

Chapter 3: Research strategy, study design and data generation

1. Introduction

This chapter will firstly review the aims and objectives of the research. Justifications for why the research strategy, study design and data generation methods adopted were relevant and appropriate for this research will then be provided. Following this, the chapter will describe the research protocol utilised, including sampling procedures, the relationship with, and recruitment of, participants as well as the data generation process. Methods used to analyse the data will also be explained. The chapter will conclude by summarising the key aspects of the methodology and methods. Limitations of the research, including the methodology and methods adopted, are explored in chapter five.

2. Review of research aim and objectives

The aim of the research was to explore the perceptions of staff members and service users concerning the meanings, understandings, processes and outcomes of 'community involvement' within SSLPs. Consequently the objectives of the research were to explore the following research questions;

- What form is 'community involvement' within SSLPs perceived to take?
- What difference is 'community involvement' within SSLPs perceived to make?

3. Research strategy

A qualitative research strategy is, in the main, concerned with generating data in the form of words as opposed to numbers (Bryman, 2004). There are four key reasons why a qualitative research strategy was considered appropriate and consequently adopted for this research. Firstly, a qualitative strategy allows a detailed level of understanding to be developed (Maxwell, 2005) including an exploration of the phenomenon's context (Punch, 2005). A detailed level of understanding, including contextualisation, is vital when exploring an issue such as 'community involvement' because of its complexity. This complexity was illustrated in the literature review through, for example, discussions of the tensions between Government interference, the prioritisation of practitioner knowledge and 'community involvement'. Secondly, the epistemological position of interpretivism is broadly adopted within qualitative research (Bryman, 2004). The position stresses the importance of understanding the social world via examination of the interpretations of those involved within it (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005). A qualitative approach was considered appropriate because it facilitates an exploration of the meanings, motivations, understandings and experiences of the research participants (ten Have, 2004) regarding 'community involvement', which is the aim of the research. Thirdly, underpinned by its epistemological position, qualitative research generally conforms to the ontological assumptions of constructivism (Bryman, 2004). Within constructivism, the social world is perceived to be a consequence of social interactions, in contrast to phenomena which occur irrespective of such exchanges (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). It therefore places a high level of

importance of the participants' subjective perspectives and does not see subjectivity as problematic, unlike within quantitative traditions (Maxwell, 2005). A qualitative strategy was therefore appropriate for this research because it aims to explore key stakeholders' subjective perspectives. Fourthly, the research aim includes exploring the process of 'community involvement', which is often neglected within research (Patton, 1990). Without such an examination of the process, a direction for action would not be adequately provided (Patton, 1990). As a result of its exploratory nature, a qualitative research strategy provides an opportunity to explore the process of a phenomenon such as 'community involvement' in detail (Maxwell, 2005), which was a key aim of this research.

A grounded theory approach was adopted within this research where feasible. Grounded theory is a set of assumptions generally linked to qualitative research (Denscombe, 2003). First established by Glaser and Strauss (1967), it promoted developing theories from within research, as opposed to deducing testable hypotheses from existing theories. However, Strauss and Corbin (1998) have since moved towards using grounded theory for testing hypotheses. Glaser (1992) has criticised the methods adopted by Strauss and Corbin (1967) for forcing data into preconceived categories. Within this research, the approach to grounded theory developed by Charmaz (2006) was employed, where feasible. The particular approach was adhered to because it follows Glaser's advice and does not force data into preconceived categories (Charmaz, 2006) and consequently aims to produce theories that are a close fit to the data (Flick, 2006). In addition, the approach

is clearly explained, whereas many other theorists have failed to adequately explain how to utilise the promoted methods (Smith and Biley, 1997). The grounded theory package adopted includes theoretical sampling, data saturation, memo writing, constant comparisons, invivo codes, diagramming, line by line coding and focus coding (Charmaz, 2006). These will be described within the relevant sections of this chapter. However, it is important to note that these aspects of grounded theory were not conducted in this order but were conducted simultaneously and revisited throughout the research process. This is key to the grounded approach (Jeon, 2004).

4. Study design

The study design adopted for this research may be described as a case study as it involved one case, i.e. the SSLP in question, being studied in detail (Punch, 2005). As discussed above, the complexities of involving the 'community' in SSLPs means that it is necessary to explore the issues in detail, rather than obtain the views of a large number of staff and 'community members' from a large number of SSLPs. Consequently, a case study was deemed appropriate for meeting the research aims in terms of providing a detailed exploration. Within case study research, the degree to which the responsibility of defining the content of the 'case' lies with the researcher is disputed (Bergen and While, 2000). Yin (1994) argues that the researcher should take on this responsibility to ensure that the case study can provide the answers to the research questions, rather than allowing the case to be defined 'naturally'. Cases are often defined by locations (Bryman, 2004). Within this research, the Government has inevitably been involved in defining

the case, in so far as they have decided upon the boundaries for SSLPs as previously discussed within the literature review. However, as the research aim is to explore 'community involvement' within SSLPs, it is not important that the researcher has not defined the boundaries of the case. What is important is that the case being studied will allow the research aims to be met.

The so called 'community driven' nature of SSLPs (Sure Start, 2005c) means that theoretically, each programme should be established to meet the specific needs of that area. Case studies are concerned with explaining the unique features of the case (Bryman, 2004) and would therefore be of use in extrapolating and explaining these aspects of the SSLP in relation to 'community involvement'. Critics of case study research have argued that the findings are not externally valid and are therefore not generalisable (Yin, 1994). Such criticisms are based upon traditional sampling theory which highlights the importance of the representativeness of the sample (Bergan and While, 2000). However, generalisability is not the key purpose of case study research (Bryman, 2004). The relevant issue is the quality of the theoretical reasoning (Bryman, 2004), that is to say, the degree to which the data supports the theoretical arguments that are generated (Bryman, 2004). Analytical generalisations from case studies can be made whereby the results may be generalised to some broader theory, which should be tested via other case studies (Yin, 1994). Therefore, any theories generated within this case study may well be applicable to other SSLPs and similar initiatives.

5. Data generation

Focus groups were the method selected for data generation in this study. Focus groups are described as “loosely constructed discussion with a group of people brought together for the purpose of the study, guided by the researcher and addressed by the group” (Sarantakos, 2005, p. 194). Importantly, focus groups were selected because they can be utilised to generate qualitative data which, as previously discussed, was essential to fulfil the objectives of this research. More specifically, the ‘group’ aspect of this method was deemed to reap particular advantages and thus provided justification for utilising focus groups as opposed to one to one interviews. Markedly, focus groups are considered to be particularly useful in exploring situations where there are deemed to be differences in power amongst participants (Morgan, 1993). This is thought to be as a result of participants having the security of being among others who may share their feelings and experiences and consequently feel comfortable in expressing their views (Morgan, 1993). Differences in power may well be present amongst participants as previously discussed within the literature review. Furthermore, the discursive nature of focus groups, allow participants to probe each others’ reasons for having a particular view (Bryman, 2004); to voice agreement or disagreement about aspects of the topic that they would otherwise not have thought of (Bryman, 2004); to encourage a ‘real’ spontaneous form of expression (Sarantakos, 2005); to illustrate diversity and difference between groups of participants (Sarantakos, 2005) and consequently to explore issues with a degree of complexity that is not possible utilising other qualitative methods (Morgan, 1993). This is particularly relevant to this research

considering the complexity of the topic. There are further advantages of focus groups when participants are familiar to one another, as within this research. The benefits of this include; the ability for others to challenge recollections of events and to feel comfortable and confident in their discussions (Bloor, Frankland, Thomas and Robson, 2002).

6. Research protocol

The sample may be described as purposive because initially, the researcher selected to invite participants who would be able to answer the research question, and did not attempt any specified quota sampling according to demographic characteristics (Jeon, 2004). As previously stipulated, key aspects of a grounded theoretical approach were adopted. One aspect of this approach was theoretical sampling which is “the process of data collection for generating theory whereby the analyst jointly collects, codes and analyses data and decides what data to collect and where to find them, in order to develop his theory as it emerges” (Bryman, 2004. p. 30). This form of theoretical sampling was adopted to some extent, where possible. For example, only two out of four managers attended the relevant focus group. After analysing this focus group it was considered that more data could be obtained regarding ‘community involvement’ within SSLPs from a management perspective. Therefore, as the two individuals in question had sent their apologies and stated that they would be willing to rearrange, a subsequent focus group was organised with these two managers. It is argued that within a grounded theory approach, theoretical sampling should take place until the point of data saturation (Charmaz, 2006). Data saturation

refers to the situation where “data no longer sparks new theoretical insights, nor reveals new properties of these core theoretical categories” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 113). Due to resource restrictions, this could not occur. It is possible that further data could have been generated if resources had allowed further focus groups with participants to take place. However, it has been argued that it is possible to construct theories without always having to go and collect additional data in this way (Jeon, 2004). The quality of the data is deemed to be of higher priority than quantity (Jeon, 2004).

All members of staff at the SSLP in question were invited to take part in the focus groups. The Programme Manager provided a list of all staff members. The researcher wrote to all staff members and enclosed the appended information sheet (number six). The researcher also asked the Programme Manager to inform members of staff, at relevant staff meetings, about the research. One week after sending the information, the members of staff were then telephoned by the researcher and asked whether they would like to participate. The most appropriate times, dates and locations were subsequently arranged. With regard to ‘community members’, staff at the SSLP identified those who were or had been Management Board/Parent Forum members or volunteers. These individuals were also service users. Staff members provided these individuals with the appended information sheet (number 7) and the information on the sheet was explained. At least one week after the potential participants had received their information sheet, staff members enquired whether they would like to take part in the focus

groups and arranged suitable times, dates and locations. Letters were sent out to participants to confirm arrangements (number 5).

With regard to group size, this is generally recommended to be between six and eight, in order to achieve a balance between the problems of limited discussion and the inability for all participants to express their views (Bloor et al., 2002). Sarantakos (2005) does however suggest that the purpose of the study will determine the size of the group. For the research in question, the ethics committee requested that the maximum numbers of individuals in each of the groups should be six. The following groups were assigned in order to facilitate this and allow a complete picture as possible to be developed;

- Managers/team leaders
- Staff seconded from other organisations
- Family Partnership Workers
- Early Years staff
- Community Representatives on the Management Board, Parents' Forum members and volunteers (there were two of these groups).

The existence of hierarchies within groups is an acknowledged limitation of focus groups (Bloor et al, 2002). The compositions of the groups were therefore designed to be homogenous in term of experiences and situation in order to avoid individuals being silenced or certain individuals dominating the discussion (Bloor et al., 2002 and Sarantakos, 2005). Following the advice of Morgan (1993), this potential problem was reduced through emphasising that

the researcher wanted to hear a range of points of view and utilised questions such as “that’s one point of view, does anyone have another point of view?” Those that were not contributing as much were encouraged to state their views. At the end of each group session all participants were given the opportunity to make any further comments. Bloor et al (2002) recommends that structures of groups should be piloted in order to identify any potential problems, if possible. This was not feasible due to the limited number of potential participants and resources. Furthermore, the focus groups were relatively unstructured. However, the first few focus groups acted as pilots, in so far as the researcher learnt successful ways of wording questions. In addition, responses from early interviews informed questions for later interviews.

All of the focus groups were held at the SSLP’s premises, the purpose of which was to provide a non-threatening environment (Morgan, 1993) by holding the focus groups in a familiar location to participants (Sarantakos, 2005). Furthermore, locations for the focus groups were arranged to minimise the impact of noise and to reduce any inconvenience to participants (Sarantakos, 2005). In addition, ‘community members’ were given the opportunity to claim their travel expenses and their children were provided with a crèche where required. Further attempts were made to make the focus groups non-threatening by utilising informal language (including hesitations, idiomatic words/phrases and a friendly voice) and providing refreshments (Pucha and Potter, 2004).

When participants arrived they were welcomed to the group by the researcher and offered refreshments. The researcher discussed the issues stated within the information sheet and provided participants with the opportunity to ask questions. All participants were then asked to complete a written consent form. As all participants gave their permission, the focus groups were audio recorded. Two individuals attended the focus groups, with one producing a written record of the data and the researcher acting as the facilitator, as opposed to an interviewer. This is a key aspect of what distinguishes a focus group from a group interview (Sarantakos, 2005). The researcher was less controlling of the research than perhaps they would have been within a one to one interview (Punch, 2005). Consequently the researcher allowed the issues of concern to the participants to be explored which is a key research objective. Following the specified grounded theory approach, the researcher also produced notes on issues deemed to be particularly significant (Charmaz, 2006). The questions posed were open, to avoid forcing data into certain categories (Charmaz, 2006). However, the researcher followed Krueger and Casey's (2000) guidelines for the construction of an interview guide. This included the use of opening, introductory, transitional, key topic and ending questions (Krueger and Casey, 2000), the purpose of which was to put participants at ease and to consequently obtain rich data (Krueger and Casey, 2000). The interview guides utilised are included in appendix (numbers 10 and 11).

7. Data analysis

Charmaz's (2006) grounded theory approach to data analysis was adopted. This included two key elements; line by line and focussed coding. Line by line coding involved naming each line in the data (Charmaz, 2006). Although line by line coding may seem unnecessary, it assists in the prevention of searching for preconceived themes and encourages a close fit between theory and data (Charmaz, 2006). This is particularly important considering the fact that a literature review had been completed and subsequently a detailed knowledge around the subject had been gained. Potentially, this could have led to searching for issues perceived to be important rather than what participants' felt were important (Charmaz, 2006). The second phase was focussed coding and involved using the most frequent or significant initial codes to sort, synthesise and integrate the data (Charmaz, 2006). A key method within this focussed coding was constant comparison. This included the comparison of data within each focus group transcript and progressed to the comparison of focus group transcripts with other focus group transcripts, paying attention to similarities and differences. Such coding methods have been criticised for losing a sense of holistic flow (Maxwell, 2005). However, the line by line labelling was conducted carefully to ensure meaning was not lost (Charmaz, 2006). Particular attention was also given to *invivo* codes, which are participants' 'special terms' (Charmaz, 2006). This practise assists in the preservation of participants' meanings (Charmaz, 2006). For example, participants referred to a 'captive audience' to describe regular service users being easily accessed to ask their opinions. This *invivo* code provided a title for a sub theme. As the findings and

discussion shows, diagramming was also used to develop theories and the logic of that theory development (Charmaz, 2006). It should be acknowledged that the use of line by line coding, focussed coding, constant comparisons and diagramming did not provide insight into participants' worlds per se. An open mind and keen eye enabled the methods to be utilised successfully (Charmaz, 2006).

8. Ethical issues

Advice was obtained from a Local Research Ethics Committee (LREC) coordinator to ensure that ethical review was not necessary for this research. It was deemed appropriate for this to be verified because certain employees who were invited to participate in the research were employed by the National Health Service (NHS). However, the Chair stated that the research may be classified as 'service evaluation' and therefore did not require ethical review by an LREC. The letter received from the LREC is appended (number two). Following advice provided in this letter, the relevant NHS Research and Development Departments were also contacted to confirm whether their permission was required. Employees at this SSLP were seconded from three different NHS trusts. Consequently, each of these trusts were contacted. Each department leader stipulated that Research and Development Departmental approval was not necessary. Interestingly, various explanations were provided, namely; the short amount of the employees' time required to participate; the lack of NHS resources to be utilised; the fact that the focus groups would not be held on a NHS site and because the research was classed as service evaluation and presented 'very limited

risks'. The emails outlining these explanations are appended (number 3). Markedly, only the latter explanation was directly related to ethical issues and puts into question the purpose of obtaining Research and Development approval. Ethical approval was therefore sought from the School of Applied and Health Sciences Ethics Committee, University of Chester. A number of minor alterations were requested. Once these were addressed ethical permission was granted. A copy of the letter confirming this is appended (number one). Aside from obtaining ethical permission, the research was conducted in an ethical manner. The guidelines of the British Sociological Association (BSA) were adhered to. The ethical issues relevant to this research are discussed under four key headings; non-maleficence, beneficence, justice and respect for autonomy (Userwood, 1996).

8.1 Non-maleficence

Participants were ensured that all information provided would be anonymised to the best of the researcher's ability. Careful consideration had to be made to whether the participants could be identified because in some instances there was only one individual with a particular role i.e. Programme Manager. Therefore when incidents were being discussed it may have been obvious who was involved because of the nature of their role. Therefore, in line with British Sociological Association (BSA) guidelines identifiers were removed and pseudonyms were used, where this did not prevent the meaning of the issue being lost (BSA, 2002). This principle was explained to participants before gaining their informed consent.

The confidentiality of the data generated also required explanation in advance of obtaining informed consent. It was explained that appropriate measures were taken to store research data in a secure manner conforming to the Data Protection Act (Information Commissioners Office, 1998). Once confirmation has been received that the research project has been completed, all audio recordings will be wiped clean. In line with the BSA ethical guidelines (BSA, 2002) participants were informed that all information they provided was confidential unless they disclosed that someone was in immediate danger of serious harm. In such a case, an appropriate professional would have been informed. Furthermore, the British Sociological Association (BSA, 2002) states that safety issues need to be considered in the design and conduct of social research projects and procedures should be adopted to reduce the risk to researchers. It was decided that all interviews would take place in public places (i.e. the SSLP's venues) for this reason. In addition, the effect on the staff members' professional reputation and the overall effect that the research may have on the SSLP had to be considered. In order to avoid these problems the Programme Manager will be consulted in advance of dissemination to highlight any issues which may need to be sensitively addressed. Finally, consideration towards whether the findings of this research would inform practice was a potential ethical problem because participants may have raised concerns in anticipation that they will be acted upon. Consequently, there is the potential for participants to be disappointed. This situation is eased by the fact that a positive working relationship had been established between the researcher and the Programme Manager, and

previous findings of commissioned evaluations have indeed been acted upon.

8.2 Beneficence

It is anticipated that this research will inform practice at the SSLP. To this end, lessons may be learnt within the programme that will assist staff members in addressing the paradox of 'involving' the 'community' in programmes and meeting Government objectives. As previously discussed, involving the 'community' in preventative programmes is high on the Government's political agenda (Marrow and Malin, 2004). Therefore, although certain issues may be only relevant to the SSLP in question, theoretical generalisations may be made to other programmes (Yin, 1994). Thus, other SSLPs and similar initiatives which are required to 'involve' the 'community' may be able to learn from the SSLP's experience. It should be noted that practice will not be informed unless the research is adequately and appropriately disseminated to staff members at the SSLP and beyond. A copy of the dissertation will be made available for all staff members. Attempts will also be made to disseminate the results in a journal that is read by community practitioners. Furthermore, a newsletter will be produced, outlining the research using appropriate language, and disseminated to 'community members' at the SSLP's activities.

In addition, the focus group process in itself may have been of benefit to participants. Many people enjoy being interviewed as it illustrates the value given to their views and gives them a sense of importance (Oliver, 2003).

Furthermore, it is an opportunity for participants to reflect upon their values and opinions (Oliver, 2003). This issue is perhaps particularly relevant for this research, considering its investigation of 'community involvement' and its theoretical underpinnings within 'community development'.

8.3 Justice

With regard to equal opportunity, all current staff members and 'community representatives' on the Management Board/Parents Forums and volunteers at the SSLP were invited to take part in the research without prejudice. In addition, in order to act in a fair manner, plans were put into place for potential participants who could not adequately understand English. However, it was revealed that there were no such individuals who were Management Board/Parents' Forum representatives, volunteers or staff members. At the SSLP in question, there was a Bi-Lingual Support Worker to support 'community members' who spoke Bengali. Anyone who had met the inclusion criteria must have either adequately spoken English or Bengali; otherwise their 'involvement' in the SSLP would not have been possible. If there had been research participants who only spoke Bengali, the Bi-lingual Support Worker at the SSLP would have assisted the researcher in translating the consent forms, participant information sheets and letters. The participants would have been interviewed separately and the Bi-Lingual Support Worker would have translated. The Bi-lingual Support Worker would have also made the initial contact with the service user.

8.4 Respect for autonomy

A central feature of social science research ethics is the principle of informed consent i.e. that participants should be fully informed about a research project before they assent to taking part (Bryman, 2004). Information sheets and verbal explanations were utilised to this end. The verbal explanations were deemed to be particularly important within the research because SSLP areas were determined in accordance with the multiple index of deprivation (Sure Start, 2005d) and low literacy levels may be associated with socio-economic deprivation (DfES, 2005). Information sheets were provided one week before the fieldwork took place to allow participants to reflect on their decision to participate. The information provided on the sheets was discussed with participants in advance of commencing the interviews. In line with the BSA Guidelines (2002), research participants were made aware of their right to refuse participation whenever and for whatever reason they wished and that they were able to reject the use of audio recording equipment. Participants were asked to complete a written consent form, which was also explained verbally, in order to provide a record that informed consent was obtained.

9. Summary

A qualitative research strategy has been adopted for this research, as it was best placed to fulfil the aims of the research. More specifically, it has facilitated a detailed exploration of the subjective meanings and understandings of 'community involvement' within SSLPs including the processes and outcomes (Patton, 1990; Bryman, 2004; ten Have, 2004;

Maxwell, 2005; Punch, 2005 and Denzin and Lincoln, 2005). The grounded theory approach has provided useful tools in generating and analysing data (Charmaz, 2006). The study may be described as a case study, the case being the SSLP itself. This has facilitated the in depth exploration this research aimed to achieve (Yin, 1994). Focus groups were employed as a method of data generation because their group nature allowed more ideas to be discussed and debated in a form which fits closer to conversations conducted within everyday life (Krueger and Casey, 2000). The research protocol utilised has also been outlined in order to be as transparent as possible. The methods of data analysis including line by line and focussed coding, constant comparison and diagramming were also outlined (Charmaz, 2006). Finally, this chapter detailed the ethical issues and methods adopted to ensure the research was conducted in an ethical manner. In summary, this included considering issues of anonymity, confidentiality, informed consent and adequate dissemination.