

Researcher Self-Disclosure within Feminist Participatory Action Research: A Methodological Discussion

Abstract

Public health services now increasingly request research contributions from experts by experience. However, little is known about how this can best be facilitated. This paper introduces researcher self-disclosure (RSD) as a creative and innovative approach to addressing this limitation. By drawing on a project which explored recovery from childhood trauma, we highlight the opportunities and challenges of using RSD from the perspectives of both the researcher and participants (i.e., co-researcher). In this discussion, we emphasise relevant research design components, such as data generation methods, as important facilitators for this approach. Lastly, we offer learning points about ethical and practical considerations to aid future researchers in disclosing to invite their co-researchers into deeper discussions rather than to ‘story-top’ or silence. By introducing this innovative practice, we seek to inspire an added level of creativity and engagement for co-researchers, which also aligns with the overall ethos of any participatory research design: facilitating emancipatory spaces, recognising the many ways in which the voices of those researched can be shared, and becoming advocates for change.

Keywords: co-production; participatory action; new materialism; creative practice; trauma; mental health; recovery; researcher self-disclosure

Introduction

Social science research has increasingly emphasised public involvement in mobilising findings across various stakeholder groups (Smith et al. 2022; UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) 2024a). Scientists and citizens alike have acknowledged the importance of applying research to inform and develop public services meaningfully. Among public health services, *user-led* research, or research conducted with experts by experience, has increasingly gained favour (Osborne, Radnor, and Strokosch 2016; Näslund, Grim, and Markström 2023; Happell et al. 2023). Specifically, if the aim of research was to improve service governance or confront barriers and inequalities within service provision (National Institute for Health and Care Research (NIHR) 2024; Nabatchi, Sancino, and Sicilia 2017). Despite this demand, there remains a challenge for appropriately presenting or conducting research which is both scientifically rigorous and honours the more subjective, nuanced lived experience expertise of those engaged. To address this, qualitative researchers have increasingly utilised arts-based methods (AMBs) for data generation, data analysis, and recruitment of participants/co-researchers (see Morgan and Castle (2023) and Skains (2018)). However, there remain tensions between those who engage with such research methods and those who are more aligned with positivism.

One practice which holds the potential to address the abovementioned dilemma, across a range of research settings, is researcher self-disclosure (RSD). It involves the researcher's intentional sharing of personal lived experiences if those align with the topic being investigated. Unlike researcher reflexivity or positionality, which acknowledges the researcher's biases and contextual influences, RSD emphasises relational moments that can inspire shared sense-making. Self-disclosure has traditionally been defined as the act of telling someone personal information due to an

internal desire to share thoughts or feelings (Jourard 1971). Within the field of psychology, therapists are generally advised against disclosing personal information to a client, the main argument being that it could risk countertransference or unnecessarily burden a client (Sunderani and Moodley 2020); however, some psychotherapeutic environments acknowledge that self-disclosure can generate empathy, emphasise client-centredness and yield relational benefits (Marais and McBeat 2021; Alva, Antony, and Kataria 2024). Within scientific research, and primarily qualitative research approaches, self-disclosure is typically made in writing, by using a reflexive journal (Bucholtz et al. 2023). However, the practice of disclosing the researcher's experiences to participants or co-researchers directly, where the researcher *has* lived experience of the topic being researched, remains vastly underexplored (Marais and McBeat 2021).

In this paper, we explore how RSD can be guided by, and be employed within, participatory research designs. Specifically, we aim 1) to introduce how RSD can be conceptualised for participatory research, 2) to highlight how RSD might be applied in participatory research, and 3) to critically discuss any ethical, practical and methodological tensions or opportunities which the application of RSD might raise. First, we introduce the concept of RSD as a practice, including an overview of relevant literature, and propose a methodological re-consideration for a more appropriate (re)conceptualisation of self-disclosure within research. Second, we highlight design components which would create an effective research environment for applying RSD. Third, we outline a case study, which was part of a larger doctoral project exploring recovery from psychological trauma during childhood (henceforth, childhood trauma), to further create context for the subsequent critical discussion. This will also aid the reader, as we will be referring to the case throughout the paper. In a fourth section, we

critically discuss the tensions and opportunities that arise from applying RSD. The fifth and final section offers recommendations for future research and practice. We conclude the paper by encouraging researchers and practitioners to consider RSD as a tool to guide participatory research and how this might enhance co-researcher engagement and data generation.

How is Researcher Self-Disclosure Conceptualised within Research?

Within scientific research, RSD has traditionally been aligned with the practice of reflexivity and researcher positionality. While acknowledging the substantial literature around these two areas, we argue that much insight reflects on the importance of disclosing positionality through reflective accounts or how disclosure with co-researchers may impact the research. Reflexive practices and researcher positionality have often shared an entangled, rich, and broad literature base spanning over half a century. Throughout this time, reflexivity has been comprehended and utilised differently. For instance, Olmos-Vega et al. (2023) suggest that reflexivity is an approach to understanding and reducing researcher bias within the research process by objectively examining biases, experiences and unconscious practices. Conversely, subjective insight has used reflexivity to make transparent how the researcher's orientation or privilege may have influenced the research (Savolainen et al. 2023). Lastly, researcher subjectivity has increasingly been capitalised on and, in some instances, woven into the fabric of the research design in participatory or co-production stances (Cinamon Nair and Fabian 2024). These have been considered opportune environments for co-produced reflexivity due to their empowering and emancipatory potential (von Unger et al. 2022).

Researcher positionality holds similar definitions and uses within research as reflexivity. For researchers, positionality often calls for open reflection and disclosure of how their unconscious or conscious biases and social identities (gender, age, race, class and experiences) may intersect and impact the research (Phillippo and Nolan 2024; Mancilla and Uy 2024). Despite the oversimplification and binary distinctions of holding an either-or status (Dwyer and Buckle 2009; Kerr and Sturm 2019), positionality has often been referred to as either having insider (shared identities) or outsider (not a member of the group researched) status. Consequently, a call for recognising the ambivalent nature of this classification has since acknowledged the complexity of human experience and how holding shared group status does not implicitly offer group access or benefit. Therefore, researcher relationships, positionality and positional knowledge are recognised as fluid and operating on a continuum throughout the research process (Bukamal 2022; Porisky and Glas 2023), with some calling for conceptual frameworks that ‘listen to the language of the context’ by actively considering the multiple identities which researchers can hold (Scott and Moura (2024, 1).

We propose that by re-conceptualising RSD as the practice of a researcher disclosing to a co-researcher any personal information relevant to the researcher’s lived experience of the topic being researched, we can generate different research experiences for co-researchers and researchers that attend to co-producing sense-making moments. However, we suggest that this would be most effective within a particular methodological research framework. Below, we outline three components we found that can offer this environment and subsequently enrich the research process and data generation.

How might Researcher Self-Disclosure be applied in Research? Constructing an Effective Research Environment

Research Paradigm

The first component incorporates a theoretical and analytical framework recognising fluidity, multiple relationalities and forces within sense-making rather than traditionally bound and dualist scientific processes. Two such philosophical positions include new materialism and post-qualitative inquiry (PQI). New materialism, specifically Barad's (2008) agential realist framework, *posthumanist performativity*, acknowledges sense-making as a collection of relational performances. Not associating with binary distinctions (e.g., mind/body, nature/culture, healthy/unhealthy) or maintaining fixed identities (Colebrook 2020), the new materialist framework acknowledges all *matter* (human and non-human) as active rather than passive, negotiators within sense-making (Fox and Alldred 2015). New materialism rejects these dualist conceptualisations and views the world through relational moments that do not privilege the human 'subject' over the 'object'; instead, attention is placed on the capacity to affect and be affected (Deleuze and Guattari 1987). This framework emphasises the dynamic nature of how things are always changing yet interconnected, thereby focusing on how people, ideas, and the world around us can work together to create new possibilities. It acknowledges that these processes are co-created with the more-than-human world, encompassing relationships between humans, nonhumans, and material forces (Deleuze and Guattari 1994). This shifts attention away from fixed definitions of what something *is*, instead looking at what bodies and materials *do*, how they act, influence each other, and shape the world (Fullagar 2017). In this view, everything, whether it's people, ideas, actions, or objects, is part of ever-changing

groups called *assemblages*. These assemblages aren't just collections of parts; they are flexible and always evolving. New elements can be added or existing ones removed, causing the whole to change in response. This constant process of change and growth is what makes these assemblages (Gurney and Demuro 2023).

Incorporating this paradigm requires a different mode of analysis than traditional methods (Elizabeth. A. St. Pierre 2021a). Instead of following a traditional step-by-step process to analyse data at a fixed point in time, incorporating a method which focuses on sharing the ongoing and dynamic moments that emerge throughout the research is needed (Nelson, Segall, and Durham 2021). In this way, analysis is never truly finished. Instead, it unfolds continuously through what MacLure (2010) describes as moments of *data glowing*, those instances where certain data seem to stand out, grab attention, or feel particularly meaningful. Post-qualitative inquiry, first coined by Elizabeth St. Pierre (2011), offers a performative, dynamic and relational framework that does not present or follow analysis traits found in quantitative, qualitative or mixed methodological stances and expands what is considered *data*. There are no 'pre-existing research designs, methods, processes, procedures, or practices', and the data takes many forms, including but not limited to transcriptions, embodied attributes, quantitative information, creative artefacts and visual information (Elizabeth. Adams. St. Pierre 2021b, 163). The analysis happens continuously during the research process and can take many different forms. Instead of focusing on presenting a single, fixed answer, the goal is to highlight the moments where various influences come together to shape how meaning is made.

Research Design

The second framework component incorporates a research design that emphasises co-production. The term co-production carries some ambiguity as the process can vary depending on the context within which it resides (i.e., who it is working with or what is being developed (Redman et al. 2021)). However, several co-production principles have been acknowledged within official research guidance, such as the UK Research and Innovation (2024b) and NIHR (2024) policies. These include 1) shifting power hierarchies, 2) generating accountability and facilitating varied perspectives and knowledge construction, 3) developing and maintaining relationships, 4) avoiding tokenistic involvement and ensuring continuous evaluation, and 5) reflection and flexibility.

Anti-colonial movements in the 1970s and 1980s also heightened the development and use of PAR (Cornish et al. 2023), along with several methodological developments emphasising the application of researcher positionality within research. PAR is a collaborative, iterative and productive methodological approach that looks to facilitate co-researcher empowerment. We view PAR as an emancipatory approach that supports the communities impacted and tackles injustices and inequalities. Co-researchers are pivotal in the direction and leadership of the research process rather than positioned as subjects of inquiry (Cornish et al. 2023). Rooted in principles of social justice and inclusivity, PAR challenges traditional hierarchical dynamics within research by prioritising the experiential insights of co-researchers.

As relationships within PAR move from viewing participants as *subjects* to collaborators (hence the use of the term ‘co-researcher’ in this paper) (Bou and Sales 2022), this environment can also facilitate the blending of the lived experiences of academics and co-researchers (Soklaridis et al. 2024; Padwa et al. 2023). It can foster

symbiotic partnerships and opportunities for knowledge co-creation while influencing preconceived hierarchical research expectations (Gatenby and Humphries 2000; Fahlberg 2022). Navigating complex relationships in PAR is not uncommon (Young et al. 2024; Van Acker et al. 2021). Some suggest that boundaries between co-researchers and researchers are entangled rather than transparent and predictable (see (Dancis, Coleman, and Ellison 2023), yet these spaces can also facilitate democratic pedagogical opportunities, which has led researchers to use PAR with those who experience inequalities and social injustices (Worthen et al. 2019; Pettican et al. 2022).

Recent developments in PAR, particularly informed by feminist and decolonial theory (henceforth, FPAR), emphasise its intersectional, decolonial and positional accountability, attending to how race, gender, class, sexuality, and coloniality shape both knowledge and action (Crupi and Godden 2024; Godden, Chakma, and Jenkins 2023; Nachman et al. 2023). This paper proposes that RSD, when situated within an FPAR framework, can serve not only as a relational tool but as a critical method for negotiating the ethical and affective complexities of holding dual roles, as both researcher and participant in sense-making. FPAR's explicit attention to structural and interpersonal power dynamics is particularly important when employing RSD, as it helps ensure that disclosure does not unintentionally recentre the researcher or replicate hierarchies under the guise of openness. While the case study presented in this paper illustrates one application of RSD in practice, this discussion makes a wider methodological argument: that FPAR can help hold the ethical tensions of RSD by grounding it in a feminist politics of care, accountability, and co-production. In this way, the combination of RSD and FPAR offers a generative approach for participatory

research contexts that prioritise relational ethics, lived experience, and social transformation.

Data Generation

A third component in creating an effective research environment for the RSD practice is the use of arts-based methods (ABMs). Using ABMs is a vital component in the RSD strategy because it provides a creative, embodied, and non-linear approach to exploring, expressing and creating sense-making about complex lived experiences, fostering deeper emotional engagement, and facilitating relational sense-making between researchers and co-researchers. While further work is needed to understand the impact of using ABMs within co-production research, there is a growing body of literature acknowledging how it can be effective in navigating challenging topics and situations through its innately non-linear and creative foundations (Tinner 2024; Pearce and Magee 2024; Barry et al. 2023). Although incorporating ABMs can present numerous challenges in the research design, delivery and analysis (Stewart 2024), the opportunity to integrate diverse perspectives productively is promising (Langley et al. 2022).

Consequently, this has increased attention to using ABMs within research for lived experience perspectives (Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) 2023; The All-party Parliamentary Group on Arts Health and Wellbeing and the National Centre for Creative Health 2023). However, more research is required to expand on co-production research, which utilises ABMs and RSD beyond the declaration of positionality, especially when the research topic emphasises embodied experiences (Kuhlmann et al. 2024).

Conclusively, we propose that RSD – within a framework such as the one outlined above – can extend the traditional representations of researcher reflexivity or positionality and facilitate new capacities for co-constructing knowledge. The following section provides a case example (Christodoulides, 2025) of how RSD might be incorporated within co-production research, which creates context for situating the subsequent methodological discussions in section three. All quotes and other data extracts presented throughout the paper have been anonymised using pseudonyms.

A Case Study

Background & Aims

The project employed a participatory action design to explore how survivors of childhood trauma understand and practice recovery, which is informed by their own embodied learning rather than the medical approaches to recovery that are available in treatment. This was important to explore, given that relevant support services are limited to clinical and pharmacological treatment, which reflects the understanding of childhood trauma in the medical field. Alternative treatment options, and particularly those informed by how survivors have learned to understand their approach to recovery, remain limited. This limitation has historically contributed to survivors feeling siloed, shamed or fearful of engaging in their recovery, thereby limiting their engagement with support services (Szentagotai-Tatar and Miu, 2016; Su and Stone, 2020). The aim of this project was therefore to explore and co-construct alternative pedagogical spaces to conceptualise and apply recovery beyond a biomedical approach.

Design

To best address these aims, the research design involved a combination of new materialist theory, Feminist Participatory Action Research (FPAR), and arts-based data generation methods (ABMs). Drawing on the foundational work of Maguire (1987), FPAR reworks traditional PAR by centring women's lived experiences, critically engaging with power structures, and emphasising positionality, relational ethics, and intersectionality. These principles aligned with the first author's ontological positioning and embodied experience, particularly in relation to trauma and recovery.

Sample

Ten co-researchers (two males, eight females), between the ages of 28 and 64, were recruited through a purposive sampling strategy. The recruitment site was a charitable organisation providing trauma counselling services in the Southwest of England. Co-researchers were included if they had experienced complex trauma before 18 years of age. This was first screened by the charitable organisation when they had first accessed the services and again by the first author through an ACEs (Adverse Childhood Experiences; (World Health Organisation (WHO) 2020) questionnaire during the recruitment process. Additionally, co-researchers had to have previously, or currently, experienced mental health issues for which they had received a formal diagnosis. All participating co-researchers had at least 12 psychotherapy sessions (referred to as a *stabilisation* criterion, as defined and agreed with the recruitment site). Due to the sensitive nature of working with individuals with complex trauma, the charitable organisation put forward interested applicants based on the clinician's recent assessment of their stability to take part, and the Head of Therapeutic Services advised on important ethical and safeguarding considerations for the project (e.g., ensuring a trained counsellor was present for all sessions). Recruitment materials introduced the first author's shared lived experience.

Study Procedures

The research was conducted between December 2021 and September 2023 in two stages. The first stage involved co-researchers in four creative workshops, three focus groups and seven external reflection tasks, which will be explained below. The second stage involved two focus groups and a public exhibition. Each focus group and workshop lasted five hours with numerous catered breaks and a lunch provision. These

were held at a local community centre, facilitated by the first author, a trained counsellor and an artist (during the ABM workshops).

The primary workshop, the project initiation meeting (PIM), sought to identify three themes using the creative method of body mapping. Body mapping is an arts-based technique often used in qualitative and health research to explore the somatic lived experiences of others (Henderson et al. 2023). The exercise involves drawing an outline of one's body (i.e. the body map) on a life-size piece of paper and then gradually decorating the body map in response to prompt questions posed by the mapping facilitator (Santarossa, Redding, and Murphy 2023). Following the body mapping exercise, three themes were identified through a group-level assessment (GLA) (see Duea et al. (2022) and Guy and Arthur (2021) for more information). Each of the three creative workshops concentrated on one theme and one creative medium - 1) Inner child - used clay and reflected the groups' interest in exploring embodied and playful influences to recovery; 2) Time - used thread work and explored various meanings of time in recovery (e.g., not enough time to 'get well', not enough therapeutic sessions, recovery over time); and 3) Keys - used animation and drawing methods to explore the complex relationality across multiple human and non-human influences in recovery. As noted above, between each workshop, co-researchers were given reflective tasks based on the previous workshop through an online application called Indeemo¹. Co-researchers responded to a series of prompts about how, if at all, their experiences

¹ Indeemo is a digital ethnography platform. The application enabled the co-researchers to engage remotely in numerous ways (e.g., photos, audio, videos, and text responses) with reflective prompts following the session allowing for the collection of rich, qualitative data in real time.

prompted renewed sense-making about recovery. Co-researchers could react in several ways, including visual, audio or textual, and insights were shared and discussed in subsequent workshops. The two focus groups at stage two combined the world café and GLA methods and thereby offered spaces to reflect on and generate action from the research findings, project evaluations and exhibition plans. A public exhibition followed, showcasing the groups (co-researchers and facilitators) artwork and study insights, encouraging visitor engagement and reflexivity through some of the ABMs executed in the project (see Banfield 2023; Harcombe 2023). Subsequent creative outputs were generated, such as an exhibition booklet² (Christodoulides, 2024). The analysis was continuously conducted throughout the research assemblage by critically and iteratively reflecting on group transcriptions, personal journals, exhibition feedback and creative artefacts. The development of themes was tracked on an interactive whiteboard.

Having provided details about the case study, the following section offers a critical discussion on the methodological tensions and opportunities that may arise when RSD is incorporated.

A Critical Discussion of Tensions and Opportunities

The previous case study highlighted two main areas in which RSD and ABMs could offer renewed opportunities for sense-making, including a sense of *togetherness through shared vulnerability* and *co-productive sense-making moments*. RSD was performative and relational, and developed organically through the research assemblage

² An online version of the exhibition booklet can be accessed here: <https://heyzine.com/flip-book/15e38e7593.html#page/22>

rather than as a separate, highly organised action. ABMs offered the group an alternative platform to use RSD for co-constructing new, shared experiences and sense-making opportunities regarding recovery.

While RSD can be applied across a variety of qualitative and participatory approaches, in this study, it was situated within a Feminist Participatory Action Research (FPAR) framework. In this context, RSD was not merely a reflexive practice, but a methodological enactment of FPAR's feminist commitments. It offered a relational means of challenging hierarchy, fostering shared vulnerability, and co-producing knowledge in ethically accountable ways (Cubero and Garrido 2023). Through the use of RSD, the research process was shaped by ongoing negotiations of power, relational vulnerability, and ethical care. These dynamics deepened the methodological and ethical complexity of FPAR, particularly in the context of trauma-focused co-production.

The following sections will explain this in more depth by moving to reflective first-person accounts, in which the 'I' refers to the first author, who was also a group facilitator.

Navigating a Sense of Togetherness through shared Vulnerability

One of the primary purposes of RSD within the study was to nurture a sense of solidarity, trustworthiness and transparency. Alongside FPAR principles, it was a natural decision to participate in all activities and minimise the potential for co-researchers to feel observed and subsequent feelings of *othering*. RSD was discussed with the group early on, and we encouraged co-researchers to consider what challenges and possibilities could arise from this approach throughout. Overwhelmingly, the group

reported it was beneficial and created a sense of togetherness. For Amy, the transparency led her to ‘feel less like a lab rat’, as she elaborates:

(...) the fact that you have shared and disclosed to us for me, helps me feel like less of a specimen on a, under a microscope. So, I'm not just being observed by somebody who's disconnected from the topic and the disclosing. It helps me to feel comfortable sharing, knowing that the person who's observing or trying to collate information has shared that they have shared experience and is, therefore, my wording, 'one of us.'

Doing-with co-researchers, however, also brought challenges. The PIM was the first session of the project, during which co-researchers were tasked with generating body maps. This was central to co-constructing themes for the following workshops. As this exercise was unfamiliar to the group, I completed my body map before the workshop (see Figure 1) so co-researchers could view mine as a reference before starting theirs. After reviewing the completed body maps, I noticed several variations, like mine, had keys and nature (Figure 2). I wondered whether viewing my body map beforehand had silently, yet very visually, influenced how co-researchers responded, a methodological consideration all researchers should be aware of (Holmes 2020; Olmos-Vega et al. 2023). While similar images may have resulted from the prompts provided, they highlighted an important point for consideration in other workshops. The use of ABMs provided another dimension to consider the multiple ways *we*, the facilitators, could influence the co-researchers and vice versa. Despite aiming to be *participatory*, offering my vulnerability through the engagement of the task, actioning it in this way may have limited or directed the responses through my researcher-survivor positioning (Lokot 2021). This experience presents important considerations for future use of this approach, whereby greater attention to potential influencing moments is needed.

Developing a collective awareness of this could have strengthened the group's ability to reflect and act accordingly, especially earlier in the process, before trusting relationships were built. One such option could be the provision of additional body mapping examples unrelated to the topic. Alternatively, as the facilitator, I could have moved between doing my body map and supporting others, completing my map, if needed, at home.

Traditional notions of neutrality left me conflicted and concerned that RSD would result in the work being discounted as non-academic, and in a final focus group, I shared this concern. Nadia's response questioned the clear traditional lines of academic identity, instead appreciating the numerous intersectional identities that can be offered through this vulnerability (Morrow et al. 2022): 'I think it's interesting that you talk about being an academic because that's categorising yourself. And perhaps we already have preconceived ideas of what an academic looks like and how they might behave, which might not be that simple.' Jess's earlier contribution in workshop one further evidenced this. Jess highlighted how her expertise as a lived experience representative for young carers and mental health groups was recognised and utilised in policy-making. However, she also noted how these spaces often felt like she was being seen as vulnerable and treated 'really gently', which didn't honour her strength and capacity to engage with the work. Yet, reflecting on this project's use of RSD, Jess indicated how it was: '(...) reassuring to know that, yeah, we're in this together. We're, like, learning this together and, and that, yeah, like we have a voice here.' In the final focus group, Jess reflected on how RSD contributed to successful connections because 'you both were open to hear us, you are both open to explore things further, be curious with us' while remaining professional. Jess explained that the 'warmth and curiosity with each

other and that openness and that, like, wish to learn from each other, like that the research was about, like, Oh, I wonder if you think similar to me? And like, I think that's what I loved about it.' Importantly, Jess highlighted that those facilitating and disclosing must 'feel safe' to do so: '(...) if the [facilitators] in the room haven't worked through their stuff and like can't hold their stuff, how can they hold mine?'

Conclusively, one strength RSD brought was that it could promote shared vulnerability among researchers and co-researchers in a strengths-based approach that can, in turn, facilitate rapport-building, engagement and shared learning.

Co-productive Sense-making Moments: Navigating Disclosures Creatively

In the PIM, I used an old painting I created of a girl running through a field with darkness behind her, which depicted my previous frustrations and despair following numerous talk therapy sessions. After showing a close friend the picture, I recounted how their interpretation was strikingly different to mine; they instead construed it as a representation of hope and light. I recalled how I began considering, 'what if she *was* running into the light rather than the creator of darkness?'. This was a profound moment in how I viewed myself going forward in recovery and opened my mind to considering alternative and positive possibilities, experiencing how ABMs offered the potential for transformative capacities for recovery pedagogies (Archibald, Makinde, and Tongo 2024; Moreno, Hobgood, Guthrie, and Strickland 2023). This resulted in its use within the study, offering opportunities to explore complex topics sensitively, critically and relationally. I never anticipated that the painting could have resonated with many of the co-researchers. One co-researcher described it as 'unexpectedly moving' and shared how 'freeing it was to be around others who felt the same'. Several others commented that seeing another survivor (me) with similar experiences appearing to be 'doing well'

and less impacted by trauma had left them hopeful that they, too, could achieve this. At first, I was warmed by the positive impact of RSD; however, a nagging discomfort bubbled, which signalled an uncomfortable feeling of expectation and pressure to remain *well*. I felt my RSD left no room to move along the inevitable variability that encompasses recovery and felt vulnerable to dominant neoliberal pressures of wellness (Becker, Hartwich, and Haslam 2021). There was irony in how this sense of togetherness could carry with it this destabilising vulnerability.

In summary, while ABMs could offer the group an alternative, empowering way to navigate RSD, a risk of feeling exposed remains and requires careful consideration and measures to support researchers doing so.

Ethical Considerations

It is essential to consider ethical tensions which may arise for co-researchers and researchers when practising RSD. Inspired by Gelso and Palma's (2011) thinking of self-disclosure within psychotherapy, we suggest researchers should consistently practice the open questions - what, why, when, where, to whom and how within the process of disclosing. Additionally, we recommend that it is helpful to consider incorporating their inverted U framework to assess at which point RSD could become ineffective or problematic. The inverted U model illustrates the balance required in self-disclosure, where moderate levels can foster trust, empathy, and relational depth, but excessive disclosure risks discomfort, over-identification, or compromising professionalism. This framework emphasises the need for intentionality and reflexivity when employing RSD, ensuring it is contextually appropriate and beneficial for co-researchers. Like PQI and new materialist thought, the inverted U disrupts the desire to apply linear or dualist relationality of RSD - good/bad, process/outcome. However, this

remains an interpretative practice, like disclosure, and thus requires consistent attentiveness, sensitivity, and reflexivity. It encourages researchers to consider the context and complexities of executing RSD through *reciprocity*. Although RSD seeks to minimise hierarchical divides, it risks over-identification or influencing co-researchers' responses. To mitigate these effects, future research should emphasise transparency and consider complementary approaches, such as incorporating facilitators without shared experiences (Sanders 2024). Therefore, the act of disclosure does not imply the creation of ethically sensitive or reciprocal approaches (Fiske and Dupree 2014; Lenton et al. 2021). Researchers need to be acutely attuned to their environment and themselves, tirelessly hypothesising and reflecting on how their disclosure will influence the research, co-researchers and themselves and be prepared to navigate the environment, during and after, accordingly. This is further challenged when RSD is threaded throughout the study rather than executed at recruitment or icebreaker activities. RSD also requires a commitment to attend to the researchers' needs so they can, in turn, hold the spaces for co-researchers. Like Waters and Fien's (2023) review on researcher care, this care is essential while working with groups considered vulnerable and neglecting it can negatively impact both parties.

Connectedly, beyond the nuances of rapport building, group dynamics or endings, the *relational implications* of RSD can be further complicated when both researcher and co-researchers are considered vulnerable, like experiencing childhood trauma. As highlighted above, this complexity, if not navigated appropriately, can trigger behaviours in both parties that can significantly impact one another. Schmidt, van der Weele, and Sebrecht's (2023, 1) paper observes how 'relational concepts' are often enacted through awkwardness and discomfort in relationships and, therefore,

require careful circumnavigation. Developing the researcher's ability to navigate or lean into discomfort offers reflexive, relational and co-researcher benefits, resonating with work that highlights the value of engaging researcher vulnerability (Sterie et al. 2023). The act of disclosing could be considered a vulnerable space for some, which, if poorly traversed, could heighten researchers' emotional burden and negatively impact co-researchers. The proposed solutions by Waters and Fien (2023) offer valuable points for consideration that resonate with our experience, which we expand on below with our reflections on the challenges and possibilities for future research and RSD within co-production designs.

Recommendations for Future Research

The discussion above highlighted several challenges and opportunities for co-researchers, researchers, and facilitators. However, echoing Gelso and Palma (2011), navigating the complexity around self-disclosure through a set of rigid guidelines might be limiting, particularly within the complexities of a co-constructive research environment. The exploratory nature of FPAR, coupled with new materialist thought, provided a sympathetic and flexible space where the tensions arising from RSD were navigated, resulting in a deep focus on survivor inclusion and contribution. However, as Keane, Heinz, and Lynch (2024) state, enacting RSD requires additional resources from researchers, demanding constant consideration of the benefits or challenges. One such concern is the risk of silencing critical voices. This could occur through a group's perceived expectation of assumed shared understanding, resulting in vital questions or reflections being missed. Co-researchers may feel hesitant to share their perspectives if facilitators fail to approach RSD with sensitivity to the hierarchical dynamics between themselves and the co-researchers or if they neglect the sentiments in Gelso and

Palma's (2011) inverted U model, emphasising the importance of balancing the appropriate use and potential overuse of disclosure. Like autoethnographic work, these self-reflective approaches have long been criticised as narcissistic or self-indulgent (Allen-Collinson and Hockey 2004; Akehurst and Scott 2023). However, as Olobia (2023) argues, revealing the self to others can also be seen as an act of vulnerability, which, when engaged critically to support the research, should not be seen as self-indulgent. Comparable to Keane's (2022) *positionality sharing* strategy, RSD was approached to support and enact a reciprocal and co-productive process of new possibilities to understand recovery within the research assemblage rather than to form representations. The strategy emphasises the deliberate and thoughtful sharing of a researcher's positionality during the research process to foster trust, reflexivity, and deeper engagement with participants or co-researchers. This approach recognises that researchers' backgrounds, biases, and experiences inevitably shape the research process and outcomes, and being transparent about these influences can create a more equitable and authentic research environment. While researchers should not consider the act of RSD a silver bullet to gaining connection, reducing inequalities or eradicating self-indulgent tendencies, it can aid the construction of an environment where this can be minimised while extending fruitful curiosity and sparking pedagogical moments.

Involving facilitators without lived experience, such as the artist in this study, offers another way to mitigate the lack of neutrality. Yet, involving others without lived expertise can also provoke tensions where the individual may be viewed as an outsider who does not understand the group. Crucially, however, recognising a disconnect in views can occur regardless of shared experience is critical (Ademolu 2024). Therefore, setting these expectations within the group is central to nurturing a culture that engages

these tensions with curiosity and compassion. Lastly, as previously mentioned, when creating a space that facilitates the sharing of vulnerabilities by all, co-researchers reported they needed to feel confident that their facilitators could hold the groups' vulnerabilities safely and non-judgmentally. Facilitators must, therefore, be cautious in providing positive mirroring opportunities by openly questioning all opinions, offering enough time and space for reflections, and demonstrating their ability to work with their own and others' disclosures in a measured and safe way.

The FPAR environment and RSD added further complexity when considering the process of disentanglement or withdrawal upon study closure. Formed over two years, the study generated many corrective experiences and relationships. Despite discussing study boundaries and expectations, one co-researcher (Nadia) shared her discomfort with the ending:

‘[I] would be happy in the knowledge that we get to see your face again because I think to completely sever, it's almost like there could potentially be a very weak form of grieving going on. I did all this work. We did open up; we shared stuff. We all built this thing together. And yeah, it would be like I've just cut my arm off. And I hate to have that.’

This comment brought much complexity in how to mitigate these feelings. Firstly, the new materialist perspective underpinning the research focuses on future-orientated possibilities for recovery and led co-researchers to conceptualise numerous resources and potential future work. Whether this predicament would have resulted regardless of RSD due to the nature of FPAR remains unknown, yet it raises the question of what disentanglement from these processes looks like (Lloyd-Evans et al. 2023; Kemmis, McTaggart, and Nixon 2014).

Embarking on resource-intensive (personal and professional) projects requires skilled self-reflection and experience, especially for early career researchers. RSD would benefit from having more case studies or research on the practical applications of navigating RSD as a practice. In addition to research, we suggest that beyond theoretical training, there are increased experiential opportunities to develop these skills and the confidence to enact the nuances of RSD more appropriately. Specific areas could include researcher techniques to navigate their own and others' disclosures, the considerations and application of ABMs and RSD, and ethical considerations.

Connectedly, despite increased attention involving experts by experience or minority populations, the risk of exploitation or burnout of researchers should also be addressed (Goodman et al. 2018). One helpful engagement the facilitators embarked on was regular supervision sessions with a trained counsellor (Waters and Fien 2023). We suggest these practices should be a prerequisite and more accessible for researchers across disciplines and career positions (e.g., students and experienced academics). Doing so could facilitate the much-needed reflective and professionally supportive space to discuss concerns or discomfort and uncertainty, and its application has the scope to benefit the research community more widely, developing the skills needed within academia and applied to research settings.

Finally, using RSD should be nurtured with choice, acknowledging the deep entanglement of self-disclosure with personal value systems and experiences. When implemented with choice and oriented for the benefit of co-researchers and research, there is the opportunity for the research assemblage to offer profoundly freeing and open pedagogical spaces. These can facilitate genuine entanglements and offer moments of transparency, honouring all influences within the process.

Conclusion

Cultivating knowledge from experts by experience requires thoughtful and genuine approaches, particularly when research seeks to address culturally and socially sensitive issues or collaborates with vulnerable people groups. Through the practice of RSD, we encourage researchers with lived experience to explore how professional and personal experiences can merge in new and beneficial ways. This discussion has demonstrated that RSD, if practised creatively, thoughtfully and appropriately, can foster effective pedagogical co-production environments. These can be empowering, collaborative, and therapeutic, and we invite others to explore them with similar criticality and curiosity. These methodological complexities we have discussed further reinforce the value of applying FPAR as a guiding framework for RSD. As Maguire (1987) argued, feminist participatory approaches are uniquely attuned to the relational, ethical, and political stakes of research that engages lived experience. In this case, FPAR sharpened the reflexive and ethical edge of RSD, foregrounding how power, vulnerability, and researcher–participant entanglements unfold in real time. It also provided a framework through which the dual role of the researcher as both academic and survivor could be navigated with care, accountability, and a politicised ethics of co-production. Without this feminist grounding, RSD could risk being reduced to a relational tactic or misunderstood as therapeutic overreach. Instead, within FPAR, it became a rigorous and intentional act aligned with a broader commitment to social change, relational ethics, and epistemic justice.

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