

# LET'S THINK MORE LIKE SCIENTISTS, AND INCLUDE LIVED EXPERIENCE IN RESEARCH



**By Liz Richardson**

The involvement of people with lived experience in research and policymaking adds real value, we've concluded in our Listening to Each Other cell. Liz Richardson, a social scientist and academic, gives her thoughts on this here.

I would like to make a proposition: respect for people's experiential expertise could be strengthened if we thought more like scientists. When I talk to organisations about citizen participation, we often focus on thinking more like citizens. I would like to add that we should also focus on thinking more like scientists. I am a social scientist and academic, so perhaps I would say that! But there are some good reasons why this might be the case. I believe that thinking more like everyday scientists – or 'citizen scientists' – could mean better participation.

People are often instinctive scientists: they look for patterns and contrasts. They ask how context affects the effectiveness of a particular approach. They are concerned with definitions. These are all also excellent instincts for good policy-making. Many existing processes of policy and practice could be made more robust with a few tweaks towards an everyday science approach. After all, what distinguishes

research is that it is in a conversation with knowledge we already have, it tries to be systematic, and ideally comparative, we think carefully about biases in our data or sources, and we explain our definitions of terms.

So, imagine what this might mean for a participatory process. What might 'being in a conversation with existing knowledge' look like? In my academic work, this would be a literature review of academic papers. But, in other contexts, it might mean digging out the results of previous engagement exercises more thoroughly. Or talking to those affected about the history of a policy or place, and what the implications are of past legacies. Thinking carefully about bias in sources could lead to an effort to include more unheard voices. Being comparative means we try to take account of differences between groups or things (places, organisations, policies) in how they are treated.

One of the core principles underpinning these propositions is respect for different forms of expertise. Including lived experience or experiential expertise does not need to displace scientific, technical or bureaucratic expertise. Each issue needs to be assessed for what types of expertise are missing. Often this will be experiential expertise. But it may be that it is technical knowledge that is missing, or the input from people with a strategic vision.

Because each form of expertise is inherently partial, and limited, we need each other. Synergistic approaches are based on the idea that 'each has something the other needs'; we add, not substitute. Blending more lived experience and more science does not have to mean that our differences are somehow flattened out; respect for the unique value of each form of expertise remains. But it is also the case that these forms are often messy and integrated in reality anyway. Not all scientific expertise comes from professional scientists, for example; and citizens are not the only ones with lived experiences.

I have started to realise that my academic world is a lot more similar to non-academic worlds than it might initially appear. When people ask questions, they are potentially setting a research agenda. We need to think more like citizens yes, but there is untapped potential in thinking more like scientists.

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