Exploring Arts-Based Participatory Research Approaches in Cultural Partnerships with Creative Manchester

Initial Findings and Recommendations (Summary Version)

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Introduction

This short report summarises initial findings from a project titled Exploring Arts-Based Participatory Research Approaches in Cultural Partnerships with Creative Manchester. This project was supported by The University of Manchester's UKRI-Research England Participatory Research fund, and was conducted between December 2023 and July 2024.

This document is a summary version of the full report. The full report, with more detail, is available from Creative Manchester at **www.creative.manchester.ac.uk**.

The aim of this research project was to investigate and evaluate approaches to Arts-Based Participatory Research (ABPR) taking place in cultural partnerships with the University. The focus of the project was on the perspectives and practices of artists and creative professionals involved in ABPR work. In early 2024, following a review of various projects, the research team made contact with three organisations with which ABPR collaborations had been taking place in collaboration with the University since 2019. These organisations were:

Made by Mortals
madebymortals.org

Cartwheel Arts
cartwheelarts.org.uk

Platt Hall
platthall.org

Between March and July 2024, a total of 12 professionals were recruited via these organisations, and invited to take part in this research project. These included a mixture of freelance artists, organisational employees (administrators, project managers, artist-facilitators), and artist-academics, many of whom had multiple roles within their organisations and/or multiple professional identities. Each professional was invited to participate in a creative methods workshop (<1.5 hours) and a semi-structured interview (<60 mins) facilitated by postdoctoral researchers Dr Henry McPherson and Dr Tessa Harris. These activities were used to explore the professionals' approaches, understandings, and perspectives on ABPR within their respective contexts.

> **In the creative workshops, the professionals took part in two exercises: (1) a poetic creative writing exercise, and (2) a sound and memory exercise.**

In the creative writing exercise, the professionals were guided through a mindfulness exercise to think about their embodied experience of conducting ABPR activities in particular workplaces and spaces. During the exercise, the professionals generated poems based on their experience of working in ABPR, and discussed these with the researchers. In the sound and memory exercise, professionals were asked to use aural reflection to consider the sensory and tactile aspects of their work, focussing on the sounds of workplaces and spaces as a starting point. The professionals generated 'sound-maps', featuring words and drawings, which reflected the sensory experiences of their work, before discussing these with the researchers.

Following these workshops, in the semi-structured interviews, the professionals were asked questions about 1) their professional and/or creative background; 2) ABPR project design and roles; 3) ABPR methods; 4) communities and engagement within their work; 5) training and support available to them; 6) the perceived impact and legacy of ABPR projects. The interviews also contained questions devised by the researchers in response to the sound-maps and poems generated in the workshops.

Through the above activities, participants spoke to their experience of identified ABPR projects involving the University, and to the breadth of their professional experience in participatory arts practice and research. The findings presented here emerge from an initial Reflexive Thematic and Narrative Enquiry Analysis of data generated in these creative methods workshops and semi-structured interviews. This document closes with a series of recommendations, based on this analysis, for how the University might best support ABPR projects in the future.

What is
Participatory Research/ABPR?

Participatory research has emerged as a transformative approach to knowledge production, challenging traditional research paradigms by emphasising collaboration, equity, and action-oriented outcomes.

At its core, participatory research seeks to democratise the research process by involving those typically the research subjects as active co-creators of knowledge (Cornwall & Jewkes, 1995). This approach recognises that communities possess valuable expertise from lived experience, which can significantly enhance research's relevance, quality, and impact.

Participatory research can be conceptualised as a family of approaches rather than a single, unified methodology. These approaches share common principles, including:

1. **Collaborative partnership between researchers and community members**

2. **Co-creation of knowledge throughout the research process**

3. **Mutual learning and capacity building**

4. **Action-oriented outcomes that benefit the community**

5. **Reflexivity and recognition of power dynamics**

In the context of the partnerships which are the subject of this project, the participatory approach is exemplified by the collaboration between The University of Manchester and three partner organisations: Made by Mortals, Cartwheel Arts, and Platt Hall. Each partnership is a commitment to co-creation and mutual learning, with each organisation bringing unique creative expertise and community connections to the research process.

Arts-Based Participatory Research (ABPR) represents an innovative convergence of participatory research principles with arts-based inquiry methods. This approach harnesses the arts' expressive, emotive, and communicative power to facilitate participation, deepen understanding, and generate new forms of knowledge. ABPR can be understood as a subset of arts-based research, which Barone and Eisner (2012) define as a methodological approach that uses artistic processes to conduct research and present findings. When combined with participatory principles, arts-based methods become powerful tools for engaging communities, surfacing tacit knowledge, and challenging dominant narratives.

Key characteristics of ABPR include:

1. **Use of artistic media as research tools:** This may include visual arts, performance, music, poetry, storytelling, and other creative forms.

2. **Co-creation of artistic outputs:** Participants are involved in the creative process, often producing artworks that embody research findings or community perspectives.

3. **Emphasis on process and product:** Both the act of creation and the resulting artwork are valued as sources of insight and knowledge.

4. **Multiple modes of knowing:** ABPR recognises and values emotional, embodied, and aesthetic forms of knowledge alongside traditional cognitive understanding.

5. **Accessibility and engagement:** Artistic methods can make research more accessible and engaging for diverse participants, including those who might be marginalised by traditional research approaches.

ABPR offers unique affordances for knowledge exchange. By engaging participants in creative processes, it can draw out tacit, embodied forms of knowledge that might be difficult to articulate through words alone. The resulting artworks and creative outputs can also serve as powerful 'boundary objects' (Star & Griesemer, 1989), facilitating dialogue and understanding across diverse stakeholders. Moreover, ABPR can challenge traditional power dynamics in research by valuing diverse forms of expression and expertise. As Finley (2008) argues, arts-based approaches can 'disrupt the dominant discourse' and create space for marginalised voices and perspectives.

While it has many affordances, ABPR also presents unique challenges. These may include:

- **Balancing artistic and research goals**

- **Ensuring rigour and credibility while embracing creative approaches**

- **Navigating ethical considerations around authorship and representation**

- **Developing appropriate criteria for evaluating arts-based research outputs**

However, despite these challenges, ABPR offers exciting possibilities for enriching participatory research practices. By combining the collaborative ethos of participatory research with the expressive power of the arts, ABPR can generate new insights, foster deeper engagement, and create more accessible and impactful research outputs.

Our creative methods

In this project, we were interested in exploring creative research methods to engage the artistic expertise of the researchers within the data-collection process. We also wanted to provide a generative space for participants to reflect upon their professional creative work.

Overall, we found that our use of creative methods opened up space for the participating professionals to generate unexpected areas of discussion and reflection, prompting meaningful conversation on the sensory and affective aspects of conducting ABPR. The poems and annotated 'sound-maps' produced by participants showed us arenas of inquiry which we would likely not have identified otherwise, while also activating the participants' artistic skillsets, drawing on their expertise as creative professionals.

We found, through discussion, that this way of working corroborated participants' experience of using creative methods themselves – that artistic activities have unique affordances in opening space for critical conversation, enabling qualitatively different kinds of commentary and knowledge generation. These exercises enabled us to think about the working practices of our participants in nonlinear, generative, creative terms.

The professionals' discussion of aesthetic and affective aspects of their working lives and workspaces allowed us to develop a more holistic, embodied, and emplaced understanding of their practice. This was particularly useful given that owing to a compressed project timeline, and some challenges in recruitment, we were unable to conduct observations in this project.

The use of creative methods in this project grounded the research in the sensory, the tactile, and the experiential; through this work, we have come to recognise that artistic methods represent an engaging and effective mode of enquiry, a way of knowing, and stimulating point of connection between academic and professional expertise.

What have we learned?

The sections that follow summarise our initial findings from the analysis of data collected in this project. These sections synthesise perspectives from participants across the three partner contexts (Made by Mortals, Cartwheel Arts, Platt Hall). Quotations are included where possible, to highlight contributions from participating professionals in their own words. To protect the identity of the professionals while maintaining the integrity of our data, wherever practicable we have not linked participant pseudonyms explicitly to specific partner organisations. Instead, professionals are referred to with letters and numbers – i.e. P1, P3, P7.

In the workshops and interviews, professionals talked about the practical, logistical, and ethical challenges and affordances when working with ABPR methods. They reflected on interpersonal as well as interorganisational relationships and processes, commenting regularly on the need for ABPR to serve both the needs and wants of the communities in which it happens. In the sections below, we have focused on four key thematic areas arising from our conversations with the professionals:

- **Participant-centred principles of ABPR**
- **Working with arts-based methods**
- **Cultivating impact through creativity**
- **Resourcing and developing ABPR**

It's about people: participant-centred principles of ABPR

When asked to describe and define creative participation and arts-based participatory research, the professionals' responses coalesced around six common themes. These were indicative both of their experience in conducting ABPR activities, as well as ideals to which they believed participatory research more generally should aspire.

The central aspects of ABPR, as identified by the professionals, are:

1. collaborative enquiry which centres the lived experience of public participants – ideally from planning, through design, to dissemination;

2. which requires meaningful co-productive relationships between researchers and public participants;

3. which has tangible mutual benefit for all stakeholders including public access to research outputs and outcomes;

4. which has transparent, flexible, adaptable project design incorporating time and space for feedback, change, and member-checking;[1]

5. which uses engaging, accessible, collaborative creative research methods and activities leading to co-created outputs;

6. which accommodates of varying degrees and types of input from participants throughout the research process contingent on their needs and capacities.

1. 'Member-checking' is described in Birt et al. (2016) as 'participant or respondent validation', where 'data or results are returned to participants to check to accuracy and resonance with their experiences'.

In general, the professionals strongly emphasised collaboration and equitable contribution from public and academic stakeholders, where possible, at all stages of the research process;

however, they acknowledged this this was not always possible, particularly when organisations did not have existing relationships with specific participant demographics (P1, P8). Strong emphasis was placed on making and doing research 'with' and not 'about' participants. However, some participants problematised the notion of participation in the context of established power imbalances between public participants and institutions conducting research (including Universities and local Government), as in the following quote from P11:

'If you've got a thing and you want people to participate in it, it's still your thing. [...] The principle [...] is about collective working, transparency, collective decision making, sharing, reflecting together and so on. [...] There a whole ethos of working together, collective decision making and so on, but actually there's a whole host of things already in place that are not on the table and non-negotiable. So, I think that where participatory work really works is where those kind of parameters are really clearly understood and shared, and that the space within those parameters is occupied knowingly.' (P11)

As explored further in Section 4, 'meaningful participation' was highlighted as integral to responsible participatory practice, with emphasis placed not only on participants' being able to share their stories, but in having a degree of agency in shaping and feeding into the research process. Professionals also highlighted the

importance of bringing completed creative research outputs back to public participants towards the end of research cycle for feedback and validation, as well as ensuring the accessibility of the research project at large.

According to the professionals, accessibility could be encouraged primarily through (1) clear explanation of research rationale in audience-appropriate language created in dialogue with academic and non-academic stakeholders;[2] (2) transparency around data collection methods, use, and dissemination strategy. This could be realised and enabled by (3) relationships of trust built between arts and cultural organisations and community members.

2. This could be aided through presentation in creative media.

Below are some verbatim descriptions of participatory research as explained by the professionals interviewed in this project.

My understanding of participatory research is that there are people who are being researched, are involved in the making of the research, as well as the data part, as well as the dissemination part. I guess that's the dream isn't it? That it goes from the beginning all the way to the end. (P1)

I think it means – mostly [...] putting people in the middle of whatever you're doing. So the people – in terms of the research [...] you're talking to real people about what needs to be heard, and you're doing it [...] in more of an accessible way, or another way to access; sharing your lived experience that potentially informs something that will make your life better. (P4)

Action, reflection, change. So, the idea, yes, that you do something, that you try it, you have an idea, you work it together, you reflect on it, you tweak it, you try it again and you keep going with that. And the politics of that being that you don't have research subjects. Everyone is an active agent in developing the research and developing the goal of the research, so that you're working to a common goal. (P11)

So, I think, participation, for me, involves, working in a specific context, that you have a kind of understanding of, or a developing understanding of. And the invitation for stakeholder groups, whether that be new co-opted audience or existing audiences into a process of shared investigation, that is ideally mutually beneficial in some way. (P10)

Something that people are actively participating in. So, instead of kind of reading books and researching online, going out and running workshops, talking to people, getting first-hand knowledge from the people who are experiencing whatever it is you are trying to research. Yeah. Basically, just working with people. (P5)

I think, for me, fundamentally for the work that I make, it's the term that I used earlier which is 'lived experience'. So that participation is about creating an authentic story, with people with lived experience, sharing their experiences, to create a story that is based on truth and real life. Real people's experiences. (P6)

The descriptions from the professionals to the left highlight that ABPR should ideally be collaborative, mutually beneficial, flexible, accessible, inclusive, and ultimately participant-centred. In the following sections, we will explore some of the ways in which professionals identified arenas of challenge and reward, in implementing ABPR within their partner contexts.

It's engaging: working with arts-based methods

Encouraging communication and self-expression

> Interviewees reported that implementing arts-based methods in participatory research can open up rich space for discussion, reflection, and thinking for public participants.

The professionals echoed Helen Kara's (2020) summary of the affordances of creative and artistic research methods, reporting that the use of tactile, sensory, performative and other ABPR strategies can open channels of communication which might be less immediately accessible via alternative qualitative means. They commented that arts-based activities can encourage 'a freedom [...] which allows people to express themselves in other ways than perhaps they would do otherwise' (P9), offering 'a different way to engage [...] which isn't just coming in, asking some questions, giving them a voucher, and [leaving]' (P4).

Referring to the process of co-creating a fictional character with participants for a developing audio-story, P2 described how they thought challenging conversations can become easier when it's 'about a fictionalised character' rather than being about participants themselves. Co-creating an avatar through theatrical workshops

can enable participants to share their lived experience at relative distance, speaking 'onto' a created person, which can help to mitigate feelings of vulnerability, while critically maintaining the integrity of participants' stories.

I think it does start a lot of, discussion and, opens people up to talk about things they might not necessarily speak about, through the vehicle of the character that we've created. [...] In the art, because they're not necessarily [...] in place where they have to relate it to themselves and share their own experiences. they can kind of pin it on to that character and suggest, oh, they [the character], might feel this or they might feel a lot, yeah. I feel like we have the distance that the art gives them a little bit. (P2)

The collaborative dynamics of shared creative activity were also highlighted by P4, who felt they could elicit 'more detailed information' from participants in creative work 'because you're creating an environment where everybody owns what's being said' (P4). For P4, employing engaging creative methods allowed for a democratisation of conversation, a sense of shared ownership, and a pooling of experience; they reflected that participants 'might be more open and honest about what you need to know, because we're creating an environment that feels like they're getting something back from giving it out' (P4). This spoke to the perceived 'in the moment' impact of taking part in creative activities for participants (see also next section), and highlighted the principle of mutually beneficial activity.

P1 discussed how, in addition to creating a democratised space for sharing experience, the co-creative dynamics in ABPR can also create friction, particularly when stakeholders disagree or have competing interests. Referring to a project involving multiple academic, public and voluntary sector stakeholders, they describe how a co-created output ultimately felt like it didn't quite 'fit for everybody', describing skill of balancing voices within the co-creative process itself as an 'art'.

It feels like there's quite different interests in how we move [outputs] forward. And they almost like different elements of what we've created. And it's almost like, you know, this group wants to take this over here and this group wants... So I think it's created a really rich piece that speaks to a wide variety of stakeholders. But it's taken a long time, it's gone through many different versions. And in a sense what we've ended up with doesn't quite fit for everybody. You know, one bit fits more for this group and one bit fits more for this group. And so moving forward we've even talking about whether, you know, we could sell it. This way over here and this way over here. So I think, that's the disadvantage isn't it, of having lots of voices and really wanting to give space to lots of feedback and opinion, and co-creation. Yeah, it can become just... And who do you listen to and who don't you listen to? If there's contradictory opinions, who do you go with. There's the art of that, as well. (P1)

However, P1 also reflected on the capacity of ABPR methods to allow scope for change and reassessment. For P1, the inherent flexibility of collaborative creative processes could enable conversations to move in multiple directions.

Freeing through doing

Interviewees described how unexpected areas of discussion can also arise through conversation which takes place over materials (i.e. working with clay, drawing) while the hands are occupied, during artistic activities which prompt sensory (as well as reflective) engagement with different topics, and through the dynamics of collaboration. P3 offered that artistic methods create an 'other space' which offers a means for facilitators and researchers to avoid 'direct confrontation' by 'working side by side' with participants in shared activity:[3]

'it's that, you know, no direct eye contact, you're working, you're busy with your hands. There's that ability to zone out of that a little bit and be a bit freer. [...] there is that other space that's created in that, as you say, busy hands work really'

They also described the positive experience of participants creating an artwork together as an engaging way of synthesising their lived experience –

> *a nice, collective way of forming and collecting little bits of information and bringing them together to make a bigger thing.*
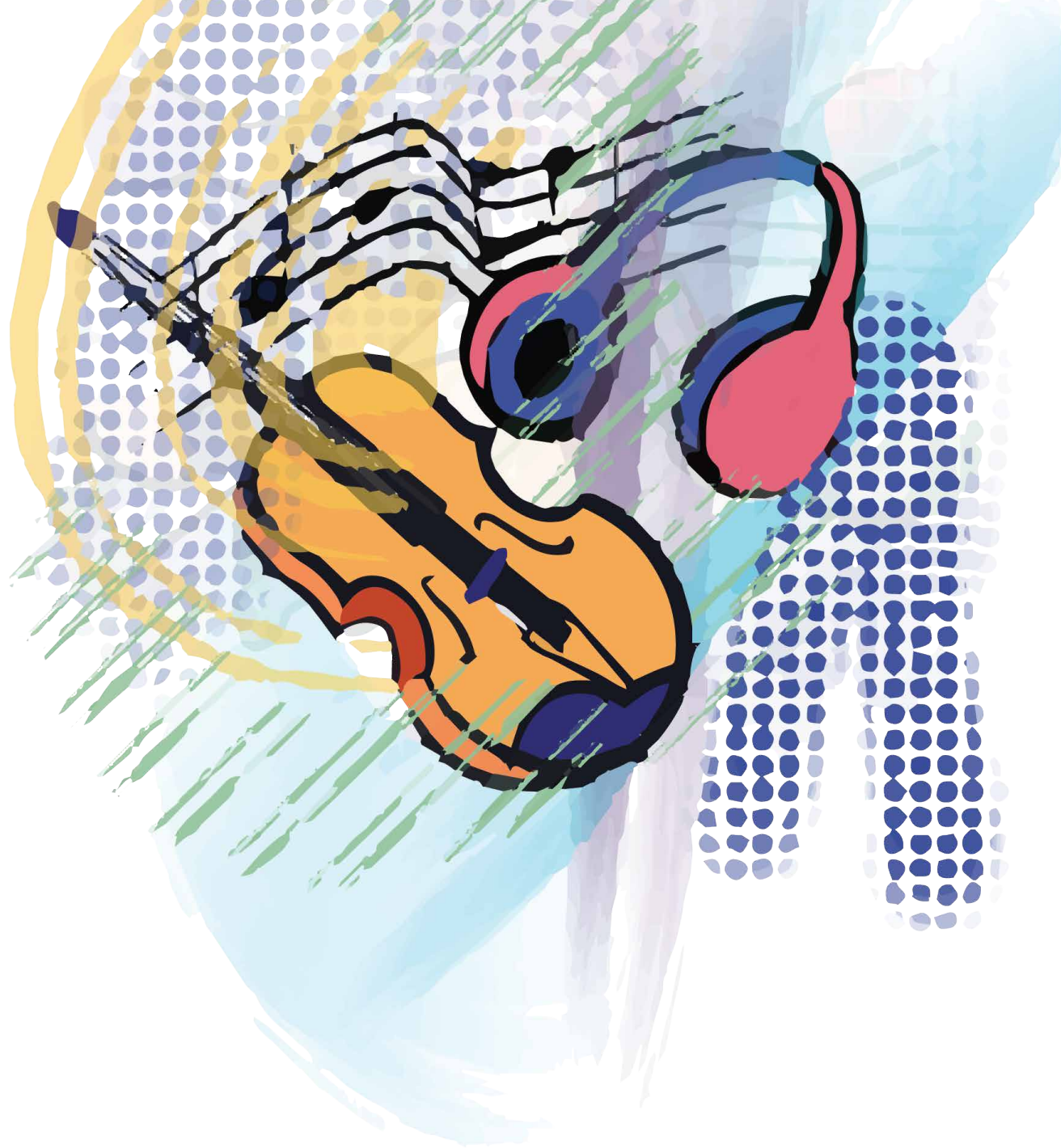
> The 'other space' afforded by artistic methods, in which public participants can be 'a bit freer', can also represent an effective medium to communicate complex research topics.

P8 identified that arts organisations and professionals have an essential role in participatory research partnerships through their ability to render research topics into accessible, audience-appropriate media via aesthetic, embodied, and creative means. P2 described how engaging with creative audiovisual media can allow participants to 'unpack' and 'discuss things that might be quite

difficult to hear', reflecting that they 'feel sort of empowered to explore through [...] unpacking what they've heard in the work'. Methods such as drawing, animating, recording, or filming (for example) can make abstract concepts or research questions more concrete for public participants through visual, aural, performative, or other creative representation across multiple sensory domains. This can provide an effective point of access into topics for public participants who are experts by experience, but may not necessarily be familiar with specific academic terminology, thereby enhancing informed communication and reflection.

3. P3 also highlighted the need to factor diverse mobility and dexterity needs of participants when planning practical or 'hands-on' workshops.

To combat the above, P5 emphasised that artists' facilitation skills are key in enabling public participants to feel comfortable, in addition to effective communication (on the part of researchers) around the expectations of the research activity. P3 emphasised the need for 'good quality [artistic] materials' to be used in workshops, to avoid 'setting people up to fail' in creative activities from the outset.

These reflections highlight the importance of involving knowledgeable artist-professionals – who are experienced in working in community – within ABPR projects, those who are able to identify need, build relationships, and encourage engagement through skilled facilitation.

Skilled Facilitation

Kara (2020) notes that some participants in arts-based research methods 'may be reluctant [to take part] because they fear that their skills are inadequate, or some may dislike taking part in activities involving creation or improvisation' (p.103). This sentiment was expressed in interviews with P5 and P3, who noted that confidence, perceptions of competency, as well as the idea that art is 'for children', can sometimes be a barrier to public participant engagement in arts activities.

Reflecting on challenges in facilitating paint and sculpture-based workshops, P5 commented:

people sometimes have a perception of art as 'art's for children'. And then, when you're trying get adults to come to do it you go 'no it's not for kids. The kids can go and do something else. This is for adults'. They're very confused, and they're trying to bring their children and go and get them to do it. It's quite difficult, sometimes, to engage people. [...] Also we find barriers: people who've been told at school that they're rubbish at art.

You get that loads, people going, well I can't take part, my teacher failed me at art, I'm awful at it, I can't possibly, I'm terrible at art. And they come in with this preconception that they've got to be able to paint a masterpiece and that's what art is. So, I think people's perceptions of what art is versus what it is can be very different. So, sometimes, just getting people to give it a go and realize that, actually, what they did at school is completely different and anyone can do what we're doing. It's just their own interpretation. I think people can create barriers for themselves without realizing. (P5)

It makes a difference: cultivating impact through creativity

'The act of creation, and our appreciation of it, provides an individual experience that can have positive effects on our physical and mental health and wellbeing'

(APPG on Arts, Health, and Wellbeing, 2017, p.10)

The value of taking part

Multiple professionals foregrounded the capacities of artistic methods to create tangible outputs as well as a perceived 'in the moment' impact for participants. They perceived impact for public participants at a range of levels, from immediate impact of taking part in creative activities – including participants 'feeling valued' (P1) and empowered by taking part in the participatory research process – to longer term impact, such as participants' seeing creative outputs 'affect positive change' more widely in different sectors such as 'research and in public services' (P9).

P1 remarked on the 'joyous' feeling of bringing a creative output back to participants towards the end of the research cycle, highlighting that

participants felt valued within the research process by seeing their contributions reflected in a completed creative output which they had helped to shape. P6 and P9 also perceived an empowering impact for participants in co-creating creative outputs which were of high 'production value', something highlighted by P9 and P1 as an essential component of their creative methodology.

And it's joyous to take it back. I've been involved in a few of those sessions now, where we just took the community champions' work back to them, two or three weeks ago. And they were just like, ah! It's so so good! And they were like, the fact that it sounded so professional. It made them feel really valued. It made them feel like their role was really valued. [...] That's one of the words that one of our [participants] [...] said 'we felt smart, we felt clever, we felt like we were researchers too'. So it's that real sense of empowerment, that their voices matter, that their experiences matter. Especially as all the work we create really is with minority groups within society. So giving, and seeing that they see that they've been heard. And then seeing that on social media. (P1)

[...] suddenly it's this piece of art that is using their words. You can see this pride, that they take in hearing

that, because they came up with it [...] I really love being in those initial workshops, when they're coming up with things. I just love how you're going in with a blank page, and you come out with a story. And I just love listening to people share, you know, talking and getting something out of [it]... I suppose it's almost a validation isn't it. Like, they do take something from sharing their story (P6)

As in the quotes above, the perceived impact for public participants not only relates to the creation of disseminable outputs, but also to the act of participating and the process of co-creating. In addition to mentioning the capacity of arts-based methods to 'take [participants] away from their day-to-day worries and stresses', P5 highlighted positive impact when participants were involved in crafting objects 'that they can take home, that they can place. Create something personal that they can have. Or something for their space at home to make it a bit more personal' (P5). P3 also identified crafting and keeping art-objects as a way of acknowledging participants' contributions: 'So there was some kind of creative output and that felt quite important to kind of say, thank you for your time. Here's something that you've made that you can take away with you.' (P3)

Meaningful participation

Acknowledging that there is benefit for participants in feeling validated through sharing their stories, several professionals also expressed the need for participatory research to be 'meaningful' beyond the act of sharing lived experience. P11 placed emphasis on framing and developing projects around topics of intrinsic importance to public participants' lives, describing how a toy-focused animation-based project with school children was conceived in part as a way of 'validating their precious things, which might not be valuable in a museum or in financial terms [...] but actually are hugely valuable [to them]' (P11). P2 expressed that participatory projects need to centre the needs and experiences of participants, when such projects directly concern participants lives, 'making sure that they've got a voice in the research that's ultimately going to impact them'. (P2)

P9 described how, in addition to incentivising public participation through vouchers, they emphasised to participants that through taking part in a project, they could 'be part of something that can affect positive change in research and in public services – is hopefully the end game – so they know that their participation is meaningful' (P9). This indicated that, for P9, prospective long-term impact, and tangible change, was engaged as a motivator for participants to take part. However, they also commented that, in their view, it was not the responsibility of their organisation, within the context of their role in the research partnership, to 'track impact', describing their work instead as a 'catalyst' and as a 'facilitator for change':

'We're that middle person, so a researcher, or an organisation will come to us and say 'we want to get this insight.' [...] And we'll go and say 'right, we can help you do that because we've got networks with these and these people, we'll create this high quality art, we'll get loads of insight for you along the way, and the how you use that is kind of up to you, and we can help you with that'. (P9)

P3 highlighted the transactional relationships of participatory research, noting that while participants should be made aware of anticipated research outputs, and prospective material experiential benefit from taking part in activities, participation fundamentally needs 'to be meaningful to people'. They described need for flexibility, adaptability, and change across the research process, through dialogue with different stakeholders, to balance the goals of the research project with ensuring ongoing enjoyable participant involvement. In their project, they noted:

I found that there was a lot of scope for having some kind of ability to change things, look at things and think about things. And we kind of did a session, and in the next planning meeting it was like, oh this could be better. So there was quite an evolution of how the sessions were put together. I was aware of, again, there was discussions between the researchers and the artists about how, are we going to get what we need? But, also, is it going to be enjoyable for the people. Is it also going to be the participants are going to feel like they've contributed and enjoyed what they've done, really. (P3)

P6's comments suggest that participatory project design ought not only to be adaptive – with capacity for change – but reflexive, to ensure that there is ongoing assessment of the balance between research aims and meaningful participant engagement.

P11 reflected that this requires, on the part of research teams, an approach to 'taking risk' and 'owning failure' through 'trying things, and then trying them again, and analysing them and working out what went right and what went wrong'. They described how an acknowledgement of change and failure can feel like an impediment when attempting to showcase best practice in grant applications.

P8 strongly emphasised 'meaningful participation' beyond the idea of participants' sharing experience, in terms of degrees of power and agency for participants within the research process. When prompted to define 'meaningful participation', they responded:

Ideally you're obviously listened to and your ideas are heard, that you're definitely able [to see] that your contribution has been has been tangible and it's been reflected back to you, so you recognize it within the work. [...] a sort of reciprocal relationship, so I'm giving this and I'm getting that. And you can see the benefit of what you've done at the end. And certainly, with the bare minimum, it's reported back to you what happened and where it's been and how it's all worked. I think those are definite. I think it needs to be something that's beyond just your kind of data, or your story. I feel like it needs to be, you know, you need to be going along as an expert in some way and giving over those expertise [...] And then that you have some power in it, as well, I think. Some sort of power. You don't have to be the most powerful person in the project, but you certainly have to be able to have some sort of power over what happens. (P8)

P8 also emphasised that participants' expertise encompasses their 'enthusiasm and humour and creativity' as 'valuable additions' to a project,

and that recognising this means their involvement can move 'beyond just their experiences' to generate a more 'equitable process between themselves and the research teams'. They advocated that the creativity and enthusiasm of participants is essential to the ethos of creative participatory practice, concluding that 'you can't run participatory research projects without those things'. They also expressed scepticism regarding mutual understandings of 'meaningful participation' between academics and members of the public:

'I think the problem is a lot of researchers would tick the box participation when it's, but there's no sense of how meaningful that participation has been. So, it might be quite a different story if you ask the person who participated how they would phrase that.' (P8)

These comments speak broadly to the person-centred values which underpin the practice of professionals across all the partners in this project. For all interviewees, maintaining focus on the benefit for public participants in taking part in participatory research, was a central priority. The above reflections detail how arts-based methods can engage and empower public participants across long- and short-term timescales through tangible creative outputs as well as in the moment impact; however, they also highlight that project designers must ensure that participation remains 'meaningful' for public participants by reflexively adapting their activities based on input from all stakeholders, in particular from public perspectives.

It has challenges: resourcing and developing ABPR

Professionals were asked to reflect upon the benefits, as well as barriers to engagement and challenges, in undertaking arts-based participatory research work. Reward was identified both in terms of perceived positive impact for public participants (as in the section above), as well as personal and intrinsic reward for professionals conducting the work. For example, P3 described their recent experience of arts-based participatory practice as 'just really worthwhile work' while identifying it as 'a big feat to be involved in' with 'a lot of logistical challenges that were quite interesting but good learning opportunities' (P3). P10 highlighted 'relationship building' and running workshops as being the most rewarding for them professionally as an artist-academic, highlighting 'I find it much more rewarding to work in collaboration with other people [who are not academics]' (P10).

> **Challenges were identified by professionals broadly across seven interconnected areas:**
>
> 1. finance;
> 2. ethics;
> 3. project timescales;
> 4. relationships;
> 5. space and time;
> 6. accessibility;
> 7. and recruitment of public participants.

These have been condensed in the following sections.

Resources: Finance, Time, and Space

Financial precarity was highlighted as a common barrier to engaging public participants, largely concerning the need to appropriately remunerate participants for their time taking part in ABPR, but also when working with vulnerable or marginalised groups.

I think for me, one of the biggest moments was ... when someone said to me, thank you for sharing the budget. 'Thank you for being really honest about how much money there is.' And it was really powerful. She was just like, 'this doesn't happen much...' She's a amazing community connector. And she she's been in she's gets asked to be in pieces of work all the time. And it's never paid for it. (P12)

I think some of the barriers, that people face, can be transport [and we do] try where we can to accommodate people with that. So if people are struggling with transport, due to their injury or illness, what kind of step in and try and get them a taxi. But we get we only know to do that if people kind of speak to us about it but obviously, not everybody feels comfortable with that. Like the demographics we work with might not necessarily be comfortable with that, like, the older generation might not feel comfortable asking. For something like that. They, they might feel some, shame around maybe the money side of it. (P2)

Sometimes it'd just be money – 'I can't come because I can't afford the bus', or 'I haven't eaten today so I can't come.' Yeah, so we'd face those sorts of things, too. (P4)

Beyond the creative or expressive benefit of taking part in arts-based activities, several participants highlighted the need to incentivize participation in order to 'respect people's contributions financially' (P4), emphasising that public participants are experts through lived experience, and should be appropriately compensated.

Reflecting on the processes of research funding and grant-writing, P8 felt that University funding processes and timelines were not always conducive to effective participatory practice, nor always supportive for arts organisations. Rather they 'steer[ed]' towards 'the traditional way' of doing research,[4] and 'forc[ed]' people into that space'.

P8 described their experience of funding processes as one of 'navigating', and expressed a desire to move from a feeling of 'how can we navigate this process in order to do what we want to do' towards 'how is this process set up to help us to do what we want to do'. For a more responsible and engaged participatory model, in which multiple academic and non-academic stakeholders 'work together to solve [...] problems' through an approach which is 'active', 'collaborative' and 'equitable', they expressed that more dedicated funding for participatory activities (including PPIE) would be beneficial. This conversation revolved around a perceived need to review, simplify, and streamline funding processes to better support non-academic partners.

'Finding spaces that aren't really expensive as well! Like [...] I'd rather use my budget to get people to come than to pay astronomical amounts for spaces. So, access to spaces and, also, sometimes you just gotta do what you gotta do and you've got to be able to make the space work. So we've been in environments where there's other loud things going on around you, but you've just gotta facilitate in a way or think on your feet to make the space work' (P4)

Finding appropriate spaces to conduct participatory activities was also highlighted as a barrier to engaging with public participants by several professionals. As in the above quote from P4, balancing participant remuneration against finding appropriate and financially viable spaces for facilitation was noted as a consideration within project budgets. Many spaces used by professionals for participatory activities were multi-use/ multi-purpose community spaces, and while these had affordances in terms of their familiarity for participants and situation within community, at times this caused problems for facilitation (due to issues such as noise-bleed and interruptions), access (due to travel distances for participants, and inaccessible venues), and efficiency (due to time spent arranging and setting up space for participatory activities).

P5 expressed having faced 'issues before where people just can't get there.' (P5), while also highlighting that clashes with participant childcare or other domestic commitments during daytime sessions can form a barrier to engagement. This point was echoed by several other participants, who also identified that timing research activities appropriately (for example, not during school collection times) was essential. P4 and P7 commented on the value of providing consistent group sessions or activities for participants outside of specific research project contexts, noting that this improved the possibility of participants attending sessions where short-term engagement might not be possible.

'I work heavily with our regular participants. and they, they come for the joy of it. They're happy to work on social issues and they're happy to give their pennies worth. But it is always very essential to try and not traumatize them. I think is the truth. and keep it light and fun in many ways. But then sometimes I find that it is a lot easier way to approach the slightly heavier subjects is that they actually share more when they feel more safe.' (P7)

P3 expressed in their experience of recent participatory workshops in community halls that there were 'a lot of issues around mobility, getting access to places, getting access to just pavements and things like that to, you know, to get to cultural assets' (P3), while also noting that some hired spaces were inappropriate or unequipped for certain participatory arts activities (such as working with clay and sculpture). P3 also reflected upon the 'physicality' of different spaces, the layout of rooms and their architectural affordances, and how these might impact the qualities of participants' verbal contributions during arts-based activities. They described how a 'more elongated' setup to allow 'pockets of conversation' might conduce more intimacy and conversation with participants that 'could happen without everybody hearing it', encouraging participant engagement.

P3 also noted that on one occasion, in a larger space where the group were all together and all conversation was audible, they felt that the initially 'negative tone' of one participant had impacted contributions from other members of the group. P3 highlighted that familiar room layouts in community venues can be an affordance for participants in providing a sense of safety and encouraging them to share:

if they have rooms and spaces and table setups that they're very used to, then it feels like that's easiest for them to access it, a little bit, but harder for us to, perhaps, go around and speak to people or try and move: you know [but] you want people to feel comfortable and okay to share, and feel safe and secure in what they're doing. So, I guess familiarity aids that a little bit. (P3)
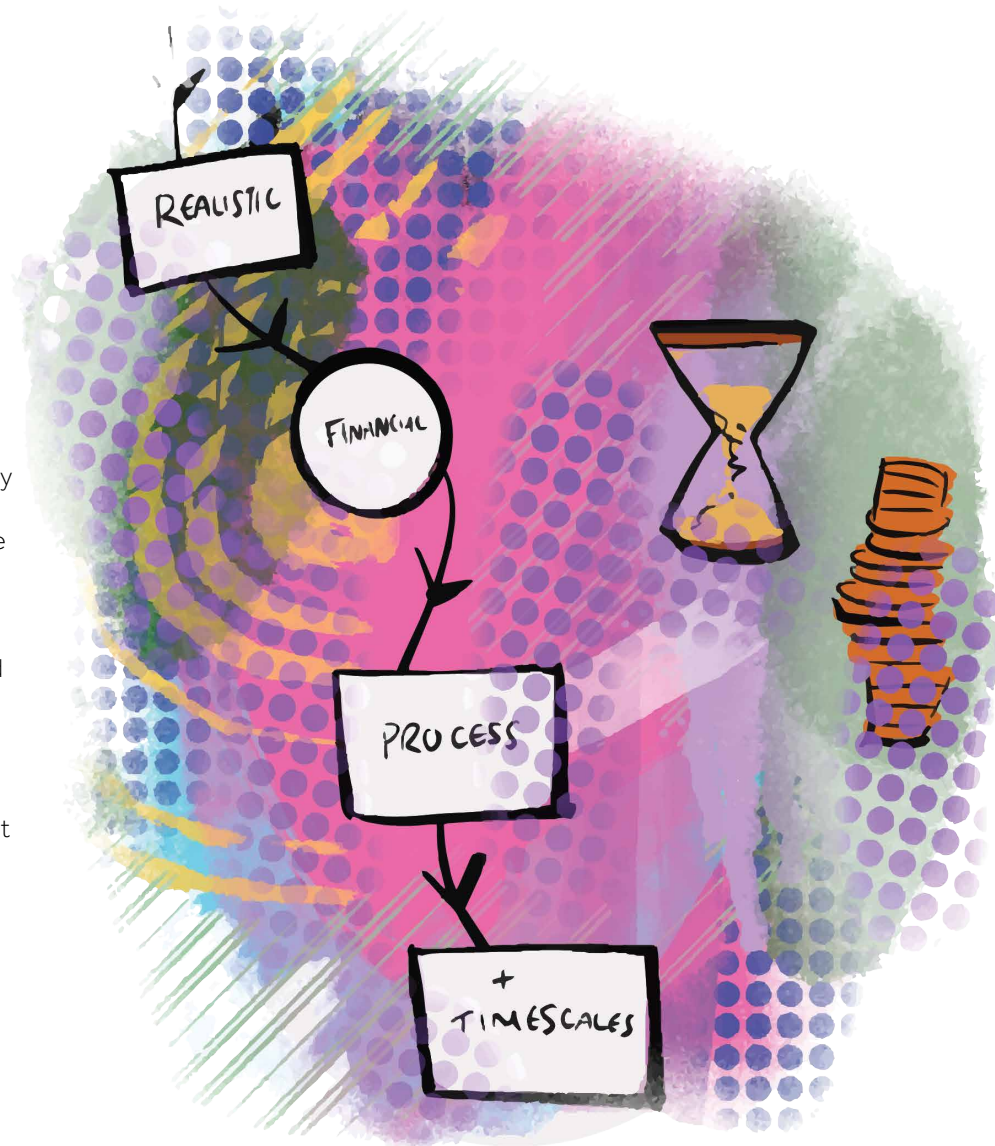
P6 commented on their experience of running participatory sessions in venues at the University, that the allocated space was not set up appropriately before the session, resulting in their having to 'spend an hour or two moving furniture, rather than rehearsing, because the space was being used for something else [before]', acknowledging 'it's a much bigger pond than just the task that you're doing' (P6). They also noted they were unable to view the space beforehand owing to the fact it was booked for seminars, meaning they were unable to identify this issue ahead of time.[5] P4 and P10 commented on leading participatory workshops in and with schools, that finding 'appropriate space, as well as enough room' (P4) was very challenging, as was ensuring sufficient time to undertake activities because

'the actual time you have with them is really short, so it often has to take place within a single lesson allocation' (P10).

Processes

Some participants highlighted that the University's procedures and internal processes caused delays and challenges in their work. P10 expressed that the university's ethics procedure had been an explicit 'barrier to engagement' in their recent arts-based participatory project, citing the length of time for committee reviews, and number of rounds of review as a problem. They also received questions relating to creative and participatory methodologies which 'didn't seem to be related to ethics', causing confusion and 'upset'.

The extended timescale for review led to concerns about having to cancel planned activities with multiple non-academic stakeholders at very short notice (one or two days), which they felt risked damaging established relationships. They advocated that improved guidance for academics on completing the ethical review process for participatory projects would be useful, highlighting the need 'to speak to somebody at the early stage of any project, and at project design'. They also indicated that ensuring that ethical committee members had an improved understanding of creative methods and ABPR research strategies would be beneficial.

P8, who has been involved in grant-writing in collaboration with the University, also identified that the speed of University processes can risk detrimental impact on relationships with different (public) stakeholders. Reflecting on funding and financial processes, they commented:

[...] it is crazy. The amount of time things take. Like, even to get the money and for people to get paid and all of this stuff. That really makes it hard work, I think, in terms of that. And it has this stop-start-y thing, doesn't it? You know, we're having conversations with people but we know, realistically, we might not be able to work with them for two years because it's going to take two years to get the funding for that in to place. (P8)

P6 echoed P8 observations, comparing the larger organisational structure of the University to the smaller arts organisational team. They weighed the benefit of academic resources and expertise against frustration at bureaucratic processes which can impede or slow down tangible action.

I think, the issue with working with any large institution is always that the kind of hoops that they have to jump through, you know. When you're working with a small team like ours, you can get to the top person and be like, can we do this or not. Whereas with the university, or somewhere like that, when there's been decades of established practice it's like, sometimes it's like pulling teeth isn't it. There's so much bureaucracy and what have you that it makes quite straightforward things, to the average artist, really frustrating. So that's that, I suppose. But then, at the same time, you know, they come with all of their experience and their approaches to, you know, methods and what have you. And I suppose there's often a lot of resources there too, that are helpful. And previous contacts. But, I think, the rules, the kind of cans and can't dos, can sort of get in the way of making things happen, creatively. (P6)

Balancing Research Priorities

The sensitivity of topic areas and research questions often addressed by participatory research projects (such as domestic violence and abuse), was highlighted explicitly by P6, P5, and P1 as a barrier to engaging within communities in which such topics might be taboo. Better cultural literacy was identified as a skill-need for professionals to engage hard-to-reach and underrepresented communities. P9 also highlighted the challenge, for facilitators, in sensitively navigating complex topics with vulnerable groups, reflecting that:

'it can be difficult, sometimes, because we do work on a lot of heavy topics, emotionally heavy topics. [...] The people that we often work with have been deeply affected by some of the challenges that they face, and when you're a facilitator, you're not a therapist, but it can feel like that sometimes, and you do have a weight of responsibility that you can feel, sometimes. [...] So that is a challenge to deal with that, I guess. Or not deal with it, because that sounds too confrontational, but to understand that that is part of it and have your own way of coping with that [...] I guess that that's a challenge' (P9)

Numerous professionals interviewed came from professional backgrounds in person-centred practices, including psychotherapy and counselling. A sensitive approach to engaging participants when dealing with potentially traumatic topics was essential to enable effective and responsible ABPR. P10 commented, for example, reflecting on the 'playful' aspect of some arts-based practice, that playfulness is not appropriate 'when you're dealing with objects with violent histories', such as those with colonial legacies. P7 described their role as a 'cog in the middle' of their organization. As the main point of contact for every participant in their engagement groups, they maintain stable continuous relationship across time and projects for various participants. P7's organisation has committed recourses and organised its structure in such a way that participants in their work have a single point of contact, which facilitates transparency and trust.

When asked what support and training was available to professionals, P3 and P5 (both freelancers) identified that support had been available to them through the arts organisation they worked for, including discussion and debriefing before and after participatory sessions, particularly with regards to working with children and young people. P5 highlighted also the role of emotional wellbeing co-ordinators, with whom they worked in pairs on their project, who supported the emotional needs of participants. They also indicated support from the pastoral and support role of professionals such as teachers (when working in school environments), as well as researchers within wider project teams. P11 noted that creative activities in their project were also facilitated by a two-person team, including someone whose role was primarily to support participants.

Regarding sensitivity, P1 noted that high-stakes or sensitive topics do not always correlate with an unwillingness to talk (on the part of participants), particularly in the context of group participatory activities – 'there are people who are just absolutely ready to tell you everything, from the beginning'. P1 reflected that in addition to being able to 'draw people out', a core part of the artists' facilitatory role in participatory contexts therefore was 'slowing [these people] down, and really making sure' they understood and consented to how their experience would be represented, and ultimately disseminated, through the project's creative outputs. This comment emphasised that the interpersonal skills of artist-facilitators are important in supporting participant wellbeing and ensuring ongoing informed consent.

P7 highlighted the tension, at times, between arts organisations' responsibility to their community participants and the needs or motivations of particular research projects, commenting that researchers had, in previous collaborations, been interested in asking questions or bringing new concepts to the group that caused the members of that group discomfort. They noted '[we] didn't want to put ideas in their heads or scare them' (P7). P1 emphasised the 'duty of care' to public participants involved in research activities as being the primary priority for their organisation.

Reflecting on the role of non-academic partners in research projects, P9 talked about the need for organisations to filter, and feedback upon, proposed research activities which might not meet the needs of public participants. They advocated the need for non-academic partners 'to be flexible, and ethical, and honest, and not pretend to do things we can't', and advocated the need to 'point [researchers] in different directions' (P9) when the research was not serving the needs of their communities. This comment highlighted the importance of arts and cultural sector partners' shaping and feeding into the research design throughout the research cycle, in dialogue with academic partners, based on their (often) long-term relationships with public participants and community groups.

Accessibility and Understanding

Several professionals also highlighted the inaccessibility of research-oriented language as a barrier to engagement for public participants. As articulated in the quote below from P3, they advocated for better tailoring of research-oriented language to different stakeholder audiences involved in participatory work, emphasising interpersonal 'human-to-human' relationships:

Just art with a capital A can be scary for participants, let alone 'creative engagement', 'everyday participation'. Using all those terminologies that, research based [sic], really have depth and meaning. But to people who are trying perhaps just to do some art and look at their wellbeing in a session, that's a bit too much in terms of that, as you say, actual human to human interaction. So, I think there is something there about [...] accessibility of language is obviously a huge barrier in terms of what can be said. [...] So, I think there is a lot there about language and how to, sort of, different layerings of it, I guess, in terms of what a participant might take from that, what an artist might take from that and what a researcher might take from that. (P3)

P3 suggested that a glossary of terms, bringing together different definitions of identified research topics from the perspectives of public, artists, and academics, would be beneficial to bridge any language barriers at the early stages of participatory projects; this has implications not only for public accessibility, but also for other stakeholders (funders, academic collaborators).

Issues with language were highlighted not only in relation to public participation, but also regarding relationships between academic and non-academic research partners during project planning. P8 commented on their experience of misunderstandings around the term 'ethics', as having a distinct meaning within the University, and the term 'ethical' as referring broadly to person-centred or demographic-appropriate practices within participatory arts. This, at times, caused stumbling blocks when designing participatory research projects with academic partners in preparation for grant applications.

'What's difficult is – it's fine if it's between you and a researcher or somebody you know fairly well, but let's say it's a very tentative early relationship, the wrong language can be used and suddenly people think, oh no, this isn't what I'm thinking it is. And oh no, that's not what I thought it was. And a potential collaboration becomes off the table because there's been a misunderstanding through the use of language.' (P8)

As reflected also in the previous quote from P3, P8 identified a 'language barrier' with 'stark difference' between researcher and artistic perspectives on and definitions of participatory practice. They referenced the 'defined understanding of what involvement, engagement, and participation means' from the perspective of research councils, as something which 'wouldn't necessarily fit with an artist's understanding of what those words mean'. However, they described that through positive collaboration experiences with researchers the University, they had become more comfortable, and had learned to 'speak the lingo' 'between the two worlds'.

Recommendations

Based on our analysis at this stage of our research, we have compiled a set of recommendations on how the University might better support arts and cultural organisations, artist-academics, as well as individual arts-professionals, within ABPR partnerships. Our recommendations are:

1.

Develop arts-based participatory partnerships which value creative expertise.

Arts-based participatory methods have unique affordances in enabling participation, encouraging communication, and accessing expert participant lived experience. Creative activities can afford a non-confrontational space for data-collection and elicit detailed responses from participants which might not emerge through other qualitative means. However, skilled facilitation from experienced artists is needed to ensure accessibility, transparency, and responsibility within ABPR work. We recommend that the University supports and resources expert arts practitioners and organisations, to ensure research outcomes best serve participant communities, and to produce engaging research outputs.

2.

Provide more opportunities for academic and non-academic stakeholders to meet and share ABPR knowledge.

All interviewees spoke to the value of being involved in ABPR, in terms of perceived impact for public participants, and for their own practice. However, a 'language barrier' was identified between arts/cultural sector and academic perspectives on participatory practice. More opportunities to meet, network, share experience, and develop understanding between researchers and arts professionals would therefore be beneficial, to improve communication and foster effective collaboration.
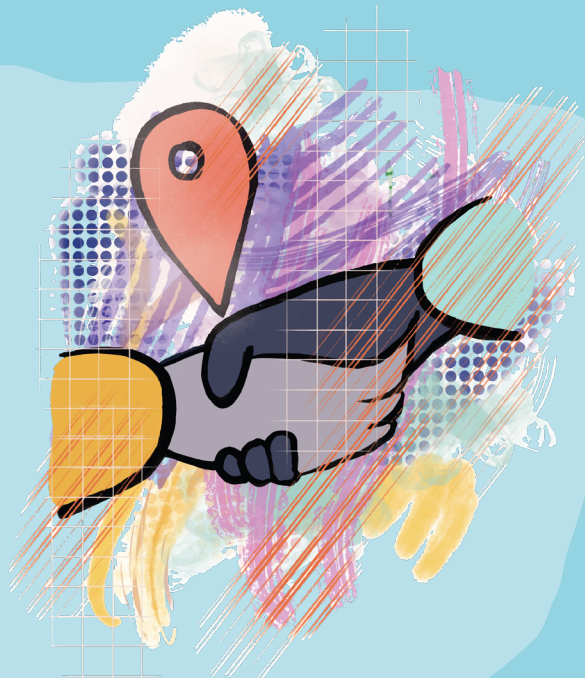
3.

Provide support and training for creative professionals wishing to engage in ABPR

Few interviewees said that they had done any specific training oriented towards participatory research methodologies. Several expressed that they had undertaken training in community arts practices or had pursued self-directed training in skills such as community facilitation, EDI awareness or mental health first aid. Training and guidance in participatory research methods, delivered by the University, would be of interest to some participants as professionals. However, we recommend that any such training be framed as enhancing the existing skills and expertise of artists acquired through professional practice.
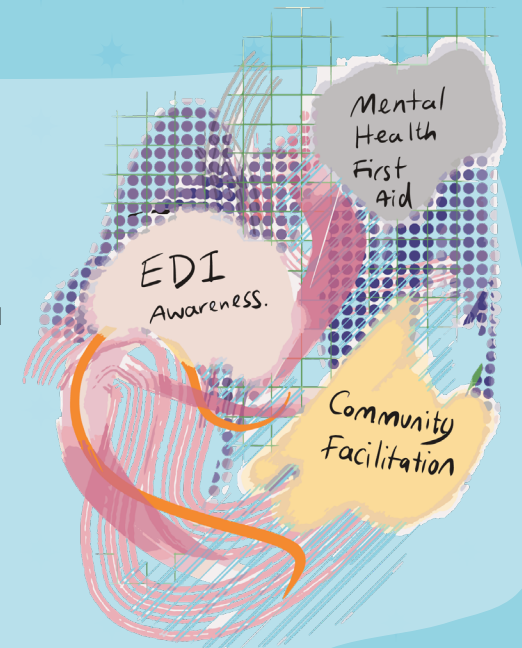
4.

### Consult with organisations to identify logistical support for ABPR activities

Finding dedicated space to undertake ABPR activities was highlighted as an arena of challenge by interviewees. Particularly when working with sound or musical methods, issues such as noise-bleed and interruptions were noted as problematic, as well as more general issues of venue-accessibility. Offering dedicated spaces and logistical support for organisations to undertake arts-based participatory research activities could therefore be beneficial in improving participant access to and engagement with research. However, interviewees stressed the importance of participants feeling ownership of the spaces, enhancing communication and knowledge exchange. Institutional settings can feel exclusionary, and travel costs are a barrier. Further consultation with non-academic partners is recommended to address space needs and prioritise participant access.

5.

Enhance project guidance and procedures to accommodate the reflexive scope of ABPR methodologies

Flexibility, adaptability, and reflexivity in project design and participatory activities were identified as crucial for effective research and 'meaningful participation'. However, several participants questioned whether University processes might limit this flexibility, particularly processes such as ethical review, where delays and misunderstandings can risk strain on relationships with non-academic stakeholders. Interviewees emphasised the importance of iterative participant input, and adapting project design and activities throughout the research process. As this reflexivity is key, it requires University mechanisms to accommodate design changes based on participant input at different stages of the research process. Improved guidance and better accommodation of ABPR's reflexive nature within existing processes are therefore recommended.
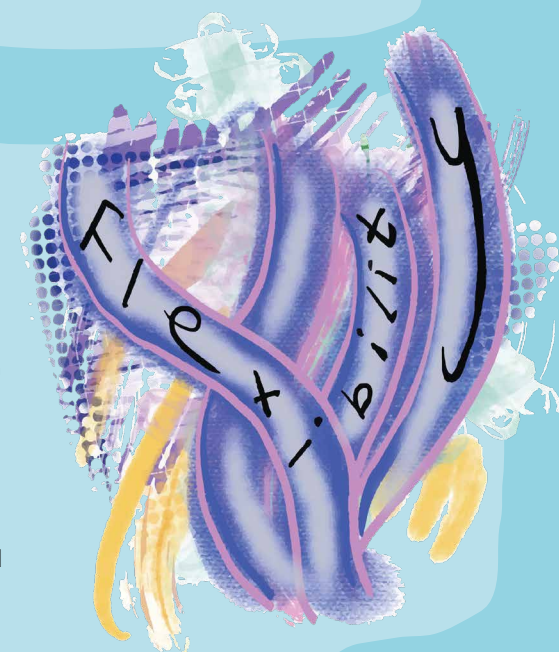
6.

Support partner organisations to build and sustain relationships with communities

Trust-based relationships with communities and public participants are essential for effective and responsible arts-based participatory research. Arts organisations play a crucial role in building and maintaining these relationships, drawing on their expertise in managing community connections. Maintain long-term relationships with participants, such as through regular engagement groups, can also help communicate research outcomes and foster meaningful participation. These ongoing connections can help with access for participants who may face barriers to regular attendance. Supporting organisations committed to sustaining these relationships therefore can help University researchers engage with expert participant knowledge and experience. Involving non-academic partners early in the research design process can ensure that research topics, participation levels, and outputs are responsive to community needs. We recommend resourcing such organisations to foster long-term collaboration, to enhance participant engagement, and ensure research aligns with community interests and priorities.

7.

Review funding models and financial processes to ensure appropriate and realistic timescales

Interviewees indicated that the speed of financial processes at the University can have a detrimental impact on developing and sustaining relationships between research partners and public participants. Short-term funding models also may not serve the reflexive needs of ABPR methodologies, recognising that many participants face financial, time, and accessibility constraints which may impede short-notice or ad-hoc involvement. Given the number of self-employed or freelance artists involved in participatory facilitation, as well as the frequent use of ABPR methods to work with economically vulnerable participants (as indicated by interviewees), delays in payment have the potential to cause real economic distress. Improved systems to process remuneration for participants and self-employed individuals working on participatory projects, as well as a review of project funding timescales, would therefore be beneficial to mitigate hardship and ensure effective ABPR work can take place.
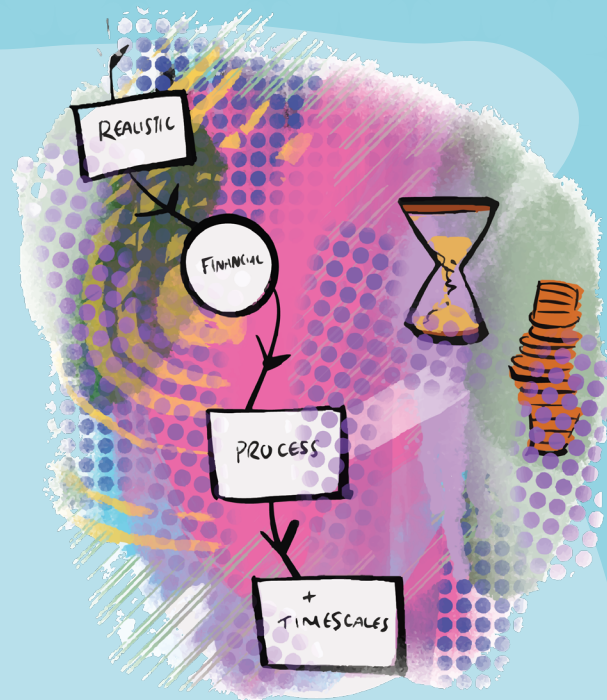
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