Why disadvantaged older adults engage in community consultation: a world café study

**Abstract**

Community consultation is increasingly favoured as a means of ensuring that health services adequately meet population needs, yet research, has highlighted the frequency of inadequate and tokenistic consultation. Our aim was to address the gap in understanding of the mechanisms of successful community consultation by being the first study to examine consultation events for older adults in one of the most deprived local authority areas in the UK. A naturalistic world café was co-designed with a community engagement service. Adults aged 68 to 91 years (*n*=103) participated in one of two world café discussions. Qualitative findings demonstrated the mechanisms behind and the added value of consultation with disadvantaged older adults. Forums were found to not only offer space within which opinions could be voiced, they also supported information gathering, the adoption of civic responsibilities and social activities. Understanding of the added value of consultation forums may incentivise service providers to facilitate more meaningful consultation and encourage scholars to examine think more critically about social mechanisms that promote active ageing.

**Keywords:** community participation; inequality; qualitative analysis; social support; health promotion

According to the World Health Organisation (WHO) model (2007), age-friendly cities need to accommodate and facilitate social and civic participation, in addition to adequate physical resources. In the UK, the development and maintenance of age-friendly cities and spaces is most challenging (and simultaneously most needed) in areas characterised by poverty, chronic illness and poor quality of life (Buffel et al, 2012), features which are true of many post-industrial cities in the North of England. High levels of deprivation impact all members of a community however, Rémillard-Boilard, Buffel and Phillipson (2017) noted that as cities become increasingly complex and transient, older adults are particularly vulnerable to marginalisation and exclusion, and the engagement of older adults in service development and evaluation is essential in order to achieve age-friendliness.

*Community consultation*

Community consultation (also known as public participation) is increasingly mandatory in policy making often however, in health care such consultation has been found to be highly unrepresentative due to the structures of patient-public involvement being skewed towards engaging ‘ordinary people only’ (Martin, 2007). Alborz, Wilkin and Smith (2002) conducted a longitudinal survey of 72 (15%) of the Primary Care Groups and Trusts in England. They analysed interview data from chairs and chief officers, and questionnaire data from lay board members and representatives of Community Health Councils. They found that although public participation was being adhered to, most services were struggling to develop effective and meaningful ways of involving local communities. They concluded that efforts to involve the public may often be little more than token gestures. Community consultation may therefore not always engage those most in need of public health services and resources.

One recent development in public participation that has sought to address tokenism and skewed engagement, is the implementation of e-consultation and e-health. Advocates argue that electronic means of health care and public participation can enable a wider number of individuals to be reached. There are however, several limitations to engaging older adults in e-consultation and e-health. This shift would likely remove some of the added benefits that may come with older adult consultation in physical community spaces. It is well established that social engagement, and remaining connected with other members of the community, benefits individuals, communities and societies. Even after accounting for effects of class and health, engaging and volunteering in the community, can promote health and reduce mortality rates (Musick, Herzog, and House, 1999).

*Experiences of consultation*

Experiences of consultation have seen limited research interest, mainly from a sociologically or social policy perspective. Barnes, Newman, Knops and Sullivan (2003) examined various autonomously formed participation groups one English city with the aim of understanding the type of public who participated. As expected, those who were typically more mobile, well and able were more likely to engage. Another study of two Senior Citizen Forums in the South-East of England (Barnes, Harrison & Murray, 2012) used observations and participant interviews with forum attendees to similarly conclude that participation favoured those who were fit, able and had higher levels of social and cultural capital. Given the difficulty that community consultation practice faces in terms of consulting those most in need, any research on the effectiveness of such practice is limited in that samples will not reflect those most in need. This is problematic and leaves a gap in understanding of the benefits of community consultation. The aim of this study was to explore the subjective experience of community consultation in order to identify mechanisms that facilitate the engagement of disadvantaged older adults in consultation. The following two research questions focused these aims:

1. Why do disadvantaged older adults engage in community consultation forums?
2. What are the mechanisms of engagement for disadvantaged older adults?

*Community setting*

The study took place in the city of Stoke-on-Trent in central England where the population is around 260,000 people. Thousands of older adults across the city experience loneliness and social isolation (gov.uk, 2018). Quality of life and life expectancy are also lower than the UK average. Stoke-on-Trent consistently reports poorer health outcomes across the life course than elsewhere in the UK. This context offered a unique opportunity within which to examine the benefits of community consultation forums, where consultation is truly needed and more challenging to implement.

Community consultation forums were provided by a charitable service named OPEN (Older People’s Engagement Network). These forums served to bring together older adults, typically aged 60 and over, and often in their eighties and nineties, as well as local social and health service commissioners. The latter would present an overview of planned services for the city (e.g. transport, social care, housing, regeneration). Attendees would then engage in roundtable discussions, headed by an OPEN facilitator, who would then feedback comments and questions to the commissioners in front of the entire group. A single forum would typically last 90 to 120 minutes, including refreshments and a light lunch, provided by OPEN, at no cost to attendees. Forums would take place approximately every six weeks and would purposively take place in different areas of the city (generally in a town hall, community centre or large conference room), in order to be as inclusive as possible. Typical forums in central areas of the city, attracted between 60 and 120 older adults. Newer forums piloted in the rural outskirts of the city attracted smaller numbers of attendees.

**Methods**

*Data collection*

Two forums, which both took place in May 2017, were identified as appropriate sites for data collection. An established forum in a city centre location and a smaller new forum in an area in the outskirts of the city where forums had not previously been hosted by OPEN. This sampling strategy allowed us to investigate different forum contexts while other factors such as: average age of attendee, time of year, service provision were homogenous in nature.

Participants consisted of 103 (predominately female) residents from across the city. OPEN were distinctive in their pro-active and rigorous engagement of older people, using a variety of methods to access the most hard to reach older people in the city. A newsletter advertising the forums was distributed to 20,000 older adults across Stoke-on-Trent. In addition, OPEN representatives visited community groups, places of worship and retirement communities. Where access to transport hindered forum attendance, it was provided by OPEN free of charge to residents. As a result, the 103 participants were largely representative of the older population of the city (i.e. low socio-economic status, chronic ill health, co-morbidities and largely socially isolated). The specific sample was determined through data collected by OPEN. Social isolation was determined where participants had less than one social engagement per week. Participants attended one of two community engagement forums. Twenty six older adults attended the smaller new forum (NF) whilst 77 attended the established forum (EF).

A research team consisting of the lead author, second author and two other research assistants attended both forums in order to collect data from the attendees. Qualitative research methods are well-established as an appropriate means to explore health and social concerns for all populations including older adults (Green & Thorogood, 2018). Such research tends however to rely upon traditional methods such as interviews, focus groups and observations. Such methods may be fitting for general populations but less so for those who are disempowered or disadvantaged in some way.

Data was collected through the simple yet creative world café method (Brown, 2010). A world café is a democratic, empowering research tool, suited to wielding rich, credible, data sets from community groups (Wright-Bevans & Richards, 2020), particularly older adults (Lamont, Murray, Hale & Wright-Bevans, 2018). World cafés generally involve a series of timed roundtable discussions, each focused on a pre-set topic or question of interest to the research team (and community). Participants then either move tables or change topics throughout the session in order to systematically address topics. Often tables are also equipped with paper table cloths or post-it notes to allow for written comments or drawings. These additional features were intentionally omitted from our world café for various reasons including; practicality, poor literacy among the sample and also the risk that presence of these additional features would intimidate participants due to how starkly different tables would appear compared to usual forum discussions. This method offered strong ecological validity as participants were existing attendees in round table community discussions. In other words, discussions were focused yet naturalistic.

Our world café was co-designed with members of OPEN and older representatives who inputted on the questions to be asked. The world café was advertised to the community through their newsletter. Information sheets, consent forms and demographic questionnaires were given to attendees on arrival. At each of the two forums, three (NF) or four (EF) 15 minute rounds of audio-recorded discussion took place, guided by the questions outlined in Table one. The format was explained and the participants were given a further opportunity to ask questions or express any concerns. A small number of attendees at both events chose not to participate and either left the venue or retreated to a quieter area of the room. The audio-recorded world café discussions were not facilitated by members of the research team, in line with world café method values of democracy and participant empowerment but instead facilitated by self-elected table hosts (Brown, 2010).

<Insert table one around here>

*Data Analysis*

Audio recordings were transcribed verbatim and analysed using a thematic analysis (TA), referring to Braun and Clarke (2006; 2013) for guidance. TA allows for a detailed and rich analysis where patterns in responses can be identified without compromising complexity (Braun & Clarke, 2006). TA is notably broad and flexible in nature. Our specific approach paid attention to meaning beyond the semantic level and participants own voices by using short quotes as codes where appropriate. Transcripts were read multiple times to ensure familiarity and immersion in the data. Following this, initial codes such as “limit isolation”, “develop new ideas”, and “sense of community” were systematically identified and collated. These codes were then searched for patterns that were coherent and could create initial themes. Initial themes included but were not limited to “Gain Information”, “Have a Voice”, “Be Heard”, “Improve Wellbeing” and “Socialise”. Relationships between codes and themes, such as “Having a Voice” and “Being Heard”, were identified during this stage. Themes were then reviewed and refined to ensure they accurately represented the data, a process which saw the merging of several initial themes. Final themes were then named and defined ensuring that they each addressed the research question and were distinctive.

**Findings**

Four key themes characterised the content of the participants’ discussions across both forums and helped depict the benefits of community consultation for the older adults involved. These were: having a voice and being heard, empowerment through knowledge, act of civic responsibility and maintaining social identity.

*Forums facilitate having a voice and being heard*

Throughout the transcripts, participants identified how the forums allowed them to have a safe space where attendees felt “able to voice your own opinion without being heckled” (NF.3.P3.30). The forums over time may create a sense of familiarity, “Not everybody is comfortable or confident to go into places they don’t know so then it’s very hard, whereas here, the local people have come here and they know each other and therefore they feel safe speaking.” (NF.1.P3.15). Forums appear to provide an opportunity for attendees to feel comfortable enough to express their opinions. Many older adults may be resistant to change and hesitant to engage in new activities (Wright-Bevans & Murray, 2018). As the forums are attended by ‘local people’ there is a chance that even when attending alone, there may still be familiar others. This sense of safety and familiarity appears important to individuals in having the individual capacity to voice their opinions confidently.

Crucially, participants at the established forum indicated that forums were an important space not only to voice opinions but to be truly listened to. The reciprocal nature of consultation was vital to these older adults’ engagement and enjoyment:

“P2: You know, so you can discuss and get together with one another, on religious grounds, or whatever… this is a good thing for the communities to come together to know one another, no religion, no differences. So we can discuss and they can listen to what everyone’s saying.

 P3: Yeah. That’s why you come?

 P2: that’s why we come, yeah.” (EF.8.P2.118 – EF.8.P3.122)

Data suggest participants feel safe and free from judgment during discussions. Differences such as religion can be left out of the forums, allowing for greater diversity of people and voices to be heard. This is important as although ethnic residential segregation in the UK has declined over time (Sabater, Graham & Finney, 2017) social ties between different groups may be discouraged especially as elders can feel that their traditional culture and values would be undermined (Martinovic, Van Tubergen & Maas, 2008). Not discovering other people views and opinions may lead to a narrow mindset or outlook. The judgment-free atmosphere encourages individuals to return and continue to identify different opinions. Some participants suggested branching out to discover further opinions:

“I think that, we all sort of are the older generation, but I think it would be good to invite the ones from the secondary schools or the colleges to come to these events, so it can be something that they can sort of come out to as well and be on the panel and also have their say on what they would like to see for the older generation.” (EF.6.P3.209)

Attendees expressed interest in hearing what others have to say, particularly the wider community, drawing on the intergenerational example of school or college students. This could be due to their experiences of feeling that they are ignored as expressed through desperation: “Listen to us. Please, please, please, listen.” (EF.11.P4.137). Further to this, intergenerational programs such as that suggested above could be promoted or held at the forums as research has demonstrated them to be beneficial with regards to both physical and cognitive well-being (Fried et al., 2004). The ability to be able to voice an opinion in an atmosphere where an individual feels safe whilst also having the opportunity to be heard and discover opinions or others appeared to be central to the community forum experience. It may have allowed attendees to feel more included and that their opinion matters but also that they should be open and listen to the opinion of others.

*Forums facilitate empowerment through knowledge*

As the main function of the community engagement forums was to discuss service matters across the city, it was no surprise that participants experienced benefits such as improved understanding and knowledge. This knowledge did however extend beyond those services discussed by commissioners. Attendees would discuss social groups, upcoming events and experiences of navigating services among one another. In response to the world café question of why do you attend these events? A typical common response was “to find out what's going on around the city, the information, what's going on.” (EF.2.P2.62). If individuals were unaware of information they may have been unaware of updates and changes such as bus route alterations. For some individuals this was particularly important as they may not have grown up in the area or may have moved recently:

“I think for me because I came from London to here I didn’t know a lot about the things that were happening. And basically, I've joined the fifty’s forum and I was able to find out a lot about what is happening in the community and talks that they had about how they were going to address say, people, coming from the hospital, how they were going to help them and so on.” (EF.6.P3.125)

Relocating from a different city, or a different country can be a stressful experience hindering social inclusion (Sergeant, Ekerdt & Chapin, 2008). This could be made more stressful if individuals are unaware of where to find information following their move. This need to be informed is strong for those who have relocated and may not know anyone in the new area and thus be at risk of loneliness. Attendees benefit as they are “able to find out a lot” of information from the forums and have a better understanding of procedures and changes to services.

Lifelong residents of the city also saw benefit in the information gained from attending forums:

“P2: I suppose really, it's just a matter of finding out what's out there. What's the… because one day, we might need what these organisations offer for different things.

P3: Yeah, we would.

P4: Because last time I come, there was more emphasis on like home helps and National Health Service and what's available from the National Health Service and that kind of stuff. So, you have to come to more than one to get a broader view.” (EF.1.P4.84-EF.1.P3.87)

Forums allow individuals to identify not only information but also organisations they may “need” later on. Benefits of attending a community engagement forum continue as attendees continue to attend. Different topics and focuses allow for individuals to gain “a broader view” and hold a plethora of information without requirement for good literacy or digital skills that would be required if the same information was provided by brochure or online.

*Forums promote civic responsibility*

Participants shared a strong desire to become a connected community through giving support as well as receiving it. A sense of civic responsibility was evident throughout the discussions, “It’s very important we’re aware of what’s going on out in our communities and how it’s affecting people. And getting involved and supporting people to have a voice as well. It affects us all, doesn’t it? All different ages.” (EF.7.P1.53). There is a desire to be involved and support others, both within the forum and among the wider community. It is recognised that “it affects us all”, the wider community. Civic responsibility may arise due to the “need to be needed” (Erikson, 1968, p. 138) or generativity. Being involved in a connected community may increase individuals’ sense of generativity and social value and improve their experience of ageing. The forums in this sense may help to facilitate active ageing in an inclusive way that empowers each older adult, recognising their sense agency to get as involved in the community as much or as little as they wish.

The fostering of a sense of reciprocity and civic responsibility was not an explicit aim of the forums, however this added value should be recognised and celebrated. There were many people who wanted to actively help and returned to forums, “I mean, I've been a couple of times now, for me it's finding out very much what's going on in our communities and taking it back to the environment where I work and share in, you know?” (EF.7.P2.137). Not only did many attendees return to forums but they would take what they had learned to their respective neighbourhoods. With individuals communicating the information back to their neighbours and friends, the benefits of the forums could extend beyond those attending. This act of passing on information was seen to empower and engage attendees.

Attendees of the new forum, similarly, discussed a desire to be able to get involved and give back to the community. Even during the new forum, participants disclosed how they saw themselves benefitting:

“What I’d like to gain from coming to events like this is people’s ideas that I haven’t thought of. People like yourself who’ve come, and they give us ideas that we, as a group, have not thought of. You can sit at home and never say anything, and then you think to yourself, that’s happened that I've done nothing about it, whereas at least you're doing something about it.” (NF.3.P1.50-52)

*Forums enable the maintenance of a social identity*

This theme was prominent in both forums but manifested in different ways. The forums were experienced as an opportunity to develop friendships and discover new interests, for example, one participant said: “I have discovered and met some wonderful people round this table” (EF.6.P2.163). Social interaction alone is not necessarily beneficial, it is important that the interaction is a positive one as value is placed on the quality rather than merely the quantity of friendships and social interaction (Victor & Yang, 2012). The forums can bring together many people which can aid in tackling the issue of loneliness and social isolation; a topic frequently spoken about:

“I would’ve thought it was good, I mean several people this morning have mentioned about loneliness and isolation which is a big… which is what that [service] is about actually, and coming here you can’t help but bump into people and speak to different people so I would’ve thought it was a good social forum as well.” (EF.5.P3.55)

Rather than being taboo discussion topics, social isolation and loneliness were readily acknowledged by participants. One attendee described the forums as live changing:

“I just think it's changed our lives quite a lot, getting involved with these sort of things. It’s unbelievable the things that you can do. I mean, I even got an interest in Shakespeare and I hadn’t even thought I ever would!” (EF.5.P2.181-EF.5.P2.187)

By attending the forum, new opportunities can be discovered that individuals can get involved in that they previously never would have given a chance. Resistance to change, a lack of confidence and not wanting to engage in new activities, are common in older adults (Murray & Wright-Bevans, 2015). Importantly, high quality social interactions came about through the discovery of new interests such as plays from Shakespeare, these positive social interactions can alleviate feelings of isolation or loneliness and provide an opportunity to reignite forgotten aspects of identity or provide a catalyst for the development of new ongoing interactions or events (Victor & Yang, 2012). These opportunities can lead to the diversifying of social networks, social identity and introduce new connections and information that can be brought back and discussed at further forums and benefit other attendees as well as the wider community.

**Discussion**

Our study is the first to our knowledge to investigate subjective experiences of community consultation specifically in disadvantaged older populations. Our findings showed that community consultation forums provided a catalyst to great active ageing – where active ageing is defined as extended social engagement through later life (World Health Organisation, 2007). These distinctive community consultation forums achieved this through the provision of inclusive social spaces that empowered older adults to voice their concerns collectively. Furthermore, forums acted as a gateway to opportunities to maintain and build social identities whether through adopting civic responsibilities or engaging in social activities. The experience of being able to voice opinions as well as be listened to, highlighted the danger of tokenistic or insincere consultation. Increasingly, services and local authorities are required to consult with community groups before the implementing of major service changes and we champion this move. However, if this task is not undertaken with sincerity and older communities do not feel listened to, our findings suggest that the consultation process may cause more harm than good.

Our findings favour a more critical perspective on the shift towards e-consultation and e-health as appropriate means for engaging current and upcoming cohorts of older adults, particularly in disadvantaged and rural areas. Wilson (2018) argued that there is a fine balance between technology for enhancing social connections and an overdependence which in fact showed to reduce feelings of belonging. Our participants spoke passionately about the need to discover new opportunities in a social forum. The OPEN forums facilitated that through a physical bringing together of older adults, allowing for the gathering of information not only from the service commissioners themselves but also from their peers. Our findings add further weight to the argument that digital technologies are not a generalizable solution to loneliness and social isolation in later life (Matthews, Nazroo & Marshall, 2018).

Civic responsibility was a key theme characterising the participants’ discussions. Forum attendees wanted to contribute and take action in their communities. This capacity for the community consultation forums to enable this may easily be underestimated due to an intuitional lag whereby services and institutions demonstrate practices and values that no longer fit the needs of their changing populations (Hong, Morrow-Howell, Tang & Hinterlong, 2009). This is evident in many older people’s services which remain best suited to a narrative of decline and decay rather than active ageing (Wright-Bevans & Murray, 2018). Though assuming about the nature of active ageing and individuals capacity to age within a narrow definition of that which constitutes ‘active’ is equally damaging (Williams, Higgs, & Katz, 2012), forum facilitators should recognise, value and further explore, the need for civic engagement that many older people want and need in order to age well.

Evidently, the forums played a role in building the capacity to adopt civic responsibilities and have greater involvement in the community. Overall, coming together allowed for a collective effort whereby innovative ideas for community improvement and engagement could arise. Attendees wanted to create change that would benefit both themselves and the wider community.

*Implications for practice*

Scholars should start, if not continue to critically appraise tools for the promotion of active ageing as well as the mechanisms through which they do so. Clearly, as our findings illustrate, community engagement (or giving a voice) is only one part of larger process by which older adults feel they can actively engage and live well in their communities. Practitioners should turn more attention towards older activism and the potential for older activism as well as means of enabling this in a more inclusive way. Studying experiences of community consultation in a disadvantaged area has indicated a desire for increased citizenship, both academics and practitioners need to attend to this desire, what is tells us about ageing well and what opportunities for citizenship might be most empowering and rewarding to those who desire it. Future research should explore this line of enquiry in particular as the literature currently over-relies on studies of activism with those in more advantageous socio-economic, cultural and geographic positions.

*Limitations of the current research*

We did not employ any quantifiable measures through our research design, the inclusion of which may have satisfied those wishing to gain insight into the objective benefits of forum attendance and any measurable differences between the two forums studied. Our interest was however, in understanding the subjective benefits of forum attendance as this was the most obvious and compelling gap in the literature. Furthermore, the use of scales and survey measures may have contaminated the naturalistic nature of the research design.

*Conclusions*

We argue that community consultation forums support an age-friendly community model in a multitude of ways of benefit to individuals, community and society. They offer a strong argument against universal implementation of e-consultation and e-health. Our use of novel world café methodology in this context has allowed us insight into the desire many disadvantaged older adults have to voice their concerns and take action.

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Table one. Questions posed during world cafés

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| --- | --- |
|  | Forum |
| Questions | New | Established |
| 1 | What makes you decide to attend community engagement events like this one? |
| 2 | What would you like to gain from attending these events? | In what ways has this event (and other community engagement events that you have attended) helped or benefited you? |
| 3 | These events aim to provide information about local resources and services. What would you like to see or do more of at these events? | Have these events led you to change anything or discover anything new or different? |
| 4 |  | What would you like to see or do more of at these events? |