

By Chelsea McDonagh

In writing this blog I try to capture how changing our research approach and methodology can strengthen research projects and allow for the collection of more meaningful data.

It's a blurring of boundaries, being the researcher and the researched. There's an assumption that doing so would threaten the validity of our research but in those zoom rooms where we sat in black boxed darkness with only our voices projecting through and the glow of names on the screen, there were relationships forged. At a time when most people were complaining of zoom fatigue, there was an almost collective sigh of relief as an unconscious decision was made to turn camera's off. People make the assumption that to have sustained participation and to create connection, we must be able to see each other which not only serves to highlight the ableism in such a requirement but also in this context was found not to be true. In those spaces we were able to leave our physical selves at the digital door and enter into those spaces as ourselves.

Our whole selves with families that sometimes interrupted, with educational commitments that kept deadlines looming, with complex life experiences that needed time and space to unpack. As people who talked, who laughed, who popped emojis into the chat, and sat silently. Young people were invited to contribute in ways that felt comfortable and meaningful for them. It was a space where everyone and their individual contributions were valued, in whatever way they chose to express them. Young people brought with them unique insights and didn't arrive as empty vessels. In this project we tried to incorporate this thinking into the methodology and planning, and used different prompts to encourage deeper thinking and reflection, both in the sessions and outside of them.

Like many I have heard the term resilience being used both frequently and inappropriately. Often used to distract from structural changes that are desperately needed and instead place emphasis and responsibility onto those being oppressed. It is undeserved suffering repackaged as a pat on the back. A congratulations for an emotional skill that you should never have had to develop. We spent so much time talking about language and what we didn't want resilience to mean. We also spent a lot of time talking about the different things that resilience meant to us and the different ways in which it could present itself. Redefining the definition for ourselves was what became most important.

As a lesbian Irish Traveller woman, it was first time I had really stopped to think about my own journey and my own understanding and experience of resilience. Travellers are often an overlooked minority when it comes to projects like this but my identity provided me with a unique viewpoint. I recognise how I am minoritised as a result of

my ethnicity and sexuality but also know that by virtue of being white and being able to change my accent I can mitigate some of that as I move through life.

After each session I would go away with a lot on my mind and more often than not, a debrief session would follow with one of my closest friends who has known me throughout all of life's challenges. I don't often talk about how difficult it was to come to terms with my own sexuality and come out to my family, I don't talk about the issues I had and the coping strategies I used, or the lack of them. But through this project I started to go deeper. When you are inviting people to share, you also have to do so yourself, to go on this journey with them. Far from it having a negative effect on the research, it strengthened it as we created an environment where people felt comfortable discussing the challenges that life had presented to them and the different journeys to navigate through that.

Looking at the analysis of parts of my own story, I'm struck by how much was drawn out of it. I'm struck by my own honesty and the depth I went into. I have lost count of the amount of times that I have been the '*researched*'. How many times people have interviewed me about different parts of my story, however I haven't let them know the real me. They have interviewed the version of me that presented itself on that day, a very put together version of myself. But in those breakout rooms where we forged bonds and people spoke openly about their own resilience, I was bolstered with confidence in telling my own story, in letting people in. I allowed myself to show my vulnerability, I didn't feel hampered by it.

Research is often done on to minoritised people. It is a tool wielded by institutions that are rooted in white supremacy and colonialism. The idea that research is somehow hampered by our proximity to the subject is not new. Researchers for hundreds of years have violated spaces and told stories which were not theirs to inhabit or tell. To me this project wasn't just about resilience, it was about redefining how we tell our own stories and how we create spaces for that to happen. What is research but storytelling that takes place in the same way that my ancestors told stories as they sat around the campfire. We are the teller of stories, the creators of stories and the carrier of stories, all at once