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‘When we put our thoughts and ideas together, policy makers are listening to us’: Hope-work and the potential of participatory research

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Abstract

This article brings together a theorisation of hope with the everyday practices of participatory research against a difficult – often entrenched – policy context. We posit that ‘hope-labour’ can characterise engagement in participatory research, which can itself be generative of hope as part of resistance to the status quo. This novel analysis links, and is relevant to, broader theorisations of resistance and critical policy analysis. While there is a growing recognition of the need to subvert traditional forms of political activism and engagement, there has been less specific theorisation of how and why participatory research might play a role. This article corrects this, drawing directly on four years of participatory research working with parents and carers living on a low income to explicate how hope manifests in our practice. We argue it is important to recognise and carefully work through the significant ethical challenges which characterise hope-labour in participatory research. These include how hope is mobilised and the markedly different ‘stakes’ at play in working with hope for researchers and participants. These represent stubborn challenges, and it is incumbent on researchers to be transparent with participants about them in line with an ethics of reciprocity and feminist research praxis. Research can be aimed at a different – and radical – future, because of its orientation towards delivering substantive changes but also, and significantly, because it foregrounds a fresh, different way of collaborating and connecting, one that values and incorporates a diversity of expertise and promotes collective self-determination rather than competition.

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hope, participatory research, poverty, qualitative methods, social security

Introduction

> It's emotionally difficult to think I've been reduced to asking for stale and mouldy bread. I feel guilty for needing to access such assistance, I feel guilty for binning some of the produce given . . . And I feel shame. At that moment, I felt disgusted at myself. What kind of mother does it make me?

This was written in 2020 by Victoria, a survivor of domestic violence with two young children. Victoria is a participant in Changing Realities, a participatory research programme working in partnership with parents and carers living on a low income across the UK to document and seek to change life on a low income. Victoria, along with over 100 parents, has been working to chart the persistent and systemic failures of our social security system and wider economy, and the detrimental impact of these socio-political and economic systems on families. Her reflections on her severe hardship and the shame of receiving food charity are an indictment of a status quo in which Trussell Trust food banks distributed almost 3 million food parcels in the past year alone. Victoria's observations about her own situation may also elicit strong emotions in the reader: outrage, pity, anger, despair, even hopelessness.

Victoria is one human representation of the mounting body of academic evidence on the inadequacy of the UK's social security system, and the harms caused by over a decade of welfare reforms and austerity (Fletcher & Wright, 2018; Welfare Conditionality, 2018). The Westminster Government's programme of austerity has become enmeshed with a global context of recurrent crisis: a global pandemic, war, environmental catastrophe, the cost-of-living crisis and steadfast opposition to anti-capitalist forces (Holloway, 2022). Writing in Britain in 2024, it is this combination of recurrent domestic and global crises that can give rise to a belief that we are living in fundamentally hopeless times.

In this article we explore whether, against this seemingly hopeless context, hope can be found and mobilised within the research process. We draw out lessons for researchers and activists working in participatory ways but also for all those interested in how research can be radical and change-making. While there has been an increased recognition of the limitations with traditional forms of political engagement and representation, including the potential in subverting these and finding new ways and forms of resistance (Jeffrey & Dyson, 2021), to date there has been less direct exploration of the potential for research practices to play a direct role here. This article corrects that. After briefly setting out the domestic policy context which renders life particularly hopeless for people living in poverty, we engage with theorisations of 'hope'. We then posit that participatory research can represent a form of hope-labour, applying this to how and where hope manifests in our own work on Changing Realities. We explicate the practice and ethical challenges of working with hope, for both researchers and participants, and reflect on tensions between pursuing radical policy changes and more pragmatic, incremental reforms. We argue that it is possible to locate hope in the practice of participatory research, given the extent and ways in which it can open up new – collective and radical – ways of thinking

and working, and transform understandings, positionalities and approaches to the generation of new knowledge. By bringing together the sociology of hope and the practice of participatory research, this article provides an improved, richer understanding of both. This understanding, we argue, is relevant for both social scientists and activists, and presents a normative case for the value in research that acts with and recognises the expertise that comes with experience.

A geopolitical and national context of hopelessness

We are living through a geopolitical and environmental context of crisis marked by global warming, the destruction of biodiversity, a water shortage, devastating pandemics, growing tensions between states increasing the risk of nuclear war, obscene levels of inequality, as well as growing racism and nationalism globally (Holloway, 2022). This geopolitical context, widely televised, circulated and debated, is accompanied by national-level, immediate inequality and uncertainty, which can engender a widespread sense of crisis and unpredictability, particularly for those most affected by hardship (Kleist & Jansen, 2016).

The harms done by these crises are unevenly distributed. In the UK, for example, the coronavirus pandemic disproportionately negatively affected people living on a low income, minority ethnic groups, people living with poor health, and women (Patel et al., 2020; Wenham et al., 2020). The harms of these crises are also exacerbated by a governing class that routinely and for many years has failed to invest in the necessary infrastructure. In the UK, we entered the coronavirus pandemic with a threadbare social security system and a much-diminished welfare state – support having been hollowed out by a decade of austerity under Conservative-led governments (Garnham, 2020). This rendered the UK ill-equipped to respond to the economic fallout of first the pandemic and then the cost-of-living crisis. Both immediately and starkly exposed the shortcomings of social security support in the UK, as well as the gaping holes in state support for education and health and social care. In this way, we would argue that the hopelessness we see among people oriented towards a more equal society in the UK is compounded, if not at times created, by political decisions.

The narrative surrounding social security has long felt hopeless among people seeking an equitable and compassionate welfare system (including and especially those in receipt of social security for some or all their income), with derision of the notion of 'welfare' and those who receive it stretching back to the 1970s and indeed before that (Hills, 2014). What is especially notable though about the current moment is that we have incredibly high rates of poverty and extreme hardship caused by the collision of the current cost-of-living crisis with (now long-standing) inadequate social security systems, and yet a continued refusal by politicians on both the left and right to make a positive case for investing in social security as a force for good (Waugh, 2021). In Britain, we see the refusal of politicians on both sides of the political spectrum to make a compelling case for change and to recognise the scale of reform needed to the UK's social security system and labour market. Instead, there often seems to be a dogged determination to proceed despite, and not because of, the evidence base: manifest, for instance, in the March 2023 budget announcement to pursue a 'more rigorous' approach to benefit sanctions (Hunt, 2023),

when the totality of research evidence shows that this is ineffective at best and harmful at worst (Welfare Conditionality, 2018). Notwithstanding the potential for change brought by the new Labour Government, there still appears to be limited prospect of things improving for the better, and a real challenge in building political coalitions to work for real and lasting change. This context has underpinned scholarly critique of the lack of political alternatives (e.g. Butler, 2016; Mouffe, 2005), sometimes explicitly linked to 'a decline in interest in hope' (Zournazi, 2002, p. 14) or even 'the end of hope' (Mouffe cited in Zournazi, 2002, pp. 123–124).

What do we mean by hope?

Nevertheless, rather than undermining hope, it has instead been this context of uncertainty, the awareness of it and the desire to act in pursuit of change, which has fuelled articulation of hope for different futures. This revival has encouraged description of hope as a multifaceted phenomenon characterised by both possibility and uncertainty (Johnson-Hanks, 2005). A growing concern with resistance as the locus of hope has fed into a large body of work on activism (Ahmed, 2017, 2021; Ware & Back, 2002), mostly led by scholars who position themselves as activists too. Here, we find a particular interest in specific forms of activism, often characterised by the principles of democracy and decentralisation found in anarchist movements. Authors, like Boni (2015) and Razsa (2015), have focused on these movements because they provide a practical example of radical political alternatives; they offer political imaginaries that lie outside the purview of 'conventional' understandings of representative politics. These analyses of hope in practice are less interested in the result of hope-fuelled activism (the revolutionary change) and focused instead on exploring the ethical subjectivities and development of the activists themselves (e.g. Ringel, 2014), their 'ethics of revolutionary practice' (Graeber, 2008, n.p.) which may underpin the development of a better (more democratic and pluralistic) world.

A recent renewed interest in hope connects to the contemporary context of crisis, and the extent to which crisis itself can be foundational to and can directly engender hope. Hope, according to Back (2015), for instance, is always context specific (situated in time and in particular kinds of context), as evidenced by the coexistence of uncertainty and hope in Bloch's *The Principle of Hope*, published in the aftermath of the Second World War. Bloch's principle of hope, which stands in contrast to fascism and its fear principle, is an important resource for survival. He wrote:

> It is a question of learning hope. Its work does not renounce, it is in love with success rather than failure . . . The emotion of hope goes out of itself, makes people broad instead of confining them. (Bloch, cited in Back, 2015, n.p.)

And yet hope can remain an aporia, 'frequently likened to the immaterial-matter of air, or sensed in the prophetic figure of the horizon, hope anticipates that something indeterminate has not-yet become' (Anderson, 2006, p. 733). Since Bloch (1986), and as continued by Anderson (2006), there has been much debate describing the content of a range of hopes. Theorisations of hope and hopelessness often create and work with dichotomous divisions between – for example – whether and how far hope is active

and passive, or the extent to which it is about living with (and making bearable) the present, or instead oriented towards a different future. The situated realities are inevitably messier and more complex.

Theories of hope do, nevertheless, explore its varied characteristics – some emphasising the present while others focus on the future. Drawing on empirical research conducted with creative workers in the precarious post-socialist context, Alacovska (2019), for instance, explores hope in the present, disputing the seemingly implicit relationship posited between creative workers' future orientation and precarity and arguing that hope functions as a strategy for coping with the uncertainty of her participants' working lives. Hope here becomes akin to the often-critiqued concept of 'resilience' (Carr et al., 2021; Olick, 2016): hope is an individual psychosocial resource for responding to the adversities in people's lives by encouraging them to persevere, thus making the present hardship bearable (Zigon, 2009). Kuehn and Corrigan (2013), in their discussion of 'hope labour', explore the notion of hope as predominantly future oriented, contending that even while it renders the present meaningful (or perhaps simply bearable), it is nevertheless comported towards a desired future. Cuervo and Cook's (2019) exploration of present and future conceptualisations of hope allows more explicitly for a diversity of hope, presenting varied modalities of hope: a modality oriented towards a specific view of a better future (as reflected in Kuehn & Corrigan, 2013), and a mode that may look towards the future but does not have a specific view of the future in mind/a specific goal. We would argue, like Cuervo and Cook (2019), that hope can be a working through of the present in order to build a different future, and so requires a willingness to look beyond the present. As Back (2021, p. 18) writes: 'Hope, then, is not a destination or an achievement but an improvisation across time that links the past, present and not yet realised future.'

Interpretations of hope vary in the extent to which hopelessness rather than hope itself is the predominant factor in human action. For Slavoj Žižek (2018), hopelessness not hope motivates revolutionary action, encouraging a first step towards a future that we cannot yet imagine. Hope for Žižek, like for Camus, is equivalent to inertia or fatalism; Camus concluded, 'I know no more stirring symbol; for, contrary to the general belief, hope equals resignation. And to live is not to resign oneself' (Camus, 2005, p. 14, as cited in Back, 2015, n.p.). The defeat and resignation equated with hope by Žižek and Camus is framed by Berlant (2011, p. 24) as 'cruel optimism', a form of unfulfilled hope. Optimism can be cruel, according to Berlant (2011, p. 24), when you discover that the dreams you are attached to are either 'impossible, sheer fantasy, or too possible, and toxic'. This kind of optimism manifests as a cluster of promises of the good life – upward mobility, job security, political and social equality, and durable intimacy – which are 'attached to compromised conditions of possibility' (Berlant, 2011, p. 24). The result is an attachment to a problematic object that is unable to deliver on its promise.

Others, however, argue that hope is necessary to thrive in an overwhelmingly hostile world. Indeed, hope can be explicitly forward-looking, characterised by action for change. For Solnit (2016) and Duggan and Muñoz (2009), despair and anger, rather than hopelessness itself, motivates us to hope, while John Holloway sees hope as driven by rage and rage infused with hope; hope becomes passive when it becomes diluted into 'let's close our eyes and everything will be alright' (Holloway, 2022, p.14). Theorising a critical modality of hope, Duggan and Muñoz (2009) argue that hope can be embedded

in a critical analysis of the present. In this way, hope can be reactive and also productive. Hope here is not an emotion but a practice motivated by despair, cynicism, anger and sadness at the contemporary socio-economic/political context. This concept of hope is characterised by critical thought, action and transformative behaviours; hope can mobilise us to change the present and to act for a better future. This framing of hope is exemplified in the coexistence rage, grief and 'forward directed energy' (Solnit, 2016, n.p.) of the Black Lives Matter movement and in its mission to 'provide hope and inspiration for collective action to build collective power to achieve collective transformation, rooted in grief and rage but pointed towards vision and dreams' (Cullors, cited in Solnit, 2016, n.p.). Uncertainty is integral to this hope, which is itself an embrace of the unknown and the unknowable (Solnit, 2016).

Solnit's (2016) and Duggan and Muñoz's (2009) advocacy of hope as action resonates with Lear's (2008, p. 103) commentary on 'radical hope':

> I would like to consider hope as it might arise at one of the limits of human existence . . . What makes this hope radical is that it is directed toward a future goodness that transcends the current ability to understand what it is. Radical hope anticipates a good for which those who have the hope as yet lack the appropriate concepts with which to understand it. What would it be for such hope to be justified?

Lear mobilises hope as a way of understanding and explicating transitions from a problematic status quo to a different future. The importance of combining hope with struggle if we are to make a transition to a different future features in the writings of Freire (2014), who argues that it is the work of struggle and action that prevents hope from becoming hopelessness, while for Ahmed (2017) hope does not come at the expense of struggle but rather animates it and makes struggle possible.

There are many ways then that we can imagine and work with hope. In contending with the varied nature of hope, Cuervo and Cook (2019, n.p.) argue that the very significance of hope lies in its diversity:

> It neither paralyses action when one cannot call up an object, nor promotes passivity because it is often a last recourse in dire circumstances. This is because of its very changeability; its ability to be maintained collectively despite a lack of structural support, as well as its ability to persist in a latent, non-representational form when representations prove unviable.

While some of this work resembles older traditions of 'critical' scholarship with 'progressive' or 'left' leanings, it is accompanied by a strong current of criticism of critical scholarship/theory. In their discussion of critical theory and hope scholarship, Kleist and Jansen (2016) contend that while 'critique' was often intended by its authors to pick holes in metanarratives of progress – capitalism, socialism, nationalism, etc. – it is now increasingly itself seen as beholden to them. Real hope, they argue, must be found outside of the framework of critique, 'which is considered to be ultimately rooted in self-defeating social constructivist hermeneutics that cannot do the politically important work necessary to radically interrogate contemporary thought and practice' (Kleist & Jansen, 2016, p. 379).

Through this article, we bring this theorisation of hope into direct conversation with the everyday practice of engaging in participatory research. Doing so creates a more

finely grained understanding of the ways and extent to which being part of participatory processes, often animated and motivated by anger and struggle, is itself constitutive and productive of hope.

Participatory research: Working and proceeding with hope

Participatory research starts with a recognition of the expertise that comes from experience, and the value and need to better incorporate this expertise in research processes (Lister, 2015, 2020). In the case of research on poverty and social security receipt, it challenges and undermines the misrecognition and disrespect that people in poverty routinely experience, and can be a powerful tool to counter the machine of anti-welfare commonsense. Participatory research is often – if not always – oriented firmly towards change-making; and the act of research *with* rather than *on* people (Bennett & Roberts, 2004) itself represents a deviation from, if not resistance to, the neoliberalisation of knowledge production within the academy, 'attempting to ensure that research is directed and owned by the collaborating communities' (Kennelly et al., 2023, p. 494).

We can draw strong parallels between theorisations of hope and the everyday work of participatory research, forward-looking and animated by change-making. Very often participatory research is grounded in and made possible by conceptualisations of hope, and it is often a form of hope motivated by anger at everyday inequalities and insecurities (see Duggan & Muñoz, 2009). Indeed, participants in Changing Realities routinely describe rage and despair as motivating factors behind getting involved in participatory research.

In recent work on Changing Realities, our focus is on poverty and social security receipt, areas which overlap closely with experiences of stigma and shame (Tyler, 2020). The promotion of stigma by policymakers can make it incredibly hard (if not impossible) for individuals facing these everyday realities to speak out and challenge their material conditions. As Lister once put it '"proud to be poor" is not a banner under which many want to march' (2004, n.p.). Instead, it is common to find individuals engaging in a defensive and counterproductive 'othering', where they accept the popular narrative of 'benefit scroungers' and 'welfare idleness' but shore up their own deservingness by pointing to the existence of a problematic 'other' (Lister, 2004).

But participatory research can disrupt this, creating opportunities for people in poverty to come together to forge connections and solidarity and create coalitions oriented towards change. Projects like Changing Realities can provide a forum to collectively challenge stigma and can create the conditions that potentially make the practice of hope possible. With the coming together of participants and researchers, participatory research can underpin a form of affective labour in the work of hope which is 'collective, intercorporeal and trans-subjective' (Kolehmainen & Mäkinen, 2021, p. 449). In this way, participatory research projects can lay vital groundwork to collectively galvanise hope and work towards a better, more hopeful, future. Furthermore, the very act of valuing and recognising the expertise of people living in poverty through participatory research is arguably itself an act of hope, and a challenge to the status quo (Patrick, 2020). It is also essential to build the case and conditions for real and lasting change. If we are to build an imaginative armoury for a better and different welfare future, it is essential that

individuals with direct experiences of poverty and social security are central to this effort (Jensen et al., 2019). But it is also vital to recognise the very real risks that come with hope-driven participatory research. We discuss these risks in later sections, reflecting on our own efforts to work with hope.

Hope-labour in action? A case study of Changing Realities

Between 2020 and 2024, we have worked in partnership with over 100 parents and carers, alongside a national charity (Child Poverty Action Group), and a range of arts-based practitioners, to document and seek to change the everyday realities of life on a low income for parents and carers in the UK. Activity largely takes place online; parents are invited to keep online diaries, which can address any topic of interest to the participant and can be written at a time and in a form that suits them. Since the initiation of Covid Realities, the predecessor to Changing Realities, in March 2020 there have been over 6000 online entries. In addition, participants can respond to video-elicited questions. These are questions posed, often on a weekly basis, by participants, members of the research team or external guests; questions often address timely issues, such as recent policy changes. Like the diaries, participants respond to these questions as and when they want, although many participants respond in the week the question is posted online. Participants collaborate through online discussion groups: these are held via Zoom on a roughly six-weekly basis. The online groups are a forum for participants to come together and discuss, in a structured way, policy and political issues, collectively develop recommendations for change, or reflect on the project itself, including its future direction and form. Participants also have the opportunity to engage in creative, arts-based methods to directly share their own experiences and priorities for change – including, but not limited to, zine making, sound recordings, writing workshops and creative journalling. Across the work, there is a significant emphasis on changing the public narrative and policymaking processes, with this supported by high-profile media appearances by participants, and by direct meetings (routinely but not always online) between policymakers, politicians and participants.

This work is rooted in a feminist ethics of care and reciprocity (Gilligan, 1982; Tronto, 1994), with the research team additionally prioritising efforts to soften but also to be honest about the nature and extent of the power differentials that exist between participants and the academic researchers. The researchers are transparent with participants about who they are and why they are doing the research, participants receive vouchers to thank them for their engagement in the project, and their input is factored into every stage of the process. For example, participants were involved in the development of the bespoke online platform through which diary entries and video answers are collected, while their preferences and ideas for activities are also foregrounded in collective decision-making about the research design and continuation of the programme. At the online discussion groups, participants work together and collaborate with the research and policy team members to co-produce recommendations for change, recommendations which are then disseminated through project outputs, including rapid-response reports (e.g. Power et al., 2023), books (e.g. Patrick et al., 2022) and briefings to policymakers (e.g. Parkes et al., 2023).

We now consider how and in what ways our participatory approach could be an example of working through and with hope – can we think of hope itself as a form of method

and can we delineate the *hope-labour* being conducted through these processes? We look at the various ways in which hope manifests in Changing Realities. In looking at participants' consideration of their personal and collective change-making, we reflect on whether Changing Realities plays a formative role in the development of participants' own 'ethics of revolutionary practice'. The empirical data on hope, included below, emerged from participant diary entries and from video-elicited questions addressing participants' hopes and fears about the future, their perceived ability to make change happen, and their reasons for being involved in Changing Realities. All data were analysed thematically, with an exploration of patterns within the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In total, there were over 260 comments from over 40 participants addressing these topics, ranging from one sentence to more than five paragraphs. Not all comments were positive about hope or the project, and negative comments are included in our discussion below.

The temporality of hope in Changing Realities

In our participatory practice and research, we critique the present and co-produce recommendations for the future. We have worked in partnership with participants, anti-poverty charities and think tanks to devise and publish policy-focused briefings on key areas of concern for participants, including mental health and Universal Credit (see Power et al., 2023), the inadequacy of government support for low-income families in response to the cost of living crisis (see Patrick et al., 2023), and the necessary changes to improve employment support provided by the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) and Jobcentres (see Parkes et al., 2023). Recommendations have been shared by participants in high-profile media interventions and directly with policymakers and politicians. Participants' individual and collective hope in a different future underpins this research and advocacy. The future here is specific – and this is arguably related to the particular focus of the project and the shared experiences of parents and carers living on a low income. The specific view of the future, which has been collectively designed by participants in successive discussion groups, is one in which the livelihoods and wellbeing of low-income families are protected and supported by the state, and specifically of a social security system which provides families with adequate income, and which operates with compassion and care.

In the latest stage of the project, participants shared their hopes for the next phase of work. Kim,[1] hinted at the radical bent of the project's ambitions:

> . . . with Changing Realities I hope that we continue to strive for reforms with the end goal of a fairer benefit system and a huge cut in poverty.

Ettie's articulation of hopes for the future were for specific systemic change: a new government and a reduction in poverty:

> My main hope is that we get a new government in 2024 that works to eradicate all the issues the current government have caused over the last 20 years. I'm trying to not have any fears – I'm staying positive that 2024 will be the year we can make a real difference to society and have a lot less people living in poverty.

Ettie's hopes for specific structural change were, however, tied to the more personal 'staying positive', introducing an element of passivity into what was otherwise collective action for specific change. The change 'hoped for' by participants was, despite the (intended) collective identity of Changing Realities, conceived by many participants on an individual level. Caroline, a lone parent living in Northern Ireland, oriented her hopes towards the need to actually change and improve her own material conditions:

> I guess what I hope to achieve through Changing Realities is that I can change, improve my learning and experience and then share my knowledge and motivate others struggling to take part and to use their voice in the best way they can.

Hoped-for improvement in personal circumstances, like that of Caroline, could slip into 'resilience', with participants focusing on rebuilding and maintaining confidence to recover from and withstand present hardships; here, hope could appear as a matter of 'coping' with the present rather than working for a different future, as articulated by Sadie:

> I think for me what has changed since I joined is that I have become more resilient . . . I have gained lots of beneficial knowledge about the work that's being done. My contributions have allowed me to rebuild my confidence that was destroyed by my ex-employer. This has allowed my family to see that adversity can hit hard but you can with courage stand up again.

Nevertheless, personal resilience, often marked by a growth in confidence, could underpin advocacy and activism for systemic changes, as in the case of Marcie. In response to the question 'what has changed since you joined Changing Realities?' Marcie said:

> . . . I've definitely grown in confidence around my ability to be taken seriously and to express myself in a way that has impact . . . Being part of Changing Realities has been a catalyst for me seeing myself as someone who is worth listening to. I already knew the term expert-by-experience, but now I actually understand what it means.

For Marcie, the project had been an important factor in her growing confidence and engagement in activism, providing opportunities to take part in policy development and advocacy; in this way, involvement in Changing Realities both helped Marcie to develop her skills and capacities but also contributed to her own self-identity as an activist.

Hope-labour in Changing Realities: Coming together as ethical and revolutionary citizens

Many participants' reflections on hope and change-making documented how they had transitioned through their involvement in the project into activists who felt ready to speak up and out. This journey towards an 'ethics of revolutionary practice' (Graeber, 2008, n.p.) was tied to the ways in which participation in the project created the conditions where participants could become activists, and self-identify as such with the roles of peer support and development of solidarity especially important here. Integral to this was the opportunity the project provided for low-income parents and carers to connect and share with each other experiences

of hardship and the harms caused by the social security system. Erik describes how participation had overturned the isolation and stigma of living in poverty and encouraged activism:

> Until I joined Covid Realities, at the start of the pandemic I had largely not tried or thought that there were any changes that I was able to make. I just felt like I was the only person struggling in the situation I was in and that it was of my own doing. It was only by attending the online meetings and listening to others' stories that I learned that change can be made and where to start looking for ways to make that change. I have managed to make some small change in my own situation but feel it is better to try and push for change across the whole of society.

The online Zoom discussion groups provided a forum for participants, like Erik, to share similar experiences and examine common root causes of poverty and stigma. Evelyn reflected on the impact of the project on her analysis of poverty:

> The experience of being involved in these has been so uplifting and there are so many reasons to never give up. I have become an activist, I have become a person who sees the truth behind so many things, that's priceless.

Libby and Missy spoke of the value of community in Changing Realities and how the project gave them a platform to focus their rage towards political change and provided some participants, like Missy, with the sense that they were being heard – a challenge of participatory research which we pick up on in later sections.

> You really get to feel 'part' of something real and game changing. We are more than just families spread across the country, we are actually a community of people, coming together for the better good of the community! (Libby)

> For me Changing Realities is giving me an opportunity to have my voice heard. When typing your frustrations out on social media, you might get sympathy and understanding for your friends and family but you don't feel as though anyone important is listening to you. With Changing Realities I think they give us that very important platform where people in power WILL hear your words. (Missy)

Izzy set out the required policy changes that had emerged from her discussions with other participants:

> Hearing everyone's stories, the support has been a lifeline! We need this support for people and campaigns to make life better, FSM [Free School Meals] for all primary children across the UK would be a great start, but universal basic income will also help and decent pay rises which value public sector and key workers who help others for a living.

From these online discussions emerged not only a collective analysis of the systemic causes of poverty but also a robust peer support network, founded in solidarity and care. Describing her experience of being part of the project, Evelyn reflected:

> I think the biggest change for me and for our household since I joined as it was then Covid Realities, has been that I'm less afraid to speak out and identify as somebody who is living in

> poverty. And I'm more inclined to challenge stigma, to challenge bias, and to challenge systems that really allow us to end up living this way. So I think probably that's the biggest change for me also, that I'm not alone. Knowing I'm not alone and knowing my son isn't alone allows me to be able to just stretch myself that little bit further, because I think that isolation and loneliness come as standard when you are living on a particularly low income.

Through participatory research, the parents and carers we have worked with realised the scope to be an integral part of change-making discussions, providing peer support to each another, dismantling poverty stigma, and building the confidence to speak out about the change they all want to see. This coming together, and the conditions (and work required) to make this possible, is a form of 'hope-labour' (following Kuehn & Corrigan, 2013), which is stimulated by the crisis context of the present, but firmly oriented towards building a more hopeful future (Back, 2021).

The cruel optimism of hope

However, of course, hoping and working for specific change on both an individual and collective level was not the same as achieving change. For many parents and carers involved in Changing Realities, life had got worse not better since the start of their involvement, despite all the efforts on the part of participants and research staff to advocate for change. Lilli emphasised the value of being part of the project and the peer support from other participants but also articulated the ambiguity, expressed by many participants, in campaigning for progressive change when in reality her financial circumstances were deteriorating:

> I am glad to be part of the Changing Realities team. I feel I am contributing towards something positive and many of the participants give me courage to continue. It is hard to keep going with the realisation that financially things have only changed for the worse for me and my family during the 7 months of participation, and there is no relief in sight. I really hope that collectively we can make huge changes for the future, so other people don't suffer such struggles to live.

Victoria, quoted at the start of this article, couched her hopes for a better future for herself and her children against recent history of governments who ignore, stigmatise or punish people living in poverty:

> On a personal level, I hope I finally get the therapy I've been waiting years for and that my kids don't experience hunger, cold or fear this year. My hopes for the nation is that no one starves, no one freezes to the point of ill health or harm . . . My fear is that our situations will only get worse, both on a personal level but also on a national one. I look at what the government has done to the most vulnerable, to the establishments that they rely on to survive, and I'm ashamed to call myself British. I'm ashamed at the fear mongering, the shameless lies and greed, the obvious manipulation and how lives are treated as less than cos it's cheaper. It sickens me and worries me. We have the knowledge and resources to do better, I hope we finally do, but I fear we won't . . .

Imagining a better future and working towards this can be exhausting and dispiriting in a context in which change for those living in poverty is hard-won. Florrie spoke of this sense of defeat and exhaustion:

> I feel very disheartened right now. Fighting for change is so tiring, and every day the world seems to be moving in the opposite direction. It just seems like life on a low income is being made harder and harder, it's getting worse not better.

Embedded in the name of the project is the idea of change and, in many ways, our work is underpinned by the belief that change *is* possible, otherwise why would we ask participants to devote their time and energies to imagine and campaign for change? Yet it is possible that the change that we imagine and work for in the project embodies a form of cruel optimism (Berlant, 2011), in which participants are given false, empty hope for a better future that, in reality, is very difficult to achieve. Roxy spoke of both her enjoyment in being part of the project as a space to 'vent' but expressed more negative feelings in her confusion and doubt about what the work aimed to achieve:

> I find it really good to have a place to say things . . . I would probably like to see some changes more, see what changes that you are trying to implement. Obviously, it's been going on for quite a while and things are only getting worse now. I mean, the gas and electricity help has stopped, but it's still pretty cold. So my bills have gone from £220 to now 300 and I don't see any changes. The prices in the supermarkets are still rising, wages haven't risen. I suppose the benefits due to rise, the payments that start affecting us next month. But is there anything in the pipeline that's about to change soon or anything that you are trying to get changed soon? Maybe letting people know what is happening a bit more just because it seems never ending at the minute. (Roxy)

It is very possible that the participants who cannot see hope or gain hope through the project either do not contribute via online diaries/responses to video elicited questions or, perceiving that the project may have little value for them, leave entirely. In Changing Realities we provide multiple and varied opportunities for participants to feed back and to shape the project's development; it is much harder nevertheless to change factors external to the project, such as the outlook of politicians and policymakers, than to change the internal day-to-day running of the work.

It has been important for us to hold and work through and with hope as we continue to collaborate on Changing Realities; however, we are keenly aware of the ethical challenges that underpin this programme of activity. These include the diverse ways those collaborating on the project (participants and researchers alike) are mobilising hope, and the different 'stakes' at play in our hope-labour, which requires carefully situated ethical practice.

Discussion: The ethics of hope in participatory practice

The first and most important ethical challenge that suffuses this work is the reality that the stakes of a failure to make change happen fall very unevenly. Put simply, for the research team, policy action that reduces poverty or signals investment in social security systems is unlikely to have an immediate or significant impact on daily lives. This is completely different for participants, for whom such change could make lasting and meaningful improvements to the living conditions and financial circumstances of them and their families. This disparity needs to be openly recognised and

acknowledged, with a parallel recognition that it means that the risks of a failure to make change also fall unevenly. Navigating this is far from easy – as with so much of participatory research (Janes, 2016; Kennelly et al., 2023) – but it is best done by creating spaces and time to think through what this means, and to facilitate the conditions for frank and often difficult conversations. We have sought to do this in Changing Realities, while also opening up our reflections to a wider community, for example by sharing short videos of excerpts from some of these conversations on our project website (see: https://changingrealities.org/).

A second challenge that we must work through is the (positive) tension between pushing for and seeking the often-radical change required and imagined by participants, and accepting and also working towards more pragmatic and incremental policy changes. Within the rubric of participatory research, we would argue that this can be a false dichotomy as the way of working can itself be radical and transformative – it underpins activism and can embody a form of care and democracy which is antithetical to neoliberal individualism. This way of working can then also be mobilised to seek more incremental changes, acknowledging that these changes will make a necessary (if incomplete) difference to the lives of sometimes millions of individuals. To give a concrete example, during the coronavirus pandemic we worked collaboratively as a team of parents, researchers and campaigners to push for the Westminster Government to maintain and make permanent a temporary £20 uplift to the main working-age social security benefit, Universal Credit. These efforts were partially, if not totally, successful, with the Westminster Government twice delaying the removal of the uplift, which was eventually removed in October 2021. The £20 uplift, even if it had been made permanent, represented only a sticking plaster (at best) for the UK's failing social security system. But it still represented a welcome improvement, and it made strategic sense to focus collective efforts on seeking to continue it. Significantly, these efforts always nested this within a broader call for investment in social security and the reimagination of this policy arena as a force for good. We persist in these efforts despite a keen awareness of the often-regressive impact of policy change, particularly that imposed on communities (see also Lea, 2020); and we would argue it is because of this tendency towards regressive policy decisions that the direct inclusion of people with lived experience of the issue at hand is so important in policy development.

We would encourage those engaging in change-based work to recognise how any tensions between radical imaginaries and incremental changes play out in their own research (Morris et al., 2021), but would also discourage simplistic readings of incremental, policy change efforts as being anti-hope. We can also make spaces to create change around what is currently possible, so long as we acknowledge this is neither enough, and so long as we root this change-based activity in a way of working and researching that is itself radical, hopeful and potentially transformative.

It is also important to recognise the extent to which the climate needed to do hope-based participatory research clashes with and is made much harder by the demands of the neoliberal academy (Erickson et al., 2021; McKeown, 2022). This is something which demands further research and exploration, teasing out the tensions and inconsistencies with growing calls for change-oriented and hopeful research and the barriers erected by an academy focused on performance and income generation. Here too, radical change is

required, and again there is a role for, and a value in hope-based activity. Participatory researchers alone cannot overturn the neoliberal academy, but they can work in a way that counters competition and centres marginalised and excluded people and ideas. There are examples of this happening both in participatory research but also in broader academic work that seeks to imagine and start the work of constructing a different, better future (Dukelow & Murphy, 2022; Gouache, 2022).

Conclusion: Hope, resistance and participatory research

In this article, we have set out how a seemingly hopeless policy context can create a condition of uncertainty and fuel the despair and anger that makes the work of hope possible. We have outlined diverse theorisations of hope to argue, like Cuervo and Cook (2019), that different modalities of hope coexist and are complementary – as they are in the participatory research project we discuss here. Participatory research, properly done, can constitute a form of hope-labour and in doing so can be generative of hope. In participatory research, participants and researchers can come together to become activists, and self-identify as such, encouraged by a strong peer support network. It is vital to recognise that participatory research can be aimed at a different – and radical – future, both because of its orientation towards delivering substantive changes (to policy/practice) but also, and significantly, because it foregrounds a fresh and different way of collaborating, and connecting – one that values and incorporates a diversity of voices and expertise and that promotes collaboration and collective self-determination rather than competition.

For us, what is especially important about 'hope' is the collision between imagining better while living with an unkind, and often brutal, present. It is work that must happen in the present, but that is oriented towards building a different future (see Back, 2021); and it can be variously ameliorative (and perhaps devoid of future realisation) and at times the seed of radical, even transformative change. As we have argued, making time and space to think and work with and through hope is itself an act of hope, and subverts the demands of everyday life. It is an act of resistance and challenge to a status quo, which in rendering us, in society more broadly and in academia specifically, overworked, insecure and seemingly in competition with our friends and peers (McKeown, 2022; Wilton & Ross, 2017), erodes the time we have and our capacity to hope. Participatory research then is an outward dedication of time, energies and resources to work in a way that counters competition and individualism bred by insecurity and an explicit attempt to create a more socially just and egalitarian future, both via modelling the change – towards collaboration and solidarity – that we wish to see and by collectively envisioning and campaigning for an egalitarian future underpinned by progressive policy change. Like direct action and political protest (Graeber, 2009), we would argue that participatory approaches threaten the status quo and constitute a radical act.

We opened this article with a diary entry from Victoria, reflecting on how she felt on receiving mouldy bread in a food parcel during the pandemic. During Changing Realities, Victoria also took part in writing workshops, where participants contributed short passages that we included in our jointly authored book (Patrick et al., 2022). We close this article with an extract from Victoria's writing, which makes a strong and unassailable case for the continuation and furtherance of hope-labour:

> People like to look back on history and read the diaries of real people, telling their real stories and experiences of the troubles that history books mark by dates and policies. To the future people who read this study, who read about the plights of us low-income families, know that I thank you for taking the time to look back on our nation's past. And heed this: learn from our mistakes. Value your undervalued . . . Maybe one day my children or grandchildren might read this study, might see these articles. Maybe someone will read about the woman who cries over bread . . . Perhaps people can learn from our voices . . . I'd be happy to be a whisper in history if in the future no one is left fearing homelessness or starvation. We have the resources. I hope the future will be more empathetic.

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