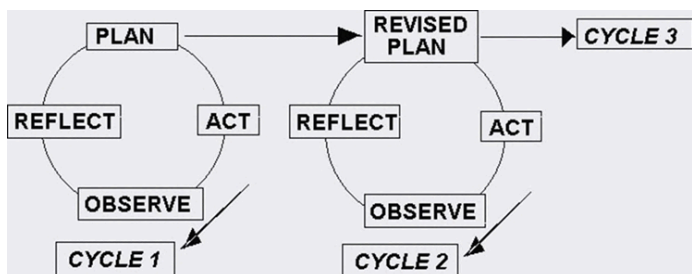


Figure 2. Cycles involved in PAR

Who Was Included

The aim of this qualitative research report is to understand the project facilitators' experience and perspectives of working in a reflective way, by carrying out semi-structured interviews with three facilitators.

Peer researchers were at the centre of the broader project, their insights shaping every stage of its evolution from the pilot stage. This study did not interview the peers, and their direct insights are not presented here. Supporting staff involved in this project (senior leadership and managers) were also not interviewed.

This decision was grounded in ethical and practical considerations; including the limited scope, time and capacity of a masters project and university ethics procedures. However, given that the emphasis is on facilitators' experience, this is not a deficit, it is a deliberate focus on a specific aspect of how the project was delivered; and can be viewed as one part of the overall learning outputs from this project.

To explore the other project outputs please head to Justlife's website:
<https://www.justlife.org.uk/our-work/lived-experience/peer-research>

Insider Reflexivity and Iteration

Structural reflexivity was particularly important for the aims of this report, because the researcher was also a facilitator within the project and a co-designer of the project blueprint. This insider knowledge has informed the design and the interpretation of this report.

Efforts were made to ensure reflexivity and transparency throughout the process, and a cyclical approach to designing this report was used, somewhat informed by PAR. From the start the researcher involved the interviewed facilitators in discussions about this report and how the data collection would be carried out.

Facilitators were given the opportunity to see the outline of the interview schedule, and feedback their thoughts on it, leading to an iteration of the questions.

Interview and Analysis

The interviews were semi-structured to allow questions to arise naturally and for relational discussion to emerge; as certain conversations about shared experiences and insider references might need to be prompted differently to make sense as abstract quotes. (Aburn et. al., 2021)

Additionally, given the familiarity between researchers and facilitators might lead to more being shared than with a stranger, participants were able to request specific quotes from them be removed from the final report past the general data withdrawal date.

Interviews were carried out digitally, via Microsoft Teams. Braun and Clarke reflexive thematic analysis approach was been used, whereby themes were allowed to emerge from the data based on what recurred across all interviews during data familiarisation. This process was lightly guided by the research aims as a framework, rather than being imposed from the start (Byrne, 2021). This made space for the lens of community psychology values to be applied; such as theoretical and practical frameworks of PAR and Freirean praxis; while honing in on the facilitators subjective experiences and collective perceptions of the project.

A Note on Anonymity

Full anonymity is impossible, given that there were only four publicly credited facilitators on the project. However, facilitators chose synonyms – Sam, Ali & Zara – , and some quotes have had details redacted or generalized to make sure individual quotes are not attributable.

Findings

03



Facilitators described reflection taking place at many levels of the project, between one another and with the peers collectively, in such settings as:

- Informal dialogues between facilitators
- Facilitator meetings
- Check-ins and check-outs in sessions
- Reflective group sessions with peers
- One-to-ones with peers
- Project planning meetings (with peers present and just facilitators)
- External supervision and formal reflective practice sessions

This aligns an initial assumption of this research report: that reflection had been successfully embedded. The following section explores themes that emerged through analysis, and how reflection influenced and was integral to the project.

“It’s about being flexible, responsive to the needs of the community. I think traditional methods are more rigid and they might not have reflection. They’re like: “this is the process, this is the procedure” otherwise it’s not considered scientific, but then it’s not as accessible and psychologically informed, or what works for people.” – Ali

1. Reflection drove person-centred iteration & participation

2. Facilitator's emotional labour was seen, heard & processed through relational reflection

3. Reflection enabled facilitators to understand power, inequality & positionality

1) Reflection drove person-centred iteration & participation

The facilitators described the project being designed as it went, with live iteration – the cyclical process of testing, evaluating and adjusting. However, also they repeatedly described this as being intrinsically linked to reflection:

“It was such a moving process, and it was being developed as we were going. We couldn’t follow a workbook, there wasn’t one.... I think that requires much more reflection. It’s quite challenging in terms of being responsive to how things shift and move. I don’t think you can do that without reflection.” – Sam

“You have reflection and then action... something might change based on that. Then you test that out and reflect on it again. So it’s like a cycle and a flow. That helped the continuous learning and being flexible, human-centred rather than just process and rigid.” – Ali

Identified in these quotes is the experience of actively building something new. They describe reflection as a means of observing the process, learning from it, and adapting their approach as the needs of the project evolved. However, Ali also discussed staying responsive and attuned to the peer researchers involved:

“Very early on in group two, one of the peers was moved out of area (by the council). So then we adapted the project to actually facilitate hybrid meetings, which hadn’t been done in the first group. And even through that process, we’d receive feedback in the one-to-ones. (I’d ask) “is this working for you?” and they might share: “well I want to feel more engaged and more involved and included”. Then we’d shift how we ran the sessions again to make sure it was safely held.” – Ali

This adaptation enabled the peers continued attendance, whilst upskilling the facilitators in hosting more accessible spaces. The facilitator engaged in person-centred, collaborative decision making led by the peer through the project’s reflective dialogue spaces. This person-centred approach, where people’s needs, preferences and values are prioritized by practitioners (NHS England, n.d.) aligns with Justlife’s collaborative and person-centred values (Justlife, 2025a).

In experiential learning (Kolb, 2015, p. 47–54) reflection is about considering the context of individual or organizational values, perceptions and understandings when assessing what happened, and considering what to do next. Reflective processes enabled facilitators not only to

engage in the iteration processes of PAR, but to assess what and how to adapt in alignment with the person-centered values of the project. Ali recalled adapting the approach in a similar way for other aspects such as ending processes:

“We built an additional part of the project, which we referred to as ‘ending well’...the Christmas period was when it was originally going to end, so we extended it until March to build in space to support people in many different ways: their mental well-being, into the future projects, education and employment, which hadn't originally been planned. (We) needed to make it more person-centred and respond to the reflections.” – Ali

These examples show person-centred accessibility adaptations being made: for someone who'd been unexpectedly moved from the accommodation they were staying in, an experience common in homeless populations (Tebbs, 2025); and the project ending being significantly altered, not only avoiding Christmas which can be an isolating and triggering time for people experiencing homeless (Saunders & Brown, 2015), but also providing extensive signposting for participants.

These learnings were embedded in the projects co-produced training manual,

which has been widely disseminated across the homelessness sector. In this way, these changes in practice not only impacted the individual wellbeing of the peers involved in the project. They also have the potential to influence change by shifting practices across the sector. These processes shed light on the PAR theory underpinning the project, and show value centered praxis in action – where cycles of learning through reflection improve things not just for the individual, but systemically (Prilleltensky, 2001)

2) Facilitator's emotional labour was seen, heard & processed through relational reflection

The Facilitators described what reflection meant to them in very clear, personal terms:

"The words that are coming to mind are digestion and processing. It's a way of letting go, of stopping and thinking about what you're doing." – Sam

"You get a different sort of angle or perspective on something. It's free flowing and you end up bouncing thoughts and it makes you feel reassured. Sometimes I'd say: "oh, I'm not the only one that noticed that". So it provides confirmation in your mind and safety" – Ali

"A few times I was like, I'm failing, I'm not doing the right thing. But reflective practises helped me see what needs to be improved from my perspective, what I need to bring more of ... or actually to realise that yeah, we're already doing enough." – Zara

Here, reflection is described as means of gaining perspective, emotional processing and release. Throughout interviews, facilitators often framed it as a reset emotionally – especially during challenging experiences or uncertainty. One facilitator described reflection as providing "containment".

Arguably what is being described is

emotional labour – the work of managing one's emotion while performing relational supporting roles (Wharton, 2009). For the facilitators holding space for peers wellbeing, complex project needs, and emergent participatory processes, while also supporting one another, reflection became a protective structure that helped them collectively process what they were carrying:

"It's about creating space specifically to share your feelings, your thoughts and your perspectives about something and then analyse those... and maybe change your practise based on that. It helps you process things for your mental well-being." – Ali



All facilitators highlighted the importance of being heard and seen by one another. They discuss recognizing one another's experiences, gaining perspective and feeling validated and supported. This insight is critical to developing a nuanced understanding of psychological safety within this project.

Psychological safety is a framework whereby conditions are created in the workplace so people feel safe to speak up, raise issues and challenge the status quo – arguably a needed precondition for participatory research. However, safety to speak is not the same as feeling or being heard. Research has shown that organisations that may deploy psychological safety measures, but experience a deficit in resources such as time or budget – a reality in the VCSE – may be less likely to listen to concerns or needs shared by their team. This can lead to burnout, disengagement or mental distress in staff (Kerrissey et al., 2022; Satterstrom et. al., 2020).

What the facilitators are describing goes beyond the basic principles of psychological safety, and is more correctly described as feeling heard – defined by Satterstrom et. al. as ‘the belief that the content of one’s voiced ideas or questions will be recognized and responded to’, which can lead

to feelings of trust and familiarity growing in teams (2020) – demonstrated by Sam’s quote:

“We were able to be so open with each other and were so trusting of each other. That helped create an environment of trust and openness in peer groups where you were safe with your honesty. I’m quite sure it helped that we got on so well and were able to be so honest with each other... I do feel that that trust between us is reflected back from the peers, that there was a lot of trust in us and between us all. We have engendered it.” – Sam

This is a clear example of collective reflectiveness benefitting facilitator’s individual practice and wellbeing, as well as the sense of collective well-being and trust between peers and facilitators. Reflective spaces not only led to psychological safety principles of being able to share and be open, but a culture of listening, hearing and trust.

3) Reflection enabled facilitators to understand power, inequality & positionality

As well as the trust, openness and supportiveness that the facilitators described, there were examples of challenges and conflict that arose in this project. While some of these played out interpersonally, all of the examples shared were rooted in structural inequality. Facilitators were able to articulate this with clarity, and all of them credited reflective processes for enabling them to understand and process what had happened (Individually and within the peer group), often involved some uncomfortable confrontations with personal power and positionality. This section hones in on one example, in order to thoroughly examine what this looked like in practice.

Zara describes an event that took place in a peer research meeting shortly after the group presented their findings at a public policy meeting:

“There was a quite intense attack on the whole (homelessness) system from the peers...and I think there was a lot of transference directed at us because we are workers (in the system) as well and not realising it...probably it was our transference as well – I used to work for the council. It was a challenge to observe my own emotions and how we could facilitate this.” – Zara

‘Transference’ is a psychoanalytic term, describing a person unconsciously projecting feelings or reactions on to another person or situation in the present, which actually relates to an experience in their past. (Alonso, 2018). In this example, Zara highlights transference from the participants and themselves.

By acknowledging that they and the participants are experiencing transference, they are revealing an insight into the way interpersonal dynamics and triggers can intersect with processes of power and positionality. After reflecting on this experience with a colleague they arrived at this realisation:

“When you're working in this type of environment, which was lovely, you sometimes forget that sure, it's Co-production, we are working as equals, but there was still that power relationship...in the ideal world, you would think we are all equals, but we are not in certain situations.” – Zara

This reflection is an example of how Vissera & Kreemers (2018) describe power in participatory processes playing out: visible, hidden and invisible. Visible power describes the formal structures, processes and procedures in place to guide a project and decision making. Hidden power is wielded by people who have the most power in a system, who are able to influence what's put on the agenda, to bend rules, and wield influence within systems – their power is often tied to status, and social capital. Hidden power refers to the cultural norms and status quo that influence a situation, reflective of the values and agenda of power holders.

Facilitators in this project were relatively low within the hierarchy of Justlife. However, their role involved enforcing visible power, by ensuring that group rules, the procedures and policies were followed correctly. Additionally, three of the facilitators were directly line-managed by senior management in Justlife, the people

that lead the direction and status quo in the organization. While in this instance the facilitator describes transferential processes, they are recognising a simultaneous truth: in the reality of the projects structure, the facilitators are power holders (Bilgen et. al, 2021).

Taken as a whole, this experience represents an uncomfortable reality. Participatory projects aiming to address power and imbalance which are carried out in organizations embedded in social systems such as the homelessness sector will always have an inherent power imbalance. However, Zara goes on to say about not being equals in certain situations:

“I don't think it's necessarily bad... I think it's just about awareness. You have to be aware of it all the time.” – Zara

This speaks to a role reflective processes can play by building facilitators awareness of the processes of power. While awareness alone can't change structural power, it can reduce the risk of further harm, particularly in instances where a person in authority might react offensively or punitively to transference.

Trauma-informed practice advocates for an approach that understands and acknowledges trauma, and lays out guidance on how to support people who are triggered. However there is a missing link in the intersection between trauma-informed care and critical awareness of power in the social care sector (Tarshish et. al., 2024). Current practice and research often fails to fully acknowledge structural violence and present day power imbalances, and how both can lead to trauma, and evoke responses, both transferential and in reaction to real dynamics in the now.

This experience demonstrates how reflective dialogue and critical power awareness could begin to bridge that gap.



Reflection influenced the way the peer research project ran and was able to achieve it's many outcomes, and the impact reflection had on psychological safety in the project.

It enabled iteration and learning about best practice, as well as human-centered, accessible participatory practices.

The emotional labour of the facilitators holding this complex and multifaceted project was made possible by a culture of psychological safety and mutual listening fostered by the reflective practices layered throughout the project.

Reflective processes enabled the facilitators to understand their own power and position within the peer research project, and respond to interpersonal conflicts and challenges in a way that was both cognisant to the power structures they were immersed in, and trauma informed.

The following recommendations are drawn from the data; aimed at continuing to embed the good practices described by the facilitators throughout this report

01

Embed reflective practice structurally across leadership and projects

- Providing training for all line managers:
 - The value of reflective practice
 - How to practically enable self-led reflection, including providing tools and templates that can be disseminated to all staff (eg. journaling guides, reflective prompts for staff)
 - Listening skills and psychological safety, so that line managers are equipped to provide reflective space in 121s
- Light-touch reflection on the agenda of group meetings such as check ins.
- In 121s ensure reflective discussion is on the agenda for direct reports who value more in-depth reflective space.
- Ensure funding bids build in appropriate level of budget for reflective needs of staff and project.

02

Create facilitator toolkit

- Carry out audit with existing facilitators, to gather best practices from across the organisation, and co-develop toolkit based on their feedback.
- Adapt elements of the peer research manual, and proposed line manager toolkits to suit facilitator needs.
- Include guidance on relational boundaries, reflective dialogue, and managing emotional dynamics in participatory spaces.
- Provide practical tools (eg. structured prompts, exercises, and formats for group and one-to-one reflection with participants).

03

Acknowledge and make power visible in Justlife

- Design training for all staff about visible, hidden and invisible power; and how to critically engage with their own power in their roles
- Adapt trauma-informed and psychological safety guidance and training to include sections on power
- Commission further internal research to understand power in Justlife's participatory work
- All teams carry out a "power audit"

04

Design reflective processes into projects from the start

- Build monitoring, learning and evaluation into projects as cycles, rather than doing it at the end.
- Set reflective learning "pauses" as key milestones in project plans.
- Project initiation to include training for staff about structural reflection models.
- Design projects using models such as PAR, praxis, or experiential learning.

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