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PARTICIPATION

What It Means and How It Works

McTaggart (1997b) highlights the distinction between “involvement” and “participation” in participatory action research. He states that authentic participation means that the participants share “in the way research is conceptualized, practiced, and brought to bear on the life-world” (p. 28). This is in contrast to being merely “involved” in PAR, where one does not have ownership over or in the project.

I agree with that distinction and further argue that what is important to and in a PAR project is the *quality* of the participation that people engage in, not the proportionality of that participation. It is my experience that the most effective strategy for engaging people in PAR projects is for the participants and the researchers to make use of “commonsense” participation. In other words, to take joint responsibility for developing *the group’s* version of what it means to participate in a PAR process. When researchers and participants work together to define the most practical and doable ways for them to participate, there is less pressure on individuals to conform to *a* way of participating. In that way, participation is viewed as a choice, not an imposition.

In this chapter, I discuss the various ways in which the women in Belfast and the young people in Bridgeport participated in their respective projects. In so doing, I demonstrate how participation in processes of self- and collective reflection and action increases the likelihood that what groups learn in and through those processes can be put into practice in ways that benefit those involved.

DEFINING AND EXPERIENCING PARTICIPATION

No matter what issue is under investigation or what problem participants and researchers hope to address, it is important to be clear about the basic terms related to participatory action research. Therefore, in each project,

and in language that was accessible to both groups, I explained the history and some of the basic principles of participatory action research. In the case of the young people, I invited them to discuss how *they* would define participatory action research.

The young people decided to look up the words *participation*, *action*, and *research* in the dictionary. After we discussed the definitions they found, I invited them to define those terms in ways that would be useful for them as we began the PAR process. The young people decided on the following definitions: "Participation means being part of the group and paying attention to what it is we're doing. Action means that we all have to agree to do things that are good for the project." Finally, the participants decided that research, a term they were familiar with owing to their experiences in science class, meant "investigating and studying things so you can understand them better" (November 24, 1997).

I congratulated the young people on developing definitions to frame the project and then offered two suggestions about how they might capitalize on "participation." I suggested that they be consistent in their attendance at group sessions and that they actively engage in project-related activities.

The participants agreed that it was important for them to be consistent in their attendance and to be active in the group sessions. Then they engaged in a long discussion about what would happen if they chose *not* to attend the sessions on a regular basis or *not* to participate in project-related activities. Tee stated that he didn't think people should be "kicked out of the project just because we don't participate once in a while." Risha agreed, stating that the participants should be given "more chances than just one to show that we really do want to belong to the project."

Since that was the general feeling among all the participants, they decided that for the project to work effectively, they needed to sign contracts. The contracts the participants created and signed stipulated that if someone came to the sessions and refused to participate more than three times, that person would be asked to leave the project. When I asked the participants what they meant by "refuse to participate," they said, "Like if they're foolin' around and you ask them to stop or everyone is tellin' them to stop and they just keep actin' the fool, that's when they're not participating" (Tina). The same consequence applied, they said, if someone missed three sessions "without a good excuse." If the person did not have a good excuse, which the participants defined as "being sick, having to stay after school, taking a test, or going to the dentist, something like that" (Collin), then they would be asked to leave the project.

When I asked the participants who was responsible for ensuring that people fulfilled their contracts, they said that everyone, including me and the

other members of the university-based team, was responsible for making sure that people participated. If there were disagreements about a person's level of participation then the young people decided that everyone in the project would vote on whether the person should be asked to leave the project or be given another chance.

Ongoing discussions about individual and collective participation were threaded throughout the project. That is because the young people changed their minds, became distracted with life, and, on occasion, lost interest in the project. Sometimes that lost interest manifested itself in a participant's absence from a session. Other times, it manifested itself in the fact that certain participants shirked project-related responsibilities.

My response to the young people's negligence and/or forgetfulness during the project was to ask a simple question: "What type of project are we engaged in?" Their response was always the same, and always delivered in unison: "Participatory." Once the response was delivered, we reviewed the meaning of participation and discussed the most effective ways for the participants to complete project-related tasks. The secretary (a position the participants created as a way to keep track of what was discussed and decided upon in the group sessions) reviewed her or his notes and informed us who was responsible for what task. The group then discussed why certain activities were completed and others were not, and why some people accomplished their goals and others "failed to do their jobs, even though they signed a contract" (Veronica). If it was something the participants deemed out of their control—for example, if a person went to see a teacher about a project-related activity and the teacher was not there, or if a person was supposed to get the school's calendar but the school secretary said it was not available—then the young people took the view that the participant involved should not be blamed. As Monique stated, "They tried. That should count for something. That shouldn't be counted as one of the three times they didn't do what they said they'd do."

During the project, there were multiple times when the young people "didn't do what they said they'd do"—at least when they said they would do it. Nonetheless, they were able to accomplish many of their goals and do so without "kicking anyone out of the project."

The process of linking the *meaning* of participation to the *actualization* of participation was slow and time-consuming. There were times when we spent entire sessions solely discussing the meaning of "participation." Yet it was in those discussions that the young people realized that if they wanted things to happen, they were the ones who had to *make* them happen. They recognized that if they wanted to organize a school assembly, they had to do the work to make that happen. If they wanted to design a photo-text book,

they had to take the necessary photographs and write the necessary texts. If they wanted to invite government officials, representatives of the media, and community members to their various events, they needed to contact them. If they wanted to present their work to faculties, students, funders, and other interested parties, they needed to craft presentations.

They also recognized that before they could improve things in their community that they found disturbing, they needed to become critically aware of what those things were. That awareness would only come when they participated in activities that generated knowledge, ideas, and plans of action. As Tee stated: "You have to be willing to participate and do what you said you'd do. If you do that, then you do somethin' good for the community." Tonesha agreed, then added, "Even if you don't like what you're doin' sometimes, if you said you're gonna do it, you gotta do it."

DIMENSIONS OF PARTICIPATION: WOMEN AND PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH

For the 2 years that the women and I engaged in the PAR project, we met in a conference room in the Reccy—the name local residents gave to the local recreation/community center. While we worked in the conference room, two teenage girls cared for the women's children in the all-purpose room down the hall.

With the knowledge that their children were close by and being cared for, the women were free to concentrate on the topics generated in the sessions. As important, they were free to be present to one another in an environment where the women could, as Nóra stated, gain "a sense of shared experiences in some way; a sense of support . . . a feelin' of havin' time just for us, d'ya know what I mean? Of havin' time set aside for yourself is lovely" (McIntyre, 2004, p. 28).

The women did experience "lovely" moments during the project. At the same time, they were challenged by participating in a process in which they felt they were "baring our souls for all to see" (Lucy). The women's hesitation to participate in a collective experience that would provide them with opportunities to reveal aspects of their lives to one another, to me, and to the outside community was due, in part, to the silence that characterizes their lives. This silence is and was a legitimate response to the war and its aftermath. Like many who grew up in the Troubles, the women were taught never to speak to the police or anyone in a uniform; not to answer any question put to them by someone they did not know; not to trust any adult who

was not introduced to them by someone in the community; not to walk out of the community by themselves; and not to frequent particular stores, restaurants, movie theaters, and recreation areas.

In the PAR project, the women were invited to explore those silences—an invitation that the women accepted but did not always act on. Inviting the women to speak about their lives and address issues that were and are painful to or unresolved for them presupposed that they could decline the invitation and be selective about what they revealed at any given moment during the research process (McIntyre, 2004). The women's silences—and the decisions they made to break those silences at different moments in the PAR project—reflect the degree to which they felt safe participating in group dialogue and later in the action steps they chose to enact.

In addition to the silence that informed the women's engagement in the project, a different kind of discomfort emerged when the women engaged in project-related activities—a discomfort born of self-consciousness. The women's self-consciousness was most evident when I invited them to participate in creative activities like drawing, sculpting, and painting. The minute the women saw the magic markers, the paint, or the clay, they pushed their chairs away from the table and told me that they "couldn't draw, couldn't write, and didn't know how to use clay to tell a story" (Winnie). When the women did not want to engage in a particular activity, they left the room for an extended cigarette break, repeatedly changed the topic under discussion, and/or asked other women in the group to do the activity for them.

I repeatedly encouraged the women to "give the activities a try" and view the activities as integrative, educative, and a natural method for self- and collective inquiry. The women usually laughed at my "cheerleading," telling me, "The real reason we'll pick up a paint brush, Alice, is 'cause you flew over here just for us and we're known for our hospitality" (Lucy).

Humor was a significant factor in the PAR project and lubricated the process in many important ways. It was the women's humor—directed at me and at themselves—that assisted us in accepting our insecurities and discomforts. In addition, when the women acknowledged their self-consciousness and accepted it as an important dynamic in the project, they were more willing to participate in the various activities, "even though," as Deirdre said, "we don't know what the hell we're doin'."

It is my experience working with the young people and the women that their resistance to various project-related activities was a normal response to processes of self- and collective exploration. Engaging in processes of reflection and revelation can be anxiety producing for people who are unaccustomed to speaking freely, expressing themselves through multiple

modalities, and voicing their fears, hurts, hopes, and suggestions for change.

Yet in the case of the projects described here, the participants ultimately allowed themselves to be vulnerable in front of others. As a result of working through their discomfort and self-consciousness, the women and the young people came to see that their participation in their respective projects provided them with unique opportunities to express themselves to each other, to me, and to outside communities.

USING MULTIPLE MODALITIES TO GENERATE PARTICIPATION AND CONSTRUCT KNOWLEDGE

Reason (1993) posits that “Research based on self-study requires that we adopt an extended epistemology which moves between and seeks to integrate several different kinds of knowing” (p. 1259). How practitioners of PAR decide which “kinds of knowing” participants decide to utilize is dependent on the aim and the context of the project. For example, secondary sources like reports, statistics, files, and historical documents are invaluable tools for gathering important information that contributes to project-related data, and practitioners of PAR make use of those sources when needed.

As important are the primary sources that are utilized as tools for gathering and constructing knowledge within PAR projects. In communities worldwide, participants and practitioners of PAR employ long-standing indigenous methods of knowing so as to maintain and sustain communities’ histories, traditions, and practices. Equally valuable is the integration of creative methods with local ways of knowing—methods that unearth, uncover, and sometimes undo “what we know” so as to “know anew.” The effectiveness of these methods—for example, mapping, diagramming, role-playing, drama, music, art, and movement—is dependent, as described above, on the participants’ willingness to engage in them, as well as the methods’ applicability to the project.

Many of the above methods have been utilized for decades in a variety of academic disciplines—for example, anthropology, sociology, psychology, community development, feminist research, and popular theater (Mikkelsen, 2001). For instance, Cornwall and Jewkes (1995) used body mapping in a PAR project with Zimbabwean women so they could visualize the differences between Western and non-Western medical models. The visualizations assisted the women in gaining a better understanding of how to take care of their bodies. Lykes (2001) used dramatizations, masks, and movement with women and children in Guatemala, which provided the project’s participants

with opportunities to “enact the unspeakable stories of violence and destruction they had survived or witnessed” (p. 364) during their country’s 30-year war. Rocheleau, Ross, Morrobel, and Hernandez (1998) used landscape mapping with the people of Zambrana-Chacuey in the Dominican Republic to explore the gender- and class-divided regions where the participants of their project lived and worked. Preston-Whyte & Dalrymple (1996) utilized a drama-based AIDS education program with young people in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa, to increase awareness of AIDS. By engaging in traditional healing circles, Dickson was better able to understand the use of ceremonies and practices in determining how to develop health programs for Aboriginal grandmothers living in Canada (Dickson & Green, 2001).

Veroff (2002) used printmaking, video, and drawing to explore questions of identity, culture, and power with young Inuit adults in a PAR project in Montreal, Quebec. The interweaving of artistic creation and production provided the participants with opportunities “to be critical about what was happening to them and gave them the desire to take action for themselves” (p. 1286). Spaniol (2005) also used an arts-based approach with art therapists who were interested in using PAR with people suffering from various forms of mental illness.

In the above examples, and many others not included here, participants were introduced to experiential methods of constructing knowledge. Although the methods used were unfamiliar to many of the participants, their effectiveness was evident as the projects proceeded. One reason for their effectiveness is that visual, hands-on activities can equalize the relationships “between the literate and illiterate, between the marginalized and the self-confident” (Mikkelsen, 2001, p. 118). In addition, using multiple modalities in PAR projects contributes to a rich and nuanced body of knowledge that can be used to effect change.

In the Bridgeport project, the young people generated knowledge by creating group collages to represent “community”; taking neighborhood walks to gather information about their surroundings; developing a skit to perform at a school assembly; designing logos for T-shirts, banners, and newsletters; and engaging in various forms of storytelling and symbolic art. In Belfast, the women also created collages that represented their community. In addition, they created stories with clay, designed symbols reflecting the experiences of Irish women, and painted images based on Maya Angelou’s poem “Still I Rise” (Angelou, 1994).

In each site, the use of nontraditional strategies for tapping into the participants’ experiences, thoughts, ideas, and emotions provided individuals

with unique ways to express themselves. In both projects, there was no standard, predetermined criteria for what constituted a “great” collage, a “perfect” drawing, or an “extraordinary” image. Rather, each participant began with a blank slate. Sometimes, as noted above, that blank slate evoked feelings of self-consciousness and resistance. Other times, it evoked a sense of possibility and excitement. Either way, it assisted all of us in generating a host of “knowledges” in thought-provoking and imaginative ways.

THE CHALLENGES AND POSSIBILITIES OF USING PHOTOVOICE IN PAR

One creative-based method for generating knowledge that both participant groups engaged in was photovoice—an approach to investigating phenomena in which people utilize photography to raise awareness and make change (see, e.g, Wang, 1999; Ewald, 2001; Wu et al., 1995; Women of ADMI & Lykes, 2000; and McIntyre, 2000, 2004). The photovoice projects we implemented in Bridgeport and Belfast enabled the women and the young people to document aspects of their communities, and of their daily lives, from their own perspectives. Once documented, the two groups crafted text to accompany their photographs, thus providing outsiders with insiders’ knowledge about aspects of their communities that they take great pride in, and, as important, have great concerns about.

A number of questions framed the participants’ photovoice projects—questions that, like PAR, are not “fixed.” Rather, they were entry points into yet more questions, more opportunities for reflecting on how to most effectively develop a photovoice project, and more ideas about how to address the issues under investigation through photography. (For a list of sample questions see Figure 2.1.)

To initiate the photovoice project in Bridgeport, each participant was given a camera and two rolls of film. They were given 5 days to take photographs of their community (see McIntyre, 2000, for a more detailed account of the photovoice project). The photographs the young people took revealed powerful images of their daily lives. Some of their photographs were provocative, others humorous, and still others disturbing. I was particularly struck by Blood’s photographs, particularly one he took of a seagull flying over the housing project where he lives. As I reviewed Blood’s photographs with him, I informed him that he had quite a knack for photography.

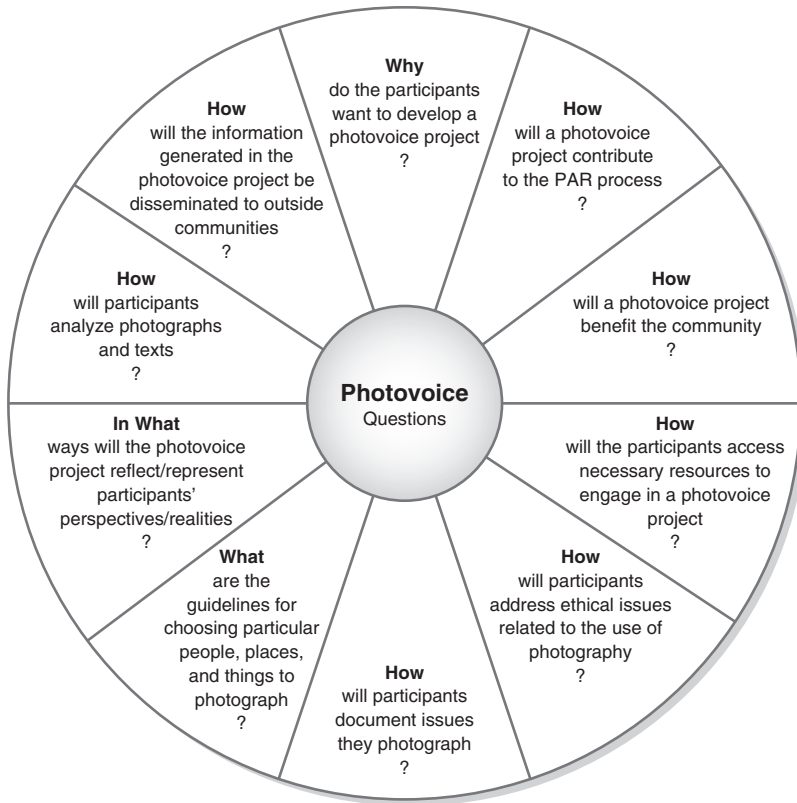


Figure 2.1 Photovoice Questions

About an hour after I spoke to Blood, he walked up behind me, slipped something into my hand, and walked away. I looked down and saw the photograph of the seagull—which now has a prominent place in my office. That was the first time during the initial 8 months of the project that Blood initiated any type of interaction with me. Although he participated in the activities, Blood rarely spoke to me or to his peers during the group sessions. It was not until we implemented the photovoice project that Blood became an active participant in the project and engaged in the group's decision-making processes.

Blood's participation in the research process was not unique. To some degree, all of the young people were challenged by the various dimensions of what it means to participate in a PAR project. What was unique about Blood's participation is that it was so closely linked to the use of photography as a method of self-expression and knowledge generation. Using the camera was a catalyst for many of the participants in terms of concretizing particular aspects of the project. For Blood, the camera also represented a vehicle for self-expression that he did not experience in school, a setting that emphasizes verbal skills for demonstrating knowledge and mastery of one's skills (McIntyre, 2000).

The women in Belfast also experienced a range of emotions as a result of engaging in photovoice. In October 2000, I provided the women with two Instamatic cameras—one color and one black-and-white—and invited them to tell a visual story about their daily lives. To photograph multiple aspects of the community, the women decided to document their lives over a 9-month period. I visited the women three times during that period to collaborate with them in their picture-taking.

Kay, one of the women who participated in the project, was, like Blood, a quiet participant in group discussions and project-related activities. Kay willingly engaged in collage-making, painting, and taking photographs for the photo-text exhibit the women designed. Yet as the sessions evolved and as the women revealed more about their lives and the ways in which the war shaped their understandings of themselves and their community, Kay withdrew. She arrived late to a session one day; left early another day. One weekend we had scheduled two day-long sessions, and Kay missed both of them. The women informed me that she was "still around" but that she was having a few problems in her life and found it difficult to attend the group sessions.

During one of my visits to Belfast, I visited Kay and, over a cup of tea, filled her in on what we were doing in the group meetings. Kay apologized for missing the sessions but told me that she needed to spend that time with her children. Kay went on to tell me that she suffers from depression and that "sometimes I have a hard time talking in groups, Alice, and that is no reflection on the group. . . . It's just that sometimes I get very down and feel like I'm not really part of what's going on around me" (McIntyre, 2004, p. 61).

Kay informed me that she enjoyed the project, that she was still taking photographs, but that "It's too much for me to participate in the sessions, look at everyone's photographs, mine, too, and think about the stories that everyone is telling about them." I assured Kay that I understood and that

although she was not present at the sessions, the women and I wanted her to know that she remained a participant in the project.

Kay did not return to the group sessions on a consistent basis. The unveiling of the silences, the consciousness-raising discussions, the symbolic art that evoked the women's experiences with the war, the storytelling, and the overall self- and collective inquiry and scrutiny that marked the women's discussions were, as Kay said, "too much" for her. Unlike Blood, who was a quiet participant for months until he found a vehicle for expressing himself, Kay found self-expression too anxiety producing. Therefore, Kay's participation took the form of a cup of tea in her home, a drink at the local pub, or a chat on the corner of Monument Road.

How Kay participated in the project made little difference to me or to the other women. When we spoke about the participants of the project, we included Kay. When we told outsiders who was responsible for that painting or that image, we included Kay. She may not have participated as fully as the others, or as consistently, but she did participate in a way that genuinely spoke to her desire to stay connected to the women and that contributed to the overall story of what life is like for women in the Monument Road community.

Blood's experience as a participant in the Bridgeport project, and Kay's in the Belfast project, are key to understanding the importance of researchers and participants negotiating the parameters of participation, particularly in communities characterized by conflict. The participation of people living in conflicted communities in the context of a PAR project is always in flux, always fluid, and always unpredictable. In the Bridgeport and Belfast projects, participants had personal or familial illnesses, work responsibilities, out-of-town commitments, after-school programs, school transfers, and a host of other things that made it impossible for them to be present at certain moments in the project.

Their absence, and the absence of any participant in an ongoing PAR project, briefly or for the long term, raises questions about how participants reach consensus, build community, and share responsibilities. In addition, it raises important questions about how a missing participant's information is integrated into the interpretations of the research data. Given the context-specific nature of PAR, those questions are not easily answered. Yet in whatever context a PAR project is played out, it is my experience that practitioners and participants must remain flexible, open to redefining the meaning of "participation" as the process evolves, and willing to integrate the unexpected if they want to maintain and sustain the research process.

NEGOTIATING THE ROLE OF PRACTITIONER AND PARTICIPANT

As a practitioner of PAR, one of my responsibilities is to enhance participation and capitalize on participants' skills and capabilities. As I do so, I need to remember that *the participants* are the key decision makers, the ones responsible for how, when, and why a project proceeds. That did not mean that I was not a participant in the decision-making processes as they evolved in the Belfast and Bridgeport projects. I was. Yet it was my responsibility to embody that role in ways that reflected *the participants'* desires to move their projects in particular directions.

For that to occur in Bridgeport, I needed to continually remind the young people that I was not their teacher. I was not there to "make them do this" or "force them to do that." I was a practitioner, a participant, a resource, but I was *not* the teacher, the leader, or the sole authority who determined the actions that would be taken within the context of the project.

That was a challenging notion for the young people to grasp. They had been in school for 6 years when I met them. Thus, they were familiar with the all-too-common paradigm in the educational system in the United States—the transmission of knowledge from the teacher to the student (Freire, 1970). They had not been encouraged to question authority, challenge established knowledge, or participate in their own learning. Thus, the young people were unsure of how to respond when I invited them to participate in a learning process in which they were the principal players.

As the young people learned how to take responsibility for various aspects of the project, I learned how to step away from "taking over" aspects of the project that I felt strongly about. For example, one of the things the young people wanted to do in the PAR project was to create a photo-text book that they wanted to publish and disseminate to the community. I presented the participants' ideas about a photo-text book to a friend of mine who is a graphic designer. During a group session, I informed the participants that my friend agreed to assist us in creating such a book. I told them that she offered to show us how to scan photographs, create montages of images, and situate text to reflect the meanings of the photographs that would be highlighted in the book. The participants thought that my friend's ideas were "cool" and that designing a book would be "really fun to do."

I wanted to capitalize on my friend's availability and felt that if everyone participated on a consistent basis, while also taking responsibility for other project-related activities, we could make some headway in designing the book. It was that "want" that prompted me to remind the participants, on a regular basis, that, in conjunction with their other responsibilities, they

might want to carve out time for us to formulate a plan regarding the photo-text book.

Although the participants were excited about designing a book, they did not particularly want to craft it on *my* timetable. As Tonesha clearly stated during one of the sessions, “We don’t have enough time to work on everything, Dr. McIntyre. We have the assembly, the presentations, going to city hall, and learning a dance for our skit. So, let’s put the book away until we finish the other projects. Everyone who agrees, raise your hand.” Immediately, all the participants raised their hands. It was not until 6 months later that we began working on the photo-text book, and it was a full year and a half before the project was completed (see One STEP Group, McIntyre, & McKeirnan, 2000).

The above example, and others I experienced in both projects, reveals the importance of practitioners’ “getting out of the way” and allowing people to proceed in ways that make sense to and for them—not necessarily to and for the practitioner. That does not mean that participants do not need an occasional push or a gentle prodding now and then. It is my experience with the women and the young people that they did, and they oftentimes looked to me to do that. I was a coparticipant in the projects and, like them, brought a particular set of skills, knowledge, and resources to the groups that needed to be used in practical ways so as to contribute to the overall research process.

“YOU’RE GONNA BE THE TELLER, BUT IT’S OURS”

In the Belfast project, there were times when the women were unsure of their decision-making abilities and turned to me for support, guidance, and assistance. I was more than willing to provide all of the above, yet I also reminded the women that they were capable of making decisions on their own. Sometimes the women responded to my comments with humor and sarcasm. Other times, the women clearly expected me to “fix” the problem at hand.

Below, I present an excerpt from a discussion that was generated after the women attempted to analyze photographs for the photo-text project they were creating. I began the discussion by asking the women if they had collectively agreed on the categories they wanted to use to interpret their photographs.

Lucy: So is this [the photos and the categories they chose] all right, Alice?
Or do you want more? Geez, you’ll be drawin’ blood in a minute.

Alice: It's not that I want more. I just, it's up to you. I mean, you either agree on some photos or you don't agree on others, and it seems like you don't all agree here. Which is fine as long as that is taken into account when you interpret the meanings of the photographs.

Lucy: What d'ya mean? . . . Are ya sayin' we just stuck them there? . . . Is that what you're sayin'?

Tricia: Yeah, she is.

Lucy: You're pickin' on us.

Alice: From my perspective, to leave here and say to people outside the community, "OK, this is what this group said" when it hasn't been thought through and reflected upon, I think does you a disservice. So, it might feel like I'm picking on you, but from my point of view, I don't want to misrepresent the work that you've done.

(crosstalk)

Winnie: We want to represent ourselves right as well, and that's why we're relyin' on you more in this part of the project . . . because ya know, that's really personal to us, but are we representin' ourselves and our community well? And articulatin' it? Because it's very hard to describe yourself sometimes. You sort of have to get justification from someone. D'ya know what I mean? I'm askin' you.

(crosstalk)

Lucy: But I'm not, I'm not sayin' that I want you to tell me or to tell us what to do. What I'm sayin' is we have never done this before. You have done it before workin' with the kids in Bridgeport and puttin' a book and stuff together. We've never done this before. So what I'm sayin' is, ya need to be more clear, to guide us, for us to understand.

Winnie: But I know, Alice, you don't want to do that too much either because you don't want to put your mark on it 'cause it's our community; it's not your community.

Deirdre: I feel as well that somehow we put you in a position because you're Alice, and you're our friend now. And that's the way we want it to be, so we're chattin' away and tellin' you all these things and talkin' to you and whatever, and then we just switch

and go like that, “Well, you’re the professor. You must know . . . You tell us. What do we know? We live on [Monument] Road, ya know? We’re the white mice. You tell us.” And I know that’s not very fair, and I imagine you must feel it in the position you’re in because you have those two roles to fill, but we turn them on and off when we want . . . So, yeah, it’s a different dynamic this time around, but at the same time, we want kinda guidance. Maybe we’re not very nice about askin’ for it. We don’t do it very well . . . ’Cause it is our story to tell, not yours, if you know what I mean. You’re gonna be the teller, but it’s ours. (McIntyre, 2004, p. 99–100)

After this exchange we had lengthy conversations about my roles and responsibilities as a practitioner and a friend. I agreed with the women that I had experience as a researcher and as someone who had analyzed and interpreted data. I also agreed with the women when they asserted that they were the primary tellers of their stories. I informed them that the challenge *for me* was deciding to what extent I needed to assist them in that story-telling process.

As evidenced by the women’s discussion, they felt strongly that I needed to assist them in analyzing the stories and discussions that were linked to their photographs. Therefore, during the next session, I demonstrated a number of analytical strategies to assist the women in making meaning of their photographs. Some of the strategies the women decided to use were helpful; others confused them. In the end, the women decided on an analytical strategy that worked for *them*—a strategy that was a combination of other researchers’ work and their own ideas for making sense of their visual stories. (See McIntyre, 2004, for a more detailed account of how the women engaged the analysis process.)

As noted earlier, it is my experience that the most effective strategy for engaging people in a PAR project is for the participants and the researchers to use commonsense participation and to take joint responsibility for developing *the group’s* version of what it means to participate in a PAR process. If both parties do not contribute to how people participate and in what ways, then practitioners of PAR run the risk of “telling” people how to do things, thus becoming too pedagogic and/or manipulative. Thus, they, and the participants, lose sight of the collaborative nature of the participant/researcher relationship—a relationship that is vital to the effectiveness of a PAR project.

WHO BENEFITS? THE IMPORTANCE OF MULTIPLE PERSPECTIVES IN A PAR PROJECT

It is important to note that PAR projects are not initiated or carried out solely for the benefit of those who actually participate in the research process. The young people in Bridgeport demonstrated that although the majority of community residents did not participate in their cleanup project, the project itself benefited *all* members of the community. Similarly, the photovoice project that the women in Belfast designed and presented to outside audiences benefited their entire community because it represented images and stories that are usually ignored, dismissed, and overlooked in the overall story about how the residents of the Monument Road community experience their lives.

The reality is that many people living in communities where PAR projects take place do not participate in the actual research process. Some people are unable to commit themselves to a PAR project owing to work, family, and other responsibilities. Others choose not to participate owing to opposition to the idea of a project or to the direction they think the project might take. Still other people are unaware that a project is under way and may hear about it only as the project unfolds. Yet regardless of the reasons that people do not participate in a PAR project, the focus of the project should be to provide opportunities for local people to develop strategies and garner resources for changing their environments for the better. Thus, as many people as possible should be invited to participate, to voice their concerns, and to inquire as to the development of the PAR process as it evolves. As Kemmis and McTaggart (2005) suggest, "Not all will accept the invitation, but it is incumbent on those who do participate to take into account [those] others' understandings, perspectives, and interests" (p. 579).

PAR ACROSS CONTINENTS

Negotiating the role of practitioner and participant when I lived on one continent and the women in Belfast lived on another brought its own set of challenges to the PAR project. The fact that I live in the United States significantly informed the women's participation in the PAR project and predicated who would be responsible for project-related tasks. The women secured the conference room and found child-care providers. They also took the photographs that framed the photovoice project. I supplied materials for the project: cameras, film, tape recorders, audiotapes, food for the

group meetings, and any last-minute items we needed upon my arrival in Belfast. In addition, I provided the funding for the project from sources in the United States.

For the most part, the women and I were able to coordinate the PAR project without too much disruption to the project itself. Yet it is important to remember that daily life and unexpected events “get in the way” of participants’ fulfilling project-related obligations. It is one thing for people to talk through an issue and make plans to take action on that issue during a group session; it is quite another for participants to walk out the door and fulfill project-related activities in the midst of their daily lives. That is one reason that the women readily admitted that maintaining the project at a pace that would move it forward was contingent upon *my* availability. Tricia summed up the feelings of the group one day when she said, “Without you, Alice, we forget. We get caught up in our lives. Plus, if we do all the work without you here, you won’t come back.”

Whether it is across continents or across town, practitioners need to employ the best methods available to facilitate processes in which participants can participate with one another to make change. That may mean that the projects do not always move at the pace the practitioner would like or in ways that satisfy everyone. Nonetheless, if the participation is authentic and if practitioners put their trust in people’s desire to change, they affirm that participation is not an illusion but a material fact that provides energy, direction, and a sense of accomplishment to those involved.

CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS

Although the “ideal” PAR project may include participants who participate in *every* aspect of the project, it is my experience that, in reality, there are multiple factors that come into play when researchers and participants meet and decide to accompany one another through a collaborative process. It is unlikely that each party, individually or collectively, can or will participate equally in a PAR process. Nonetheless, the process by which individuals participate in PAR holds the most promise and the most potential in a participatory process. It is there, in that dialectical process of investigation and consciousness-raising, that participants rethink positions, imagine new ways of being, acting, and doing, and grapple with the catalytic energy that infuses PAR projects. It is by participating in critical dialogue, in discussions in which people agree, disagree, argue, debate, are affirmed for their views, and challenged for their views that participants truly experience the

“aha” moments that come with self- and collective scrutiny. It is that type of participation that provides space for people to reflect on what is being discussed in the group sessions and then, upon reflection, to take the necessary steps to improve their current situations.