Pushing the boundaries: Exploring ‘citizen science’ and community participation across research

Discussion paper 1
Experiences of ‘citizen science’

Institute for Community Studies, October 2023
The Institute for Community Studies is a research and evidence centre with people at its heart. Powered by the not-for-profit organisation, The Young Foundation, we work to influence positive change, bridging the gap between communities, research, and policymaking.

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Executive summary

This is the first in a series of short discussion papers, sharing learnings and reflections from the UK Research and Innovation (UKRI)-funded Citizen Science Collaboration Grants (CSCG). It focuses on the experience of doing ‘citizen science’. This involves exploring what it means and feels like to be involved in ‘citizen science’ from a range of perspectives, including those of academic teams, those of ‘citizen’ researchers, and those of other partners in research projects. The paper explores cross-cutting themes from the programme, alongside stories from CSCG projects, sharing reflections and questions to support further inquiry.

First, the paper highlights how experiences are relational, contributing to something ‘greater than the sum of their parts’:

• Much of the value of participatory methods is in the shared endeavour to incorporate a greater breadth of experiences and views in the research process

• ‘Citizen science’ methods often strive to enhance the reciprocity – and limit the transactional nature – of research relationships

• Negotiating relationships with and between ‘citizen’ researchers can be a ‘balancing act’, which requires significant resource and effort

Then, this paper considers how experiences are affective, imbued in emotion and feeling:

• There is a shared understanding that involving ‘citizens’ in research processes often feels messy and complex, encouraging creativity, innovation and experimentation

• However, pushing the boundaries of ‘traditional’ practice can carry a sense of responsibility that can have profound impacts on the wellbeing of those involved in research projects

• The risk associated with methodological innovation is not necessarily rewarded in the current research and innovation system

1 Refer to note on terminology on p. 8
Finally, we explore how experiences are powerful:

- Participatory research can be empowering for ‘citizen’ researchers and their communities; yet there are many ways in which power interacts with experiences, that are more complex than this linear notion of ‘empowerment’ might suggest.
- Experiences within a research project lie in systemic relations of power across society, and particularly dynamics with the powerful institutions associated with research.
- The language used to talk about ‘citizen science’ matters as it reflects these power relations.

Together, this opens spaces for broader discussion across the research and innovation sector, for those funding and designing participatory research, as well as the institutions and organisations involved in its practice. The provocations throughout the paper bring into focus important considerations:

- How do relationships, risks and power dynamics characterise different participatory research methods?
- What more is needed to support the research and innovation system to invest in relationships, reward risk, and address entrenched power imbalances?
- What moral implications do the risks and power dynamics of (participatory) research impose on approaches to drive change?

Our reflections on these questions have already begun to shape the delivery of the CSCG programme, as well as the future directions of UKRI and the Institute for Community Studies. By continuing to share and reflect through a series of events, we hope to both provide and incorporate inspiration more broadly too.
Introduction

This is the first of a series of short discussion papers, sharing learnings, reflections and experiences from the CSCG projects, working in collaboration with UKRI and the Institute for Community Studies.

The CSCG programme brings together five UKRI-funded ‘citizen science’ projects, working across a range of disciplines: from environmental sciences to health and history. The Institute for Community Studies supported these projects with a range of training and knowledge exchange opportunities.

Ancient History, Contemporary Belonging
This project explores how engagement between migrant-background youth researchers and ancient historical objects can facilitate new understandings of the migration and transnational histories of both.

Citizens Researching Together, Bristol
In this project, people in Bristol, including African Caribbean communities, are addressing the history and contemporary legacies of transatlantic slavery in the city.

C-STACS (Citizen Science to Achieve Co-production at Scale)
In this project, people with experience of mental health problems are sharing knowledge on strategies that have helped them, and envisioning a more recovery-orientated mental health system.

HOMEs under the microscope
Citizen scientists are working to investigate the extent of the microplastics crisis, exploring the presence of airborne microplastics in people’s homes to get a better picture of where these particles come from.

Youth LIVES (Lived Experience Evidence Synthesis)
Young people with mental health problems are working to identify priorities for mental health research, and to design research that addresses any gaps.
These projects’ collective experiences, of delivering and experimenting with participatory research approaches in a range of contexts, highlight the huge value of involving communities in research – but there remain questions to explore about how to do this in practice, and what’s needed from research design, institutions and funders to get this right. This report explores the enablers for these methodologies – and asks what barriers need to be overcome to make the most of it.

In doing this, we return to some of the themes touched upon in a paper the Institute for Community Studies and UKRI published in 2022, retrospectively sharing learnings from the 28 CSCG projects. This time, we’re sharing midway through the programme – working in the open, in the knowledge that what is emerging through this programme may resonate with others’ experiences in the cross-disciplinary field of participatory research.

This is therefore an opportunity to test our thinking and contribute to collective action, which is designed to better enable communities to participate in research across a range of disciplines. Insights gathered from across the research ecosystem will feed into the final outputs from this programme, which will draw out conclusions and recommendations for funders and practitioners, and help shape the future directions of UKRI and the Institute for Community Studies.

This contributes to a wider body of work on delivering ‘citizen science’ and community research projects – with a commitment to exploring these questions from multiple perspectives. This involves working across disciplines and, critically, incorporating the views and voices of the ‘citizen’ researchers involved in projects.

**Experiences of ‘citizen science’**

A natural starting point for this first paper is to reflect on the experience of doing ‘citizen science’. This explores what it means and feels like to be involved in ‘citizen science’ – from a range of perspectives spanning those of academic teams to those of ‘citizen’ researchers and those of other partners involved in research projects. As well as documenting the value of this work to those who participate in projects, this opens thinking about how these experiences stand apart from other research experiences – questioning assumptions about different methods, and exploring what researchers, funders, and institutions might do to enable improved experiences in the future.

**We break this down into three key themes:**

- **Relational experiences:** the interplay between individual and collective experiences
- **Affective experiences:** the feelings and emotions involved in doing ‘citizen science’
- **Powerful experiences:** the role of power dynamics in shaping experiences

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2 Valuing and enabling citizen science: Lessons from the Citizen Science Exploration Grant programme – The Young Foundation


Pushing the boundaries: Exploring 'citizen science' and community participation across research

Under each theme, we share key talking points and reflect on the broader questions this work raises, in relation to cross-cutting areas of inquiry:

- What is different about ‘citizen science’, compared to other research methods?
- How do institutions help – and get in the way of – participatory research?
- How can (participatory) research drive change across society?

Approach

This paper draws on discussions and reflections shared in meetings, workshops and training sessions with academic researchers involved in the CSCG projects, as well as feedback from ‘citizen’ researchers. It provides a ‘snapshot’ of their experiences to date, with further engagement planned. While insights are convened by the Institute for Community Studies, they reflect knowledge co-produced with stakeholders across the programme.

A note on terminology

We define ‘citizen science’ loosely. Citizen science can describe a host of methods where the public and communities participate in research across different disciplines. It is the terminology used in the original call and some find it useful; for others, it can be seen to misrepresent their work or lead to unhelpful assumptions about what they are doing. Our aim is to share learnings that might be useful for all those interested in exploring participatory practice, in any form.

4 The CSCG projects also use a range of terms to describe the role the public play in their research. While some use citizen scientist/researcher, others prefer terms like co-researchers. Those focused on the involvement of young people tend to refer to youth researchers.
1. Relational experiences

With different people and groups coming together to conduct research, participatory research is underpinned by relational work, concerned with developing and supporting relationships between different parties. This is where much of the value of the CSCG projects lies, enabling a greater breadth viewpoints, skills and experiences to be incorporated into the research process beyond academia. Several projects focused on diversifying the stories told about a subject matter, actively working to involve those from a diversity of backgrounds, and explicitly avoiding collapsing their experiences into one overarching narrative. For ‘citizen’ researchers, valuable experiences emerged from exploring the commonalities and differences between their individual and collective experiences. Across all parties, the sense of a shared endeavour, contributing to something ‘greater than the sum of its parts’, emerged as a key benefit of participating in ‘citizen science’.

“\nThe enjoyable thing was that it was a shared exploration, because where I’ve done my own historical research, the search for understanding, this was something that we were sharing across communities.\n
Citizen researcher\nCitizens Researching Together, Bristol

Case study: The value of a team

Ancient History, Contemporary Belonging

Reaching the last stages of their project, the relationships formed felt like some of the biggest successes of the project. Solidarities and connections crossed generations and institutions forming a constellation of teams across different sections of the projects. Youth researchers cherished the sense of community they had developed, and the ways they were able to grow individually, supported by a team (of their peers, artist mentors, academics and museum staff). Among the academic researchers, alongside their relationships with the youth researchers, they recognised benefits of bringing together their different expertise across disciplines, and the immense value of institutional buy-in from Manchester Museum to push past structural barriers to change. Of course, this came with inherent complexity and messiness. It takes a lot of time and energy to work sensitively across different partners and stakeholders on complex topics, but working within supportive team structures mitigates some of the challenges and isolation.
Although, elements of research are necessarily transactional, with individuals benefitting from the exchange of data or expertise across parties; the methods used in the CSCG projects sought to enhance the reciprocity of relationships. This meant making the projects mutually beneficial for all those participating, by ensuring everyone shared the rewards for research. Primarily, reciprocal learning and personal growth were identified as key outcomes across all project stakeholders. Beyond this, academic researchers often sought tangible ways to recognise and reward the ‘citizen’ researchers’ contributions, working within the parameters of their systems to provide comparable recognition and acknowledgment to their professional contributions— for example, through co-authorship, payment/incentives, qualifications, or academic status. They often had to be incredibly resourceful, and find workarounds, in order to provide these benefits, as university intellectual property and payments processes were not usually set up to support this.

In this context, negotiating relationships with and between ‘citizen’ researchers can be a ‘balancing act’ – which requires significant resource and effort. The experience of the CSCG projects demonstrates that building relationships requires investing time at the outset, to establish flexible ‘ways of working’ that are co-produced with participants and can adapt to changing circumstances. Each project developed their own approaches to manage an array of needs and expectations (both research- and citizen-led), and enable open learning, feedback and evaluation.

Key provocations posed by these insights:

Through the CSCG cohort’s experiences, it is evident that relationships form a key tenet of the experience of ‘citizen science’ methods and their value. We ask how this helps us to conceptualise these research practices:

• Can participatory methods be defined by the nature of the research relationship? What does this mean for the way they are practiced?

Given the time, effort, and resource taken to develop these relationships, we also ask how these ways of working can best be supported by the research and innovation system:

• What more is needed to invest in relationships? How can this best be enabled in funding and research design?
Case study: Piloting a pilot

HOMEs under the microscope

From all that has been learned through this project, it opens up even more questions about what we don’t know (yet). For the citizen scientists involved, they shared the joy of using the microscopes to learn about a range of things around the home – but were eager to know what the abundance of airborne microplastics they discovered meant for their health and the environment, and what change this data could contribute to. For the multidisciplinary academic team, a rich learning process came from undertaking a citizen-led approach – understanding what data could be collected and how best to do this with citizens, meant the pilot process was much longer than anticipated. They had to flex to different needs, amid more rigid frameworks around data quality standards or ethically working with citizens. Through this project, they have established an approach to collect data that has never been accessed before – it has laid the foundations for further investigation in a new field of research. As an abundance of opportunities emerge through interest in the project, they continue to navigate different expectations about what researching with citizens can deliver.

Case study: Laying the groundwork

C-STACS

Citizen science is just emerging as an approach in mental health research, and hence the initial stages of this project have been about research to shape future practices. This early work is hoped to support positive relationships moving forward in the project. This included developing good practice guidelines through a systematic review of mental health citizen science work conducted so far, as well as working with an advisory board of citizen scientists to understand how our projects can create real change, and interviewing people who have knowledge relevant to mental health citizen science. This knowledge is being put into practice through two projects with citizen scientists – which will in turn develop new practices to support future work.
2. Affective experiences

Experiences of research processes are affective, meaning that they are imbued in emotion and feelings. Across the CSCG projects, a shared understanding emerged that involving ‘citizens’ in these processes often feels messy and complex for all those involved. Departing from ‘traditional’ approaches, and opening research to a greater diversity of people and stakeholders, encourages creativity, innovation and experimentation, which can be both challenging and fun. Project teams learnt to ‘expect the unexpected’ as they delivered complex programmes of work – yet the focus on process and method enabled opportunities to adapt, iterate and learn from ‘failures’, which are not necessarily commonplace within more established research practices.

However, across the CSCG cohort, it became clear that pushing the boundaries of ‘traditional’ practice can carry a sense of responsibility that can have profound impacts on the wellbeing of those involved. While this reflects the challenges of navigating genuinely complex practices, against the tide of dominant approaches; these experiences tend to be situated in personal feelings about one’s own expertise, (in)experience and (dis)comfort. Some researchers could embrace this learning process, but others were haunted by a sense of ‘imposter syndrome’. In academia, systemic issues related to pay, precarity, workload and diversity compound wellbeing concerns and highlight the how the culture and systems in academia provide inadequate support for researchers, especially in their early careers. This amounts to a feeling that a level of risk is associated with participatory approaches to research. For academic researchers, the lack of precedent and institutional support can invoke a sense of ‘anxiety’ about how they convey the integrity or ethics of their approach (to reviewers, funders, publishers, peers); even when their practice is guided by a commitment to reimagining research processes for the better. They also carry a ‘heavy’ weight of responsibility towards ‘citizen’ researchers, committing to ensuring they have positive experiences – even among difficult circumstances beyond their control. Moreover, they felt the entrenched precarity in academic employment contracts does not reward the risk that comes with innovation.

“We had to get really creative, contacting many people, … figuring out what happened from the small little clues that we got. So, as a researcher, you have to be able to be really good piecing little puzzles together. And, finally, maybe finding the big picture.”

Youth researcher
Ancient History, Contemporary Belonging
Youth LIVES

The first phase of the programme focussed on capacity building, with regular Q&A sessions with the youth researchers. As this was ongoing, the project team had to deal with significant challenges to the supporting infrastructures that underpin the project (from partnerships to ethical approval and safeguarding processes). These challenges called into question: what is the right approach? Whilst striving to ensure experiences remained positive for the youth researchers, this led to conflict and doubt, making the way forward feel unclear at times.

While seeking to be honest and transparent with the youth researchers as lots of work went on ‘behind the scenes’, to the academic researchers it often felt like there was not much to show for it at the surface. Nonetheless, these experiences have laid the foundations as they set out on the second phase of the project, where youth researchers pick an area of mental health research to focus on and form research teams to pursue this. The youth researchers shared how useful and interesting the earlier stages of the programme had been to inform this.
These affective reflections about the CSCG cohort’s experiences highlight a sense of risk and innovation associated with the methods deployed in the projects. We question whether this helps us to conceptualise defining characteristics of ‘citizen science’ and other participatory methods:

- Does researching with ‘citizens’ necessarily implicate a level of risk and/or require continuous innovation?
- Is the sense of risk and innovation inherent to the methodological approach? What does that mean for the ways these methods are practiced?

We also recognise how the environment within the current research and innovation system means negative experiences of vulnerability and precarity are often associated with methodological innovation, which can act as a barrier to pursuing participatory research. We ask what can be done about this:

- How can risk and innovation be better rewarded within the research and innovation system?
- What can institutions do to support researchers to pursue participatory research?

Finally, in spite of these negative experiences, we ask what positive change can be achieved through these feelings associated with risk and innovation:

- Are innovation and risk-taking necessary principles to drive positive change across society?
3. Powerful experiences

I find doing this sort of thing might be empowering in some way ... we just have to point the microscope at a couple of petri dishes, and if lots of people do it, and then feed it back to you know, policymakers, it can really make a difference.

Citizen scientist
HOMEs under the microscope

Participatory research often professes to be empowering for ‘citizen’ researchers and their communities, with increased awareness, engagement and action often cited as key benefits. Conversations with ‘citizen’ researchers involved in the CSCG projects acknowledged ways in which their experiences can feel empowering. This might derive from their role in influencing change, or feeling part of a legacy, that has external relevance. It could also be more personal – discovering more about oneself and one’s capabilities, opening different life trajectories.

Nonetheless, the way power interacts with experiences seems to be more complex than this one-way notion of ‘empowerment’ might suggest. For example, the ‘citizen’ researchers challenged the idea that they were previously ‘disempowered’, highlighting the skills and value they could bring to the research process. Likewise, the academic researchers did not necessarily feel that they occupied powerful positions in all contexts, sharing feelings of vulnerability in some interactions with different collaborators in the projects. In addition, elements of research projects and relationships were experienced by some ‘citizen’ researchers as exploitative or tokenistic – especially in interactions with institutions perceived as ‘powerful’ or when their work did not have the impact they had anticipated.

This highlights how experiences within a research project are situated in systemic relations of power across society. There are several institutions associated with research (whether universities, museums, health services or local councils), which typically hold significant resources and capacity to shape decision-making across society. The ways in which individuals and local communities perceive and have interacted with these ‘powerful’ institutions in the past, is carried through experiences in projects, and shapes conditions for co-production.

Moreover, the lack of representation of diverse researchers and practitioners, particularly those from racially minoritised backgrounds, was raised as an issue among both ‘professional’ and ‘citizen’ researchers – and it was a particular concern in projects focused on topics related to race. Experiences of marginalisation, across a range of intersecting identities, are seen to compound the challenges of relational work, as well as wellbeing concerns.
Case study: It takes bravery

Citizens Researching Together, Bristol

Researching legacies of transatlantic slavery, all too often, the dynamics this project is dealing with remain unspoken. Using a range of methods (from dance to working with teachers), what this project has achieved is providing an enabling space to collectively confront these. It has not always been easy: it has required sensitivity, support and bravery to reach a position of discomfort. And, there is still further to go – it is recognised that, whether within the city or within the University of Bristol, people are ready to act, but the ‘machinery’ isn’t necessarily ready to follow yet. Nonetheless, this project has been a mechanism to take people on a journey – it has provided a voice to speak about race relations within the university, and galvanised citizen scientists to take their research further.

Further to this, the language used to talk about ‘citizen science’ matters, as it reflects these power relations. By its nature, ‘citizen’ is an exclusionary concept for those that do not meet the legal criteria associated with citizenship status. It is particularly problematic when working with migrant, refugee or asylum-seeking communities. Likewise, the term ‘science’ reflects hierarchies in the ways different types of knowledge are valued, where knowledge produced in professional context, and with certain methods, are typically deemed more credible than knowledge generated through communities. It also can suggest a focus on certain academic disciplines, discouraging cross-disciplinary working.

Among the CSCG cohort, there is a desire to avoid labelling groups and practice, moving towards terms and concepts which invoke power-sharing, rather than hierarchies – such as, community knowledge, or co-researchers. In practice, though, projects found how it was often hard to predict what language will be (in)comprehensible or (in) offensive to different audiences, highlighting the value of co-producing the language used.
Key provocations posed by these insights:

These complex relations of power associated with the experiences in the CSCG projects encourage us to think more critically about how to conceptualise different participatory research methods, and the language used to describe them:

- Is ‘empowerment’ necessarily a key characteristic of citizen science?
- How should we categorise the power relations of participatory research?
- What terminology should be used in what contexts?

As experiences within the CSCG projects come up against longstanding power imbalances in the research and innovation system, we ask how far it is possible to address these – both within and beyond the current system:

- How can the research and innovation system address its entrenched power imbalances?
- Are universities an appropriate environment for participatory research to take place?

Finally, we turn to consider what these interactions of power with research processes mean for the ways research is used as a means to drive change. We ask what difference a participatory approach can make:

- What moral questions do the power dynamics of (participatory) research impose on approaches to drive positive change across society?
- Who tends to be involved in participatory research – and to what extent do they hold levers for driving social change?
Concluding remarks

So far, the CSCG projects have highlighted the significant value of involving members of the public and diverse communities in research. Together, these projects have explored big questions about what helps – and what gets in the way – of greater participation in research and innovation. We’ve asked key questions:

- How do relationships, risks and power dynamics characterise different participatory research methods?
- What more is needed to support the research and innovation system to invest in relationships, reward risk, and address entrenched power imbalances?
- What moral implications do the risks and power dynamics of (participatory) research impose on approaches to drive change?

At UKRI and the Institute for Community Studies, learnings from CSCG have already begun to impact on work and future directions – and they have huge potential to provide inspiration more broadly, too.

Driving community-led research: learnings from UKRI

Building on learnings from the CSCG projects and a legacy of work supporting participatory research, UKRI have been trialling a number of new approaches to supporting grantees, through the CSCG programme. This has involved working with the Institute for Community Studies to provide a comprehensive support package, which goes some way to mitigate the risks invoked by the various methods the projects are using. Moreover, the design of the grants also ensured project length and finances could allow for relationships to develop – and UKRI has since given CSCG grantees access to a £150k bridging fund, to build on the relationships and trust built in their project, without requiring specific outputs. UKRI is continuing an open and honest dialogue as the organisation rolls out these learnings more broadly – and conducts wider work to both shift culture and power dynamics within the current system, and support infrastructures for community-led research beyond the typical boundaries of the R&I sector.  

Ongoing programmes include the Community Research Networks, Community Knowledge Fund and Highlands and Islands Climate Change Community Grant.
Driving greater participation: The Young Foundation’s role

The Young Foundation is committed to embracing and extending the power of participation. As the organisation’s evidence centre, the Institute for Community Studies’ involvement in the CSCG programme has helped demonstrate the potential of participatory approaches for research across a range of disciplines. Working flexibly with the CSCG teams and UKRI, the Institute has co-produced mechanisms for learning and support, developing ways of collaborating as cohort, even as they navigate precarious contexts.

As the diverse projects encountered common challenges, the programme has uncovered insights about what support and infrastructure is necessary to enable and sustain participatory research practice. The Young Foundation believes that shifting the power dynamics in the current system will require multi-sector collaboration, with new ways of organising for equity and sustainability. Learnings from CSCG feed into the not-for-profit’s ongoing work – both that of the Institute for Community Studies, and that headed by The Young Foundation – driving greater participation in communities and for individuals who have typically held less power and representation in the R&I sector. This runs alongside work to reform universities’ and convene stakeholders to drive standards, quality and innovation in participatory research.

A collaborative process

UKRI and the Institute for Community Studies at The Young Foundation recognise there is further work to do. Across the sector – whether funding, commissioning or using research, working in university management or support services, working as a ‘professional’ or ‘citizen’ researcher, public engagement professional or community practitioner – there are different perspectives on the questions posed throughout this paper, and their solutions.

This discussion series aims to bring diverse ideas together to address these important questions and explore the implications for how to build the potential of participatory methods and shift practice for a more inclusive future of research.

That takes collaboration, which is why UKRI and the Institute for Community Studies want to hear from you, inviting readers to participate in upcoming events through 2023 and 2024. Further details can be found through the Citizen Science hub and by signing-up to The Young Foundation’s Peer Research Network newsletter.

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6 Building on scoping research conducted by the Institute, the Community Research Networks and Community Knowledge Fund are funded by UKRI and delivered by The Young Foundation.

7 The Institute is a strategic partner in the UK’s Civic University Network, delivering the National Civic Impact Accelerator.

8 The Young Foundation’s Peer Research Network provides space to connect, share ideas, discuss best practice, and collaborate on new work.
About this series

Through UKRI's ongoing Citizen Science Collaboration Grants (CSCG) programme, five cross-disciplinary research projects are pushing the boundaries of existing research practice to pursue participatory approaches in partnership with the public. Working with The Young Foundation's Institute for Community Studies, they are learning from the common opportunities and challenges they encounter.

This series of discussion papers shares learnings to date – exploring what it takes for communities to participate in research across disciplines, focusing on four thematic areas: experiences, ethics, partnerships and impact.

Watch the video:

What is citizen science?

Participate in the conversation

These emerging ideas are shared as both an opportunity to learn from the CSCG cohort’s experiences, and to incorporate views from readers. By opening up this conversation, UKRI and the Institute for Community Studies hope to build the potential of these participatory research methods, working together to shift future research practice.

Through 2023 and 2024, the Institute for Community Studies and UKRI will host a series of opportunities to get involved.
Acknowledgments

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Please note, not all contributors wished to be named as part of this publication.

Find out more about this collaboration at: www.youngfoundation.org/institute-forcommunity-studies/our-work/citizen-science/