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Participatory Q: A Collaborative Approach to Q-Methodology

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Abstract

Participatory research continues to attract attention across academia, civil society, policymaking, and research funding landscapes. Yet Q methodology has not fully explored the full potential of participatory practice, despite its well-recognised democratic characteristics. In this article, we introduce 'Participatory Q', a co-productive reimagining of Q methodology, offered not as a prescriptive roadmap for a perfectly participatory approach (if such a thing were even possible), but as a research orientation that challenges researchers to work more collaboratively and reflexively. We propose Participatory Q as both a methodological and epistemological intervention, one that aims to de-centre dominant knowledge systems rooted in the colonial legacy of the Academy, and to foreground pluralistic, community-informed ways of knowing. Drawing on the Queering Shelter project - which explored the meanings of 'shelter', 'safe space', and 'home' among LGBTQ + communities in England, UK - we describe how participatory principles were integrated across all stages of the Q methodology process: from study design and concourse development to analysis and output creation. The aim for this article is to serve as a useful starting point on which others can build, in order to advance Q methodology practice in ways that are not only participatory in technique but also disruptive of epistemic hierarchies.

Keywords

coproduction, ppi, lgbt, queer, mixed methods, decolonial, epistemology, q-methodology

Introduction

Collaborative or 'participatory' approaches to social research have become increasingly popular in many 'geopolitical north'[1] contexts (Lee et al., 2023; Sheikhattari et al., 2023; Voorberg, 2017). Their social and theoretical development can be traced to the 1970s and 80s by scholars such as Fals-Borda (1987) and Freire (1970), and later research teams such as Swantz, Ndedya and Masaiganah (Swantz, Ndedya and Masaiganah (2006)) or Haque et al. (1997). The often-overlooked origins of participatory research theory in the 'geopolitical south' and global majority contexts are outlined by Caroline Lenette (2022), who highlights the need not only to promote participatory practice in academic research, but also to acknowledge and credit the foundational work on which these approaches are built, which lie outside of the geopolitical north.

In this article, we explore what we call Participatory Q: a collaborative and epistemologically reflexive reimagining of Q methodology. We argue that Participatory Q offers a means of not only enhancing co-production in practice but also challenging the colonial and scientistic knowledge hierarchies embedded within the Academy. To support this proposition, we begin by outlining the historical and epistemological foundations of participatory research, before turning to Q methodology as both a technical tool and a conceptual framework. We then describe how we developed a

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participatory approach to Q within the Queering Shelter project, including practical strategies and philosophical reflections drawn from that experience. Finally, we consider the implications of Participatory Q for future research.

Participatory research has now come to be understood by many as that which involves collaborative methods where individuals and communities represent partners, with meaningful engagement across all stages of the research process between academic and non-academic stakeholders (Armstrong & Alsop, 2010; Facer & Enright, 2016; Howard & Thomas-Hughes, 2021). Despite its popularisation, the potential for and approaches to participation and co-production have yet to be established in the context of Q methodology research: an approach developed in the 1930s (Stephenson, 1936) that combines qualitative and quantitative methods to study subjectivity, but which can be considered part of the "repertoire of qualitative research methods" (Shinebourne, 2009). Perhaps due to Q methodology's ambiguous epistemological and methodological affiliations, only two papers on the topic have been published in this journal so far, despite its "powerful capacity for thematic identification and analysis" (*ibid*., 2009).

In this article, we provide some background to both participatory approaches and Q methodology, before presenting how we integrated both to design a collaborative approach to Q methodology as part of the Queering Shelter project - a study exploring the experiences and understandings of 'shelter', 'safe space', and 'home' among LGBTQ + adults in England, UK. Discussions of 'participation' in Q methodology thus far have focused on how it can inherently be seen as a democratising approach to the study of subjectivity. We move this discussion forward and challenge Q methodologists to explore how they might advance their participatory practice through the *collaborative* design and delivery of future Q research, and through the epistemological shifts that may be linked to such a challenge. As such, when we use the term 'participation' in this article, we are not referring simply to the act of interlocutors taking part in an interview, survey or other data collection activity. Rather, we use 'participation' and 'participatory approaches' to refer to a broad umbrella of frameworks for public and/or community engagement practices in social research, and their philosophical roots (for an overview of the range of collaborative practices and engagement models, including co-production, co-design and community-based research, see Fransman, 2018).

Drawing on the Queering Shelter study, and the principles underlying it, we will demonstrate how participation can be integrated at each core stage of the Q methodology process. We present possible benefits and challenges, drawing on existing literature and the authors' experiences of working together to deliver an approach we term 'Participatory Q'.

We outline below how these participatory commitments are underpinned by broader concerns with epistemic dominance, extractive research, and the colonial legacy of academic institutions. Much of this context may already be familiar to some readers, but we include it here to clarify the philosophical ground on which Participatory Q is built.

The Potential Value and Values of Participatory Approaches

Academic research has, among some communities, been experienced as transactional or even exploitative and critiqued for its failure to sufficiently recognise the value of lived experience and extra-academic expertise (Campbell & Vanderhoven, 2016, p. 12). Increasingly academics, and their funders, are aware of the extractive tendencies that research has traditionally fallen foul of, in which researchers and/or research institutions replicate top-down power structures. This can be demonstrated in the way many academics have historically carried out social research – i.e. where researchers often stand to benefit in material terms from the study, but the communities they research do not benefit in ways that are desirable or meaningful for them, and where lived expertise is less well-regarded and well-rewarded than academic credentials.

A vast body of scholarship links such tendencies with the colonial legacy of the Academy (Fine, 2018; Seth, 2009; Stoler, 2009; Suárez-Krabbe, 2012); a legacy that also includes direct complicity in colonial and racist projects (Daniel, 2018). Scholars have documented how the development of scientific disciplines and pursuit of knowledge during the Enlightenment period in Europe, for example, served as a powerful tool for reinforcing imperial expansion (Henry & Tator, 2009; Nhemachena et al., 2016; Smith, 2021). Like raw materials and military force, knowledge and culture were systematically extracted, appropriated, and redistributed, shaping 'regimes of truth' that remain embedded in academic disciplines today (Fine, 2018; Seth, 2009; Stoler, 2009; Suárez-Krabbe, 2012).

A key concern is the view, still held within some (though not all) domains, that genuine knowledge may be derived only via a process of empirical observation, logic and the verification and/or falsification of hypotheses (Comte & Harrison, 1853). It is argued that this classical positivist view, and other forms of positivism it went on to inspire, has served the purpose of essentially dismissing other knowledge systems by positioning them as 'unscientific', including Indigenous knowledge systems (Smith, 2021; Nakata, 2007). At the same time, we see that the sciences - especially in health and 'psy' disciplines, but also the social sciences - have played central roles in efforts to subjugate colonised people and 'prove' the superiority of White colonisers (Beals et al., 2021; Khanna, 2003; Stoler, 2009; Zuberi, 2008). These colonial legacies persist within our disciplines and institutions, often manifesting as epistemic hierarchies that assert the 'scientific method' as inherently superior to all other ways of knowing. Cooke and Kothari (2001) identify this dynamic in international development research and practice today, even in the context of so-called 'participatory development'.

Rather than rejecting positivist traditions outright, the point here is not to dismiss the value of this sort of research but to critique its dominance when it marginalises or excludes other ways of knowing. The perspectives discussed above illuminate the imposition, both past and present, of Eurocentric 'scientific' epistemologies, knowledge hierarchies and value systems on communities targeted by research (Tamdgidi, 2012), particularly those in the geopolitical south or among marginalised groups in the geopolitical north, without due recognition of those communities' own worldviews. This epistemic dominance, in turn, poses a challenge to what we might call 'strong participation' in research - such as co-designed, co-produced, or survivor/community-led work (Kennedy et al., 2022) - which might aim to redistribute authority over knowledge production more fundamentally than 'weak participation' approaches that remain consultative or advisory without challenging epistemological norms.

We return to this tension later, but here we emphasise that a critical examination of the 'coloniality of knowledge' thus exposes how global majority epistemologies are persistently marginalised (Grosfoguel, 2013), or indeed their methods appropriated (Lenette, 2022), compelling an interrogation of the conditions under which subaltern voices are recognised and heard (for wider discussion, see Spivak, 1988). Such inquiries have led to calls for 'epistemic disobedience' as a direct challenge to Euro-American epistemological dominance (Mignolo, 2009). Challenges to the rigid disciplinary boundaries of 'Western' knowledge systems, within which valid and invalid ways of knowing and being are dictated, also emphasise the need to embrace hybridity and the in-between spaces that promise new possibilities – that which has been referred to as the epistemological 'borderlands' (Anzaldúa, 1987/1997; Krueger-Henney et al., 2023). Such responses to the coloniality of knowledge systems perhaps reflect the contention that "the moment has arrived to put the humanities at the service of decolonial projects in their ethical, political, and epistemic dimensions; to recast the reinscription of human dignity as a decolonial project" (Mignolo, 2006, p. 314) – a sentiment that we would argue is also applicable beyond the humanities alone, and which we attempted to adopt throughout the Queering Shelter project.

Participatory approaches often aim to challenge some of these inequities in research. Through the redistribution of power and resources among academic and non-academic researchers, the idea is that those individuals who might otherwise be considered 'subjects' of research gain more agency in the design and delivery of intended research goals and outputs. To ameliorate the epistemic bias outlined above, many participatory approaches actively seek a plurality of perspectives and approaches, seeing the intrinsic value of the knowledge that people hold about their own experiences and how to understand them (Cahill, 2007). This term 'participation' encompasses a range of approaches, from consulting with people who have lived experience of the topic in question on one end of the scale (what we tentatively call 'weak participation'), to shared leadership of all aspects of the study at the other end (or 'strong participation'). There are various frameworks for understanding this spectrum of approaches, including Arnstein's (1969) ladder of participation. More recently, some NGOs and third sector organisations have sought to develop their own frameworks of participation and co-production of research, better suited to the specificities of the communities they work with, including Survivor's Voices (presented in Kennedy et al., 2022), Think Local Act Personal, 2021 and Global Fund to End Modern Slavery and National Survivor Network (2023).

In our view, the value of participatory research lies in the belief that any transformative potential research holds begins with transforming the research process itself. Change does not simply follow from research findings, nor do researchers control how those findings are used. As the work drawn on in our discussion so far suggests, history has shown that academic knowledge production can lead to negative consequences, even if sometimes unintended. This underscores the necessity of *co*-producing knowledge in participatory ways, as a safeguard against research that risks being, at best, intellectually redundant and, at worst, actively harmful.

It is in this spirit that we feel it is also important not to gloss over the ways in which the wider take-up of participatory terminology is being 'hollowed out' and risks becoming a performative exercise. Growing acknowledgment of the importance of engaging those with lived experience of the phenomenon under study has gone hand in hand with the emergence of a sort of 'lived experience industry' (R. Újhadbor, personal communication, February 26, 2025). While not necessarily a problem in and of itself, the institutionalisation of lived experience risks reinforcing hierarchies in research rather than dismantling them, with far-reaching ontological implications. When professionalised, certain voices may be prioritised over others, with the potential to shape a curated reality that aligns with institutional interests – that is, the 'political co-option' of lived experience (Cooke & Kothari, 2001, p. 6). Moreover, lived experience may become treated as a fixed, stable category rather than a fluid, relational, and socially constructed reality, which risks essentialising and homogenising experiences. As a result of this professionalisation of lived experience, we sometimes see a depoliticisation of lived experience in research, with lived experience becoming a credential serving simply to reinforce the status quo (Groundswell, 2024, pp. 14-16).

Epistemologically, the implications of a 'lived experience industry' are equally concerning, raising questions of who gets to know and speak (Groundswell, 2024, p. 16). Privileging certain narratives over others replicates the very knowledge hierarchies that many survivor/service-user/lived-experience researchers strive to dismantle through co-productive practice. When collaborating with stakeholder communities in research we must remain attentive to who gets to represent a particular lived experience, as those in professionalised expert-by-experience roles may have a radically different experience

of oppression from many of those impacted by the research. Failing to do so risks reinforcing extractivist models of research and the difficult but vital work of 'strong participation' approaches, no matter how imperfect, can become sidelined. This issue has been highlighted by critiques of diversity, equality and inclusion (DEI) initiatives in geopolitical north contexts, and so-called 'decolonial' projects that then push ultra-nationalistic political agendas (Lewis & Lall, 2024; Moosavi, 2020).

Such challenges do not, in and of themselves, simply negate the value of collaborating with stakeholder communities in research as a means of fostering positive social transformation (Bell & Pahl, 2018, p. 105). Participatory research, we feel, holds real potential in generating the types of insight that might better effect change, and in ways that might better address the needs and wishes of individuals affected (Armstrong & Alsop, 2010; Campbell & Vanderhoven, 2016). Moreover, participatory methodologies can help build the right foundations for ensuring findings from research are more relevant to, and actionable by and/or for, the communities it has engaged (Israel et al., 1998).

Oliver et al. (2019) categorise these benefits as substantive, instrumental, normative and/or political. The latter is particularly emphasised by Cooke and Kothari (2001), who argue that the most significant potential of participatory approaches lies in the epistemological and ontological challenges it could level at epistemic coloniality in academia, more than the normative, substantive and instrumental benefits that may be brought by co-productive techniques in and of themselves. This framing is foundational to the methodological proposal we outline in this paper.

An area where participatory approaches have yet to take hold - in either their strictly technical or broader philosophical form - is in Q methodology research, used in a wide range of fields, including psychology, sociology, and political science, to study topics such as attitudes, values, and opinions. Traditionally, Q methodology research has been conducted using what might be described as a more 'top-down' design, with the planning, delivery, analysis and outputs of a study being led by researchers without significant input from community stakeholders or potential participants. However, this approach risks exacerbating inequity, epistemic injustice and knowledge hierarchies, and prevents research from being informed by the complexity and diversity of lived experiences of the subject in question. In response, this article proposes Participatory Q as a research orientation in which we challenge ourselves to explore ways of doing Q methodology collaboratively and responsively to the needs of the communities we work with, and perhaps sometimes are part of ourselves, in a way that does more than simply 'add involvement and stir'.

By using the term 'research orientation', we mean that we will try to avoid prescriptive methodological revisionism, whereby Q's technical mechanisms are simply replaced with more collaborative alternatives, resulting in surface-level shifts. Instead, we wish to describe how those more collaborative approaches stem from and can further cultivate a critical reflection on what reality is, whose reality matters, who gets to make truth claims, and what kind of knowledge counts. We work from the assumption that we will fail in some ways, knowing it is likely impossible to delineate or create a perfectly participatory approach working within academic institutions - if such a thing even exists. Failure and imperfection are messy realities we acknowledge, and we see them as creative openings through which we can explore how to refine our approach or change course. In this we also embrace and align ourselves with the 'queer art of failure' (Halberstam, 2011).

We hope to situate our discussion of Participatory Q within a 'decolonial imaginary' (Pérez, 1999) that is attentive to what emerges at the intersection of participatory approaches and Q methodology, between decolonial theory and queer theory. We also wish to align our exploration of a participatory approach to Q methodology with Pasler's (1997, p. 21) instruction not to dwell on pretensions of supposed novelty and 'innovation' or "what should be replaced or superseded with what", but instead to appreciate how our perspectives are "enriched by the presence of others". In this spirit, the objective of our article, therefore, is not merely to supplant Q methodology (or any methodology) with Participatory Q, but to explore its potential as a vehicle for helping dismantle epistemic hegemony within the Academy, in pursuit of more inclusive and pluralistic orientations to knowledge creation.

What is Q Methodology?

Q methodology is an approach established by Stephenson (1936), which uses 'quali-quantological' (Stenner & Rogers, 2004) methods in pursuit of a nuanced and systematic understanding of diverse subjectivities. If, as is posited in post-structuralist epistemological scholarship, subjectivity is constituted of interpellated social discourse circulating in macro, meso and micro contexts (Althusser, 1971/2009; Butler, 1997), Q methodology can thus be used to analyse social discourse (Burke, 2015; Stainton Rogers, 1997). In this way, Q methodology offers constructivist social researchers an insight into discursive realities by means of 'operant' - that is, self-referent and enacted - subjectivity.

Q methodology works by developing a set of statements, images, items or entities, via a comprehensive search of literature, websites, empirical data or otherwise and a process of curating those vast numbers of statements, images or items into a smaller yet diverse sample – the Q-set. Where the Q-set uses statements (as opposed to items, for example) participants are usually provided with a set of physical or virtual cards, each containing one of the statements. A participant would ordinarily be presented with a forced-choice distribution grid, typically ranging from most agreeable to least agreeable. Using this grid, they would be invited to sort the Q-set according to the degree of representativeness or alignment of each statement with their particular viewpoint, until all

statements are placed. The resulting data is then analysed using a form of factor analysis, a statistical technique that identifies clusters of shared preferences and attitudes. The approach taken in Q methodology has been described as 'inverse' factor analysis, owing to the fact that the statements themselves constitute the 'sample' for analysis, and the individuals represent the variables - rather than the other way around, characteristic of traditional factor analysis. The factors identified in the analysis can be interpreted as identifiable axes of subjective viewpoints and, by extension, interpellated social discourse, usually also informed by accompanying qualitative data.

Thus, Q methodology is an approach which emphasises integrating the subjective experiences and understandings of people into quantitative data, setting it apart from more traditional ("R methodology" - Brown, 1996) quantitative methods that are more aligned with positivist epistemology (Stainton Rogers, 1995). Watts and Stenner (2012) add that Q methodology enables researchers to take into account the range of different perspectives that may exist on an issue, regardless of the popularity of these views within the communities of interest, given its prioritisation of diversity over frequency. Q methodology is thought by many to be an approach that is inherently participatory, in light of how individuals' card sorts each make an active statistical contribution to the analysis, without outliers being excluded or minimised (an acceptable practice in much quantitative work); and without contributions deemed insignificant being deprioritised in analytical discussion (as can be the case in much qualitative work). This is undoubtedly an asset of Q methodology. However, we suggest that its democratic potential can be extended further.

Towards 'Participatory Q': Queer Theory and the Queering Shelter Study

Queering Shelter is a study seeking to explore the discourses around 'shelter' and the related concepts of 'safe space' and 'home' among LGBTQ + people with lived experience relating to these things (or being without them). This project asks: what does 'shelter', 'safe space' and 'home' look like for queer people? And what do we need from services aiming to provide them? The study explores different answers to these questions, so that we can advocate for new projects, better policies and improved services.

Queer theory is at the heart of this work. Academics have often highlighted the impossibility of producing a concrete definition for that, which has come to be known as "queer" (Boellstorff, 2007, p. 19). However, we follow Berlant and Warner's (1995) view that underlying queer research is a commitment to 'queering' understandings of the (gendered/sexual) world; that is interrogating dominant, taken for granted ideas about gender, sex and sexuality, and examining whose interests those ideas serve and to what ends. While the project does not attempt to delineate all that queer research could be said to encompass, it follows several key principles inspired by queer theory, and critical theory more broadly, as we understand it:

- Acknowledging the politically-situated character of all research
- Interrogating dominant taken-for-granted understandings of the world (especially the gendered/sexual world, which is intricately connected to other axes of meaning-making, including but not limited to class, disability, neurodiversity race, caste, age and more.)
- Accounting for diversity (especially gender and sexual diversity) and paying attention to who gets to be acknowledged and heard, whose definitions count, whose needs are met.
- Helping dismantle inequity and oppression felt most strongly by those with marginalised or minoritised identities and experiences (including but not limited to non-normative sexual and/or gender identities and their intersection with class, disability, neurodiversity race, caste, age and beyond).

A participatory approach to Q methodology, or 'Participatory Q' as we refer to it in this article, has offered a way to foster these principles in the context of the Queering Shelter study. Likewise in reverse, queer theory has offered a lens through which to reconfigure Q methodology in a more participatory form.

At the same time, this reconfiguration aligns with the article's broader epistemological commitments. In particular, bell hooks' (1984) articulation of the 'margin' as a space of resistance is useful here: while queer theory challenges (among other things) the normative structures of gender and sexuality, decolonial thought critiques (among other things) the colonial hierarchies that shape knowledge production itself. In engaging with the concept of margins, we do not see them as fixed, essential, or inevitable. We understand marginalisation as an active process, not a static status. To centre the margins is not to reify them, but to disrupt the idea that there must be margins at all. It is our view that both queer and decolonial thought call for an interrogation of the very structures that create exclusion in the first place, demanding not just the inclusion of those historically left out, but a radical transformation of the systems that position some as central and others as peripheral. It is through this convergence of queer and decolonial thinking that we begin to articulate the epistemological foundations of Participatory Q.

Practical Challenges to Participation in Q

Despite the benefits of participatory approaches in Q methodology, integrating them into traditional research practices presents challenges. Eisenhart (2019) and McQuinston et al. (2005) highlight tensions in participatory ethnography,

including its complexity, time demands, and the steep learning curve for both academics and non-academics. We encountered similar obstacles in Participatory Q. Academics engaging in such research may need new skills to build meaningful community relationships, navigate power dynamics, and create spaces where diverse perspectives and expertise are valued. DiGirolamo et al. (2012) identify key training needs for US health researchers, including partnership-building, participatory analysis, and evaluation techniques. Importantly, however, we feel training must also address the foundations of academic research, its epistemological and ontological biases, and the enduring impact of these on knowledge hierarchies today.

In health research, Lazarus et al. (2012) highlight tensions in participatory approaches, particularly misaligned research priorities between academics, community leaders, and policymakers. We found similar challenges in our Participatory Q work. While participation enhances research relevance, it can also expose power imbalances, in keeping with wider decolonial critiques of academic knowledge production. The hierarchical nature of research institutions often privileges academic discourse over lived experience, a pattern often mirrored in policy and governance.

These power dynamics are further compounded by unequal access to research funding, typically restricted to senior academics. This creates barriers at the funding application stage, where detailed study plans are required, yet resources to involve community stakeholders in project design are rarely available. As a result, marginalised communities are often excluded from shaping the research or must contribute their time and resources without support.

Other difficulties pertain to wider institutional constraints and, importantly, the risk of tokenism, as touched upon earlier in the article, whereby the idea of co-production in theory is 'hollowed out' in practice, in order to tick a 'participation' or 'PPI'[2] box. This carries significant consequences, including the risk of the research then taking a substantial emotional toll and enacting harm on those seeking meaningful input into the design and delivery of research.

In this context, we understand Participatory Q not as a perfected model but as an evolving practice shaped by these tensions.

Participatory Q in Practice

There are a number of stages to a Q study, all of which offer the potential for participatory practice.

Establishing Shared Values

An important first step for the research team was establishing shared values and principles for collaboration. The working group consisted of the project lead, and five community consultants - LGBTQ + artists, activists and/or academics with life experience relating in some way to (lack of/) shelter, safety or home. Several months were dedicated to creating a 'vibe' within the group, characterised by a core set of values:

People Not Numbers. Reflecting the Academy's historical function as a tool of subjugation, criticism of academic research often highlights the tendency to treat participants as mere data sources and subjects rather than individuals. Rejecting this approach, we prioritised respect, gratitude, and responsiveness to participants' needs, remaining attentive to the historical and social contexts shaping our interactions and the harms participants may have experienced in research or service settings. In doing so, we resisted the decontextualising tendency of much positivist inquiry. In keeping with decolonial principles, we also challenged extractive research norms, such as the assumption that researchers' time is somehow more valuable than participants'. This commitment was not just rhetorical but something we tried to enact in practice. Some engagements spanned multiple afternoons rather than rigid time slots; others required months of flexibility to accommodate participants' commitments or health needs. Some opted out of interviews or preferred intermittent engagement. To support this, we introduced an online interface and instructional videos, enabling independent Q sorting. At its core, this approach prioritised respect and relationship-building over data. Reaching expected 'data collection' targets was secondary to facilitating participants' autonomy and well-being. Regardless of participation level, all individuals were fully compensated - a practice not always upheld, even in participatory research.

In opposition to 'damage-centred approaches' (Tuck, 2009), we also sought to celebrate the creativity, insight, and strengths of the communities we worked with and were often part of. Building long-term relationships of care and reciprocity was, and remains, central to the Queering Shelter project. To support this, we launched Beyond Do No Harm, a creative programme that continues beyond the project timeline as The Reject Lounge. This initiative has included graffiti workshops, crochet, creative writing, zine-making, and theatre and movement activities, offering participants new avenues for community, meaning, and joy through self-expression. Through artistic practice, participating artists and facilitators explored diverse understandings and experiences of shelter. Instead of traditional evaluations like post-event questionnaires, we drew on creative evaluation methods (Boleman et al., 2009; Christensen et al., 2005; Christou et al., 2021; Manohar et al., 2016; Owen et al., 2022; Simons & McCormack, 2007), inviting participants to share reflections in ways that enriched rather than interrupted the workshop experience.

Arts-based practice was central to our approach, particularly within academic institutions that often marginalise creative research. Since the Enlightenment, rational, objective knowledge - closely tied to white male authority - has been privileged, while other ways of knowing have been dismissed as 'uncivilised' or 'unreasoned' (Smith, 2021, p. 32). These power dynamics persist, reinforcing the devaluation of

creative methodologies in favour of positivist inquiry. For this reason, we saw participatory arts as a powerful challenge to conventional academic notions of knowledge creation (Meer & Müller, 2023; Samuel & Ortiz, 2021; Santana & Akhurst, 2021; Seppälä et al., 2021).

Finally, a key priority for the legacy of this project was to provide a way for the artists (that is, the workshop participants) to enjoy and interact with the pieces they created and foster a sense of having participated in a project that 'meant something' to them and the community. To achieve these goals, the team settled on an exhibition at a community centre for LGBTQ + people, a place frequented by many of those involved in the workshops. Displaying the art pieces first and foremost in a community space, instead of a university or more formal exhibition space, offers a way to resist the tendency in some research contexts to exhibit creative outputs in places that are often experienced as uncomfortable or even hostile to those who may not occupy particular positions of privilege. It also serves as a response not only to epistemological questions like who gets to know and speak, but also who gets to hear and appreciate, both arguably equally important.

Impact as also 'Micro' Not Just 'Macro'. Rather than only expecting immediate, tangible, measurable impacts from the project, such as clinical outcomes or policy developments, we embraced the fact that complex experiences, like co-creating a piece of art, have a unique and significant kind of impact, more on the lines of personal significance or meaningfulness – what we call 'meaning in the making' (Annand et al., 2023a). In other uses of this term, 'meaning in the making' describes an analytical process of exploring or expressing interpretations of a phenomenon through creative means (Abrams & LaRocca, 2020; Sawyer & Norris, 2009). For us though, more akin to Tucker (2021) and Dissanayake (1995), 'meaning in the making' does not refer to an analytical technique, but to the process of bringing into being experiences of personal significance, of meaningfulness, over the course of a project. Diverging from Tucker and Dissanayake, though, we decouple the concept from strictly crafting or arts contexts, with the 'making' element potentially referring to all kinds of (co) creative activities, including research.

Facilitating personally meaningful activities is crucial, particularly for LGBTQ + people with experiences of homelessness or other forms of being without shelter (and no doubt other groups beyond this demographic), as healing is rarely linear and social change rarely straightforward. While research can contribute to broader transformations, no single study can enact a radical, immediate overhaul of systemic issues. As such, in the meantime, meaningful day-to-day experiences that make a small-scale but real-life difference (be that connection, community, solidarity, or something else) matter. However, valuing the personal and micro does not mean neglecting the political and macro. As Cooke & Kothari (2001, p. 14) warn, "An emphasis on the micro… can sometimes obscure, and even sustain, broader macro-level inequalities and injustice." Rather, by attending to such injustices, particularly those tied to institutional prescriptions of what sort of outcomes 'count' or represent easily marketable 'impact', we consider how a focus on the micro can be a means of engaging with and addressing macro-level concerns.

As part of the Beyond Do No Harm project, we further explored these issues through a frank discussion on the academic impact agenda and its effects on academic-community collaborations. A roundtable of over 40 stakeholders - including LGBTQ+ people with lived experience related to the project, cultural and community organisations, housing groups, artists, and activists - examined how the UK Research Excellence Framework (REF) can conflict with the outcomes valued by community groups, potentially replicating the extractive and dismissive tendencies of the Academy critiqued by decolonial scholars. The resulting report offered recommendations for institutions and funders to realign priorities and decision-making to better serve both academic and community needs (Annand et al., 2023a).

In recognition of this, a 'slow launch' was deemed to be a more appropriate approach to honouring the art created than the traditional public launch event that might usually be expected of an arts programme. There is value in embracing the unfinished step-by-step process behind an exhibition of the work created together, in a way that allows the art (and artists) to inhabit the space more harmoniously with the existing contents and characteristics of the place where it will live. Such an approach allows for more of a two-way dialogue to be facilitated within and across the community, rather than an entirely outward-looking – and short lived – show and tell.

Challenging Knowledge Hierarchies. For us, the will to question knowledge hierarchies stems from a belief that lived experience is valuable knowledge and knowledge systems that do not align with positivism ought not to be erased or dismissed. Academic conventions that prioritise formal qualifications and professional status were felt not to be appropriate in the context of the Queering Shelter study and we thereby sought to challenge them.

Formally, we established a system of consistent payment rates across the working group, applicable to all community consultants regardless of formal qualifications. The rate itself was decided in a collaborative discussion with the working group at the outset of the project. This strategy was adopted in recognition of the fact that all working group members were invited to join the project because of their expertise – whether lived, professional or both/beyond. In this context, the value of each person's contribution to the study cannot be equated to formal or professional qualifications.

Informally, we reflected on our positions as both 'researcher' and 'community member'. This multiplicity of status brought many advantages in terms of lived experience-informed research and prompted us to further question the hard line that is often drawn between 'who researches' and 'who is researched'. This was particularly pertinent when it

came to navigating the parameters of the 'steering/expert group' and the 'participant group'. This discussion ultimately led us to blur the boundaries between the two, in recognition of the power dynamics that this sort of strict distinction often entails.

Establishing core principles, such as those described above, helped to direct the focus of our work with reference to a shared vision of what success could look like. While our approach was informal, structured tools like the 'values card sort' (Miller et al., 2001) can support teams seeking a more systematic method. Rather than defining values only at the outset, we aimed to enact them iteratively throughout the research process. In our view, it is through actioning these values that Participatory Q can make meaningful political and philosophical contributions, beyond just technical advancements.

Study Co-design

A fundamental step in any Q study is its design and conception. Embedding participation at this stage allows the research question to be co-developed with researchers and stakeholders. Facer and Enright (2016) suggest this can involve focus groups or design workshops, where stakeholders and potential participants act as partners with the power to initiate, (co-)lead, and make decisions. Such collaboration ensures the research is relevant and practically usable beyond academia while also minimising harm and maximising benefits for those involved. Crucially, adopting a collaborative approach is both an ethical and political necessity, given the epistemic erasure and knowledge hierarchies that, as discussed, often characterise academic research.

Our methodology draws on Freire's (1970) critical pedagogy, which emphasises co-producing knowledge rather than imposing dominant ideologies. Instead of indoctrination, Freire advocates fostering critical consciousness, revealing the social processes that obscure and sustain structures of domination. He argues that meaningful change can only be led by those with lived experience of disadvantage (*ibid*. 1970, p. 27). Accordingly, it was important for us that the Queering Shelter study was designed by and with people affected by the types of oppression that the research set out to examine, while recognising the limitations of our approach and the challenges we faced. For example, prior to the development of the study, the project lead consulted informally with their own networks on the topic of study and its proposed aims, before putting together a two-page research brief. While these networks included people with experience of (being without) shelter, safe spaces and/or home, it was nonetheless a small group of people consulted at this early stage. As already discussed, researchers often encounter issues at this point, given the limited funding available to pay community stakeholders to input into the development of a project proposal before grant funding has been secured. This is symptomatic of the structurally produced limits to participatory research that, as Cooke & Kothari (2001, p. 4) caution, risk leading to 'tyranny' in efforts to deliver it.

As an imperfect workaround, initial discussions helped shape the project's parameters, with the study's precise design co-produced with community stakeholders once funding was secured. At that stage, the two-page Queering Shelter brief was re-worked into a full research protocol with input from five academic and community stakeholders, including the authors of this article. Our involvement was supported by bespoke Q methodology training. As individuals we bring experiences of migration, racialisation, queerness, gender fluidity, disability, domestic and/or sexual violence, homelessness and housing precarity, and other social locations related to 'shelter' (and/or the absence of it). We work across several fields, including academia, not for profit organisations, and the arts. We recognise that our links to institutions in academia, civil society and the arts grant certain privileges, even if our routes to such affiliations may have been unconventional and reflective of our different life experiences. At the same time, we appreciate our personal affinities with communities often excluded from or disregarded by those institutions. To expand participation beyond our core group, we engaged community organisations and individuals through a programme of arts workshops. This process led to us broadening the study's original theoretical focus on 'shelter' to include two additional strands with applied relevance: 'safe spaces' and 'home'.

While this approach fostered a more participatory research design, it had limitations. We used consultancy contracts to compensate working group members without academic posts, based on individual circumstances and administrative feasibility. However, offering long-term employment alongside consultancies could have enabled broader participation, particularly for those with visa restrictions on freelance work or those needing greater income security - an advocacy aim we continue to pursue. The team size was dictated by budget constraints. A group of five was chosen to ensure fair compensation while allowing sustained engagement throughout the project. This was critical given the risk of co-production replicating exploitative dynamics, where unpaid or underpaid labour subsidises funding gaps (Fotaki, 2015; Farr, 2018; Annand et al., 2023b). It also prevented limiting participation to a few hours or involving consultants only at later stages, both of which would undermine meaningful input. In precarious research funding landscapes, it is vital to assess whether available resources can support participatory research ethically and effectively. Open and transparent dialogue with stakeholders about those resource constraints was a central part of our process.

Collaborative Concourse Development

In Q methodology, developing the concourse involves gathering and extracting relevant statements from literature and empirical data. In our study, we adopted a collaborative approach, engaging stakeholders through in-person workshops

and online platforms like Padlet. We also held discussions on key search terms, shared source ideas via Microsoft Teams, and conducted co-working sessions where team members searched different databases.

To extract statements, we used Leximancer, a text-mining tool, which helped us identify approximately 200 statements each for 'shelter,' 'safe spaces,' and 'home.' While extended co-working sessions could have enabled collaborative manual extraction, time permitting, we opted for Leximancer due to its evidence-based utility (Lemon & Hayes, 2020; Smith & Humphreys, 2006) and its efficiency. This allowed us to dedicate more time elsewhere, whether further developing our co-productive practice or simply looking after our own health and wellbeing. The latter can often go overlooked, but Audre Lorde (1988) reminds us that prioritising self-care is a radical act in the face of racism, sexism and homophobia, serving to assert one's inherent value and reject narratives that some lives matter less. In this way, concourse development became not just a technical step but an extension of our broader values and working principles.

Collaborative Q-Set Development

A key phase in Q methodology is developing the Q-set by organising, refining, and reducing statements to capture a broad yet manageable range of perspectives (Watts & Stenner, 2012). In the Queering Shelter project, we collaboratively reviewed statements using Microsoft Excel via video conferencing and asynchronous work. To refine the concourse into a Q-set, we used Miro, a digital collaboration tool with greater interactive functionality than Padlet. Each team member identified top-level themes, then iteratively organised statements within them. Initially, some statements overlapped or didn't fit neatly, so the activity was attempted again. This produced a workable framework for organising the statements, wherein statement categorisation was felt not to be 'forced' and with little ambiguity over which statement would sit under which category.

Reviewing statements for clarity and comprehensibility was essential to ensure participants could interpret them accurately during sorting, a common step in Q methodology. We refined statements both asynchronously and in online meetings using Excel. Further revisions followed trial Q sorts, where team members practiced the sorting process and provided feedback on wording. Light trial-runs with individuals outside the core team further strengthened this phase.

Beyond improving intelligibility, this collaborative approach prevented decision-making from resting solely with one academic lead. Instead, it fostered epistemological pluriversality, helping in turn to generate more ontologically diverse insights (Mignolo, 2007). In doing so, for us, the Q-set became both a research instrument and a site of epistemic negotiation in its development, reflecting the plural values of Participatory Q.

Collaborative Analysis and Interpretation

The interpretation of the results can also be a collaborative process between academics, community stakeholders, and participants, allowing for a deeper understanding of the findings and increasing the likelihood of the research having sufficient relevance to inform practice (Greenhalgh et al., 2016). At the time of writing, data analysis is ongoing. So far, anonymised quantitative data has been exported into a 'crib sheet' (Watts & Stenner, 2012), with the working group meeting in person and online for familiarisation and initial analysis. We reviewed factor arrays – that is, aggregated Q sorts - by extracting distinguishing statements and organising them into a four-part grid. Each team member analysed a factor, reflecting on coherence, contradictions, and real-world relevance before summarising its key discourse. This iterative process refined initial interpretations.

The initial interpretations will in turn inform the content and structure of two data workshops in which all participants, and a wider expert group made up of people with academic professional and/or lived expertise, will be invited to take part in a paid capacity. The aim of the first workshop will be to share perspectives on the initial interpretations and adapt, refine or re-interpret them accordingly. Thereafter, we plan to review the accompanying qualitative data in light of the re-formulated factor interpretations and return for another data workshop, wherein participants will be invited to examine data excerpts and review the pre-final factors and interpretations thereof. We hope to supplement these focused workshops with more unstructured creative workshops to facilitate further reflection. In this way, we aim to expand participation and gain input into the analysis and interpretation that goes beyond the core working group.[3]

Collaborative Output Development

For us, ensuring that outputs are meaningful at the meso and micro levels - for community organisations, services, and individuals - is just as important as achieving broader socio-political impact. We aim to prioritise collaborative outputs with direct community relevance while recognising their potential influence on wider society and policy. To this end, we plan to hold workshops with community organisation representatives and members, using ideation, priority-setting, and consensus-building activities to determine and co-develop academic and creative outputs. This approach challenges the notion that only academics can produce 'valid' research and that only academic outputs are worth publishing, aligning with the political and philosophical shifts we hope Participatory Q will help advance.

Conclusion

In summary, we have found that collaborative decision-making, development, and delivery of Q research with

community stakeholders is not only possible but also offers opportunities to enhance research integrity, quality, and epistemological and ontological depth. While LGBTQ + perspectives formed the backdrop and focus of our study, we would like to end by emphasising the relevance of Participatory Q for other subject areas and hope that this approach will be taken up across different disciplines. Participatory Q may align well with the kinds of 'critical public science' advocated by Fine (2018); that is, research which endeavours to question who it is (or should be) accountable to, and resist the dominance of Eurocentric knowledge systems and their epistemological erasures.

Both queer and decolonial theory can be said to challenge fixed categories - whether of identity, knowledge or power - disrupt imposed hierarchies, and centre knowledges historically excluded. We have tried to present Participatory Q in a way that reflects this, by going beyond simply listing techniques for improving 'lived experience involvement' in Q methodology. These, if taken alone, have the potential to be co-opted and hollowed out. Instead, we aimed to couple these technical descriptions with an interrogation of the norms and traditions that that sustain marginality in knowledge production practices in the first place, and show how Participatory Q can be adopted in ways that help challenge these.

We hope that in putting forward a Participatory orientation to Q, this article serves as a point of discussion for others considering adopting a Q approach to their research, prompting critical reflection on not just how Participatory Q might be done but also if and how it might also be done in a way that is epistemologically disruptive. We do not propose Participatory Q as a perfected model, but as an ongoing invitation to reimagine what Q methodology can do, and for whom.

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Ethical Consideration

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Notes

1. We use the term "geopolitical north/south" rather than 'global north/south' per Annand et al. (2023a) to emphasise that these are historically produced, politically contingent categories. They describe relational positions in global systems of economic, political, technological and epistemic power and thus exceed purely geographic delineation.
2. PPI stands for 'patient and public involvement' and is a term for participatory research approaches increasingly used in health settings.
3. In our view it would be possible with a more substantial co-production budget to expand this sort of participation exponentially, in order to more fully overcome issues associated with researcher re-interpretation of participants' input that Burke (2015) identifies in her post-colonial augmentation of Q technique.

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