Mental health service users in research: critical sociological perspectives. By Patsy Staddon (ed), Bristol, The Policy Press, 2013, 176 pages, £70.00, ISBN: 9781447307334

Across health and social care in the United Kingdom, there has been a surge in the acceptance of and activity in widening participation in planning and undertaking research. Within this broad acceptance there are many debates, such as the degree to which non-traditional researchers ought to be involved in research and the potential for them exercising control over all aspects of their own research agenda (Beresford & Croft, 2012). Underpinning these issues are deeper questions concerning knowledge and power. Whose questions are being asked in research? Whose priorities shape the way that outcomes and answers are framed? It is in this interdisciplinary context that this collection edited by Staddon is published. Mental health is an area of health and social care research that is well-developed in terms of widening involvement relative to many others, and this book draws on the knowledge and experiences of people steeped in its history and practice. Authors here have various combinations of researcher, service user, carer, and care professional experience to draw on, the combination of which illuminates the subject from many points of light.

Sweeney provides an introduction to the book with an overview of sociology and survivor research. Middleton places debates about involvement and knowledge in to the context of improving health care and a gradual maturing of a social understanding of differences between illness and disability, which challenges an over-simplistic, traditional model of the sick role. Beresford and Boxall address head-on the questions of knowledge and power. In their chapter they ask “where do service users’ knowledges sit in relation to professional and academic understandings of knowledge?” They draw the link between activist movements’ commitments to change and the roles of power and knowledge in this. They conclude that there are significant examples of users’ knowledge having an impact on changing understandings and systems, but argue that consumerist models of involvement in services (i.e. asking people using services about their experience) are not sufficient to radically improve services and, if used as an approach to involvement in research, will undermine meaningful political involvement that shifts power.

Other authors in the book examine these fundamental issues and practical aspects of research in relation to specific groups of people. These include carers, people diagnosed with personality disorders and with alcohol problems, people from ethnic minority groups, and lesbian, gay and bisexual service users.

McLaughlin discusses alternative possible futures for service user involvement in research. He argues that we need to enhance our rigour and critical faculties applied to involvement if it is to develop further. There is a need to develop a stronger evidence base to involvement, in part to improve practice but also to continue to engage in the political and power debates. What this evidence base needs to look like, though, is still to be debated and understood.

One risk in this context is that things become too factionalised and battlegrounds for those who fundamentally agree on matters, but who argue intensely about some aspects, leave the wider terrain of debate and change largely untransformed. To return to the chapter by Middleton, he argues that drawing a clear distinction between “professional researchers” and “service-user researchers” plays in to this situation and distracts from the epistemological limitations of knowledge from any one position. He does not offer a way of addressing the challenges he raises, for they are complex and deep rooted, but by framing the debate as he does he may offer a new way of overcoming old antagonisms.

Dr Michael Clark
Research Programme Manager
NIHR School for Social Care Research & PSSRU
London School of Economics and Political Science
London, UK

Declaration of interest
The author declares no conflicts of interest. The author alone is responsible for the content and writing of this paper.

Reference
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