Participatory Action Research: Theories and Methods

University of Ljubljana, Thursday 12 November, 2026

8.45 arrival for a 9.00 start, until 16.30

Facilitated by Sarah Banks, Durham University, UK, s.j.banks@durham.ac.uk



This workshop is designed to develop understanding and skills in the theory and practice of participatory action research (PAR). PAR is increasingly popular, involving people whose lives might be affected by the issue being studied (e.g. domestic violence, asylum-seeking, homelessness) taking an active part in designing, carrying out and putting research into practice, often alongside academic researchers. The aim is to bring about change in people's living conditions, service provision or public policy, for example. Masters and doctoral students taking a PAR approach face many challenges, including negotiating how to work with partner organisations, handling co-ownership of research findings in relation to the thesis, and responsibilities for working for social change. Similarly, community organisations can encounter obstacles in undertaking community-based research with universities.

The content will cover key values, ethical/political issues, theorising and critiquing PAR, working with partner organisations to influence change, and participatory approaches to research design, process, analysis, dissemination and implementation. The workshop will be participatory, using small groups to focus on specific questions and evaluate learning.

The objectives of the workshop are to:

1. Enable participants to develop critical understandings of the uses, advantages and limitations of PAR, and an ability to draw on a range of theoretical and practical insights.
2. Develop participants' awareness of ethical and political challenges in PAR, particularly in community-university partnership working, and strategies for handling these.
3. Facilitate the development of participants' confidence in working with the complexities of PAR within different disciplines and settings.
4. Offer participants the experience of learning and understanding through active participation during the workshop.
5. Develop participants' understanding of the impacts that PAR may have, and processes for creating and capturing these.

Sarah Banks is Professor Emerita in the Department of Sociology and co-founder of the Centre for Social Justice and Community Action at Durham University, UK. She teaches and researches in the fields of participatory action research, community development and social work ethics. She has a particular interest

in practical ethics and is co-editor of *Ethics in Participatory Research for Health and Social Well-being* (Routledge, 2019) and *Co-producing Research: A Community Development Approach* (Policy Press, 2019).

INDICATIVE PROGRAMME

8.45	**Arrivals**
9.00	**Introductions and warm up exercises**
9.30	**1. INTRODUCTION TO PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH (PAR) - PRESENTATION & EXAMPLES** What is PAR? History, underpinning principles and 'the participatory paradigm'. Starting out on a PAR project, working agreements and partnership working.
10.00	**Break out groups in pairs/threes** – Questions: 1. What are the advantages/disadvantages of PAR? 2. How are you using/might you use PAR in your research?
10.15	**Feedback** (brief)
10.30	**Break**
10.45	**2. METHODS AND APPROACHES – PRESENTATION & EXAMPLES** The importance of a participatory approach rather than participatory methods *per se*. A rapid overview of a selection of methods, with examples from practice.
11.15	**Break out groups in pairs/threes** – Questions: 1. Which methods interest you? 2. Are you using any participatory methods in your research, or might you consider doing so? 3. Choose one method and think about how it might work in relation to one of your research projects?
11.45	**Feedback** (brief)
12.00	**LUNCH BREAK**
13.00	**3. ETHICAL ISSUES IN PAR – PRESENTATION** The nature of ethics, issues of partnership and power, ethical principles for PAR
13.30	**Small group discussions**: choice of 4 ethics cases
13.50	**Feedback** from groups (brief)
14.10	**4. PARTICIPATORY DATA ANALYSIS - PRESENTATION & EXAMPLES** The challenges of collaborative data analysis, approaches & examples from practice
14.30	**BREAK**
14.45	**Break out groups** to undertake a group exercise and discuss data analysis.
15.15	**Feedback**
15.30	**5. PLANNING DISSEMINATION AND THE IMPACT JOURNEY - PRESENTATION & EXAMPLES** Deciding together how to share the research findings, what counts as 'impact' and how this is co-created and evidenced.
16.00	**Evaluation and reflections on learning** 1. What is the most important learning I will take away from this workshop? 2. What more do I need to learn? 3. Might I use PAR in my research and if so, how? 4. What was one positive feature of this workshop? 5. What was a difficult or negative feature of this workshop?
16.30	**Close**

ADDITIONAL MATERIALS

1. Ethics Cases for Discussion

These case examples are shortened from: Banks, S. & Brydon-Miller, M. (eds) (2019) *Ethics in Participatory Research for Health & Social Well-Being: Cases & Commentaries*, Abingdon: Routledge.

Case 1: Are you telling me this as a researcher or friend? A UK doctoral student's dilemma

A UK doctoral researcher (a young woman) was studying how a volunteer youth-led community radio station provided space for young people to find and realise their voices. This research adopted a participatory design in collaboration with young people at the radio station, training them as co-researchers. The student visited the station 4-5 days a week for 18 months, deciding to position herself as 'researcher as friend' – accepting young people's 'friend requests' on Facebook, sharing her mobile number, enjoying activities with them outside the station. She reported how she came to question her approach:

> "One day a young volunteer sat next to me, and … started telling me about his past battles with depression and drug abuse, and how the station had been his saviour. 'What excellent data!' I thought. However, alarm bells rang, and I asked him: 'Are you telling me this as a researcher or a friend?' 'As a friend,' he replied, 'but you can use it in your thesis if you want.' I suddenly began to question my entire approach to this participatory research project, which had drawn me into friendships with young people, which I considered to be inevitable due to our comparable age, our liking of the same music, and our mutual interest in radio."

Questions:

A. Was the doctoral researcher's decision to position herself initially as 'researcher as friend' in this case:

1. Ethical
2. Unethical
3. It depends …

B. Why? What reasons would you give?

Case 2: 'Co-writing', The Netherlands

A postdoctoral researcher (Gustaaf) and a community researcher (Rafaella) were working on a project to evaluate a programme for developing experiential knowledge for people with intellectual disabilities. Gustaaf had trained Rafaella and another woman in conducting interviews and observations. Rafaella was a member of an organisation that supported people with intellectual disabilities. After each observation the community researchers would hand in reports. Rafaella asked Gustaaf to 'correct' her 'grammatical errors and other mistakes'. Gustaaf was reluctant, as he saw himself as a co-researcher, 'not her Dutch language teacher'. He felt that people with intellectual disabilities are stigmatised, and correcting language exerts 'cultural dominance', 'eradicates tension' in interactions between people/researchers with/without learning disabilities. He valued 'authenticity' and would only correct the reports if he could not understand them. Rafaella, however, really wanted Gustaaf to be honest and to adjust her errors, because 'I do not want people to consider my writing weird … I would be ashamed if my children would read what I wrote ….'

Questions:

A. Was Gustaaf's reluctance to correct Rafaella's reports:

1. Ethical
2. Unethical
3. It depends …..

B. Why? What reasons would you give?

Case 3: Suicide and well-being research with Inuit in Arctic Canada

A research partnership involving Inuit and academic researchers in Arctic Canada was looking into issues relating to suicide and well-being amongst Inuit people. The research questions and the participatory methodology came from

the Inuit community. A Canadian academic was working with the group. He was not Inuit and was regarded as 'white'. The Inuit Youth Committee, very much involved in the project, complained about the negative attitudes of one of the adult Inuit researchers. This man wasn't any good at doing interviews, and he also didn't like working with the women interviewers. The President of the Youth Committee asked the academic to deal with this and implied that he should 'fire' the man.

Questions:

A. If the academic did ask the man to leave the project, do you think this would be:
   1. Ethical
   2. Unethical
   3. It depends …..

B. Why? What reasons would you give?

Case 4: The Research Ethics Committee, Ireland

A palliative care academic (Geralyn) was interested in how all nurses can gain basic palliative care competences. She was approached by a respiratory nurse in a hospital to support efforts to address palliative care needs of patients with advanced chronic respiratory disease. Geralyn suggested an action research approach and a planning group of nurses worked to draft a proposal to set up an action research group of nurses and patients, which would oversee information-gathering and analysis of palliative care needs and recommending palliative care strategies for the hospital. The proposal was submitted to the University Faculty Research Ethics Committee and was rejected on the grounds that:

a) Including patients who had advanced disease in an action research group would be too onerous for them;
b) Asking patients to engage in a project the outcome of which was not pre-determined in terms of activities and time was unacceptable.

Questions:

A. Do you think the decision of the Research Ethics Committee was:

1. Ethical
2. Unethical
3. It depends …..

B. Why? What reasons would you give?

2. Some examples of participatory methods

Method 1: River of Life

From http://www.kstoolkit.org/River+of+Life accessed 14.5.18, Wikispace, now discontinued (Page Authors, Catherine Fisher, Nancy White). See also: Participatory Methods, Institute of Development Studies, https://www.participatorymethods.org/method/rivers-life and The Steps Centre, https://steps-centre.org/pathways-methods-vignettes/methods-vignettes-rivers-life/

Brief Description:



River of life is a visual narrative method that helps people tell stories of the past, present and future. Individuals can use this method to introduce themselves in a fun and descriptive way; a group can use it to understand and reflect on the past and imagine the future of a project; and it can be used to build a shared view compiled of different and perhaps differing perspectives. River of Life focuses on drawing rather than text, making it useful in groups that do not share a language. When used in a group, it is an active

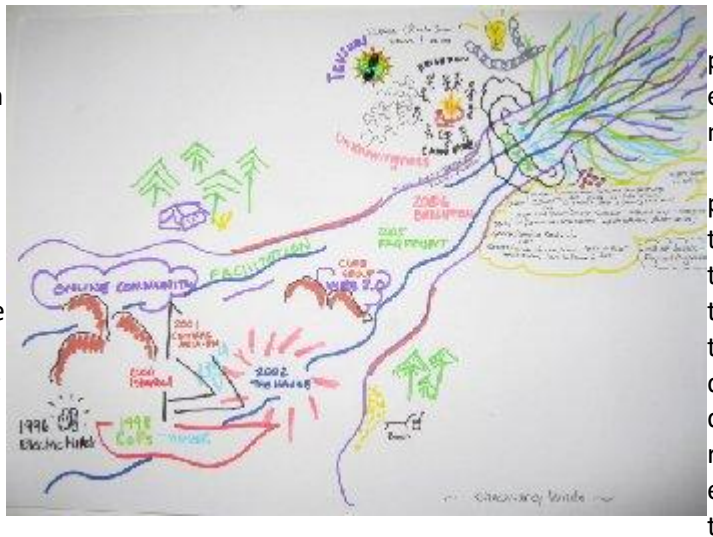
method, good for engaging people.

When to use:

- Personal introductions.
- Project review and reflection.
- Planning for the future.
- Reconciling different perceptions of a project, situation or issue.

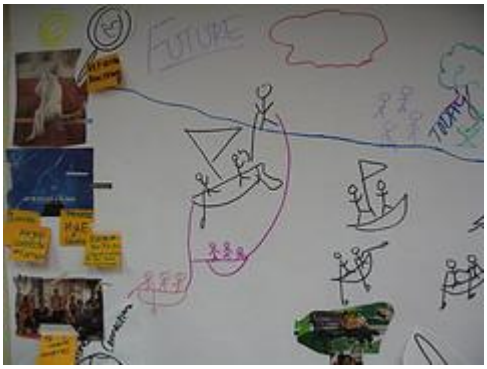
How to use:

For individual introductions:



- Introduce the method if participants are not yet familiar with it. Draw an example river to help people visualize what it might look like.
- Form small groups of four to six people.
- Ask participants to draw rivers at the two-thirds point of the page. Ask them to use the bigger part of the river to represent where they come from and what led them to attend this event.
- Participants share and explain their drawings.
- Participants return to their drawings and use the smaller part of the page to represent what they expect to gain out of the event and what they will use from it back in their normal work environment.
- The facilitator keeps time during the drawing and explanations, announcing when to start drawing, sharing, drawing again, sharing again and when to stop.

For groups to look at a project, problem or opportunity:



- Break into small groups and ask people to think about the past, present and future of the project or issue you are addressing.
- Ask them to draw images, or find images in magazines that represent key milestones from the past, present and those they would envision for the future. It can be useful to do this in phases, starting with the past. Then invite the present. Finally invite the future. You may wish to stop and have conversations around the image after each phase.
- On a large piece of paper on the wall (several meters long) ask a volunteer to draw the river flowing through the paper.
- Ask the groups to come up and place their images (with glue sticks, tape, etc.) on the paper. Encourage discussion while participants are working at the wall.
- After the group has finished putting up images, initiate a discussion about what they see; reflect on past lessons, current situations and visions for the future.

For groups to chart progress through an event:

- Set up the river on a large wall, whiteboard or pinboard at the start of the meeting. In conversation, ask people to create and bring up images about what brought them to the meeting and what they wanted out of it when they agreed to come. Put those in the "past" part of the river.
- During the meeting, invite people to capture key moments, learnings or questions in images and put them in the "present" part of the river.
- Towards the end of the meeting, invite people to capture next steps or actions and put them in the 'future" part of the river.
- Review the full river before the end of the meeting and use the future section as your follow up tool.

Tips and Lessons Learnt

- People may initially be reluctant to draw, but in the end, there is often more appreciation and ownership of the drawings than the cut outs.
- Cut outs allow images to be moved if you need to reconcile across different versions or perspectives. Drawings can be done on separate papers to facilitate this movability.
- Take digital picture of the images to share afterwards.
- Think creatively - this method can be used anytime there is a timeline involved.

Examples & Stories

Story: We used River of Life last week in a face-to-face 3-day workshop on knowledge sharing (KS). We had a very diverse 15-person group, workshop run in English, interpretation in French and Spanish. We started by breaking the group into four subgroups where they started thinking about the history and possible future paths of KS in the organization. As the groups started sketching out ideas on paper, we invited them up to the front of the room for our large river of life, where they then more fully sketched out their contributions. One group offered a complete rethinking of the river structure, showing tributary streams which, before joining the river, were isolated. At the end of about 90 minutes, we had a vivid depiction of where they had been and where they wanted to head, mostly visual and free of a lot of text (useful in the multilingual environment). We were then able to refer back to it as we worked over the three days... One thing I noticed is there was little self- consciousness about how "artful" it was. We used stick figure drawings, magazine cut outs and stickers. Quite simple. – Nancy.

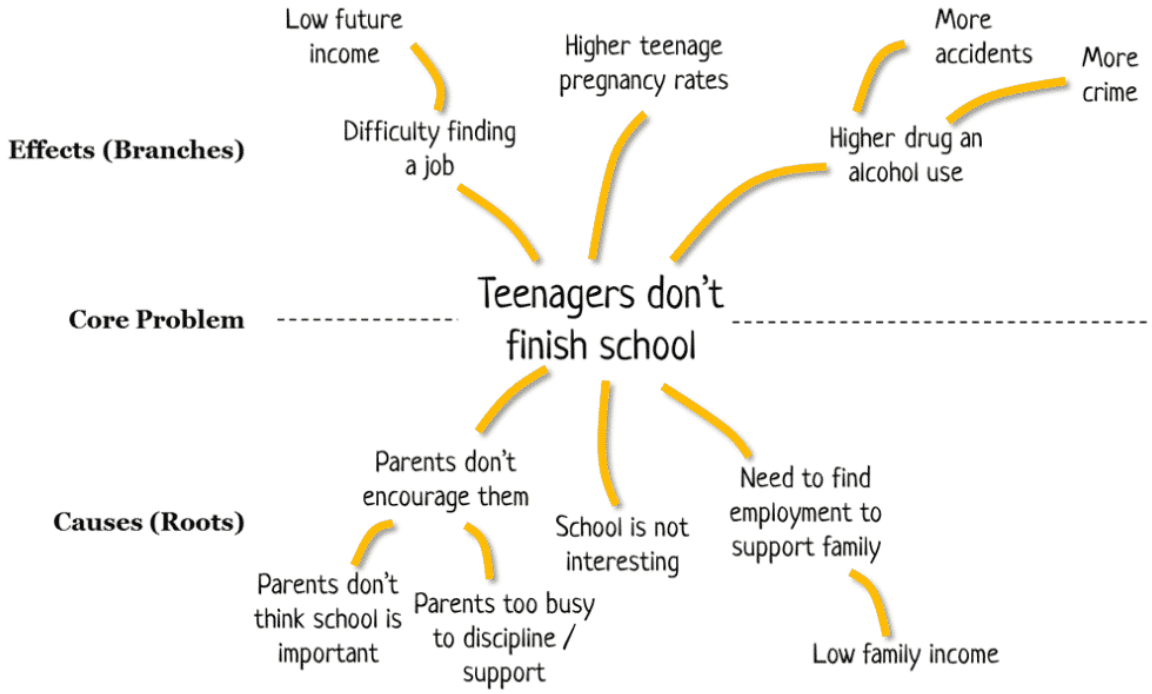
Method 2: Problem Tree

(taken from *tools4dev*, https://tools4dev.org/resources/how-to-design-a-new-program/)

Find out what the problem is

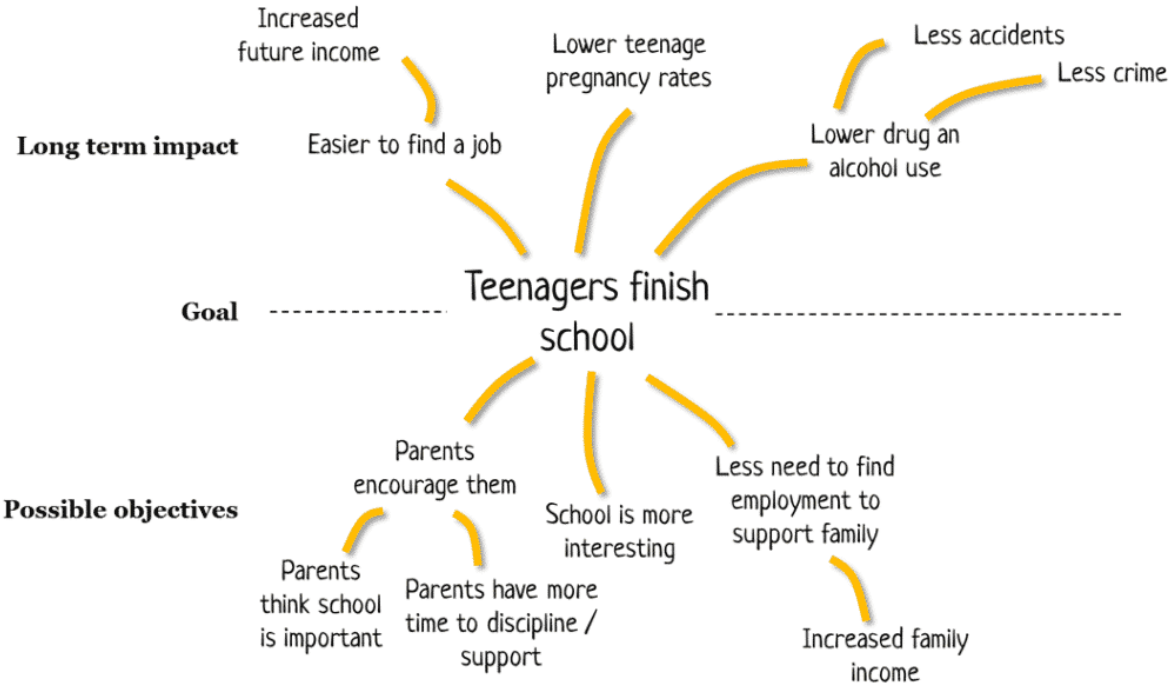
The first step is to understand what problem it is that you want to solve. This normally involves some type of "needs assessment", where you conduct a survey, interviews, focus groups and/or meetings with beneficiaries to find out what problems they are facing, the size of the problem, and how important they think the problem is.

Once you think you've identified the problem it can be helpful to do a Problem Tree Analysis to investigate the causes and effects. Start by writing the core problem in the middle of the board or flip chart paper. Then ask yourself: What is the cause of this problem? And what is the cause of that cause? Keep listing causes down the page so they become the roots of the tree, until you think you've reached the very bottom root cause. Then go back to the core problem and ask: What are the effects of this problem? And what are the effects of those effects? List them up the page to become the branches of the tree. The result will look something like the example below.

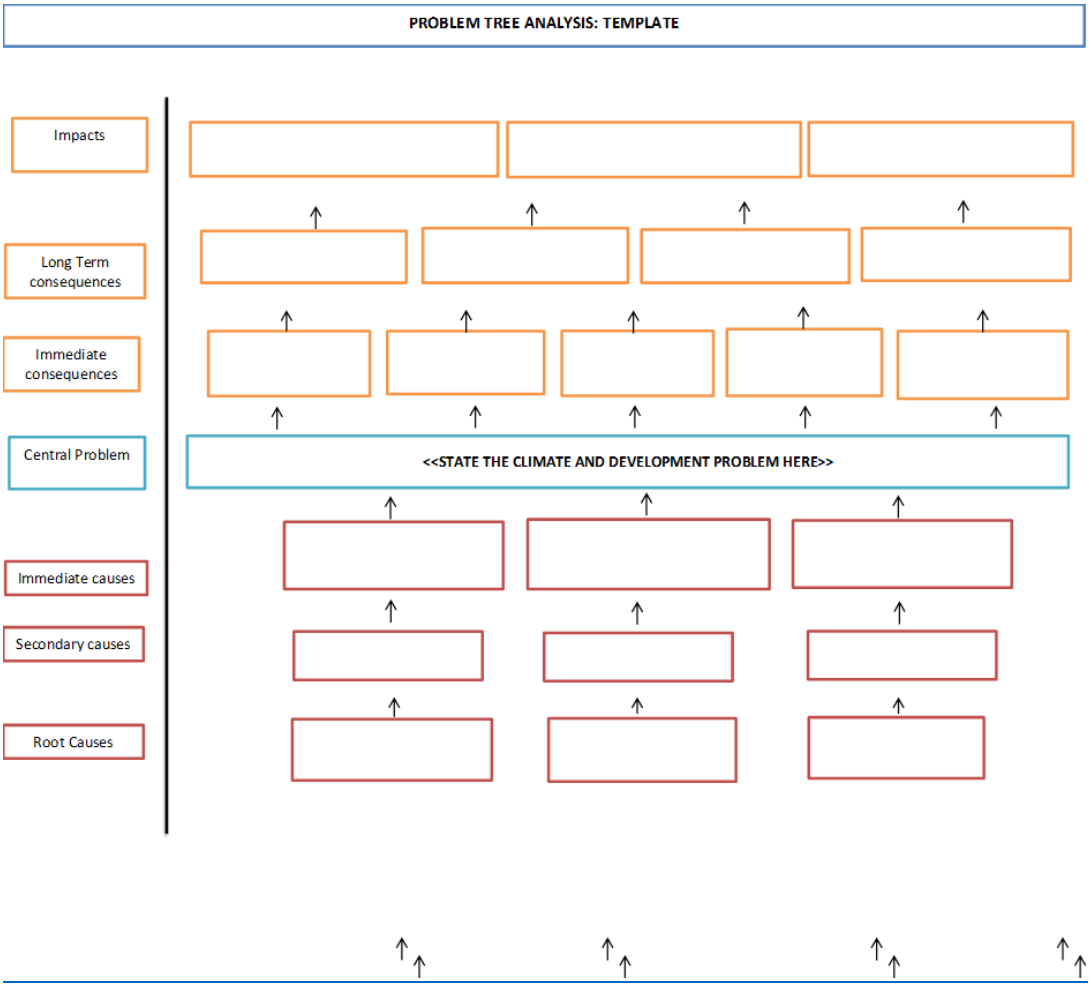


Choose your goal and how to measure it

Once you know what the problem is, who the stakeholders are, what skills and resources you have available, and what people have already tried previously, it's now possible to decide what the goal of your program should be. You could have just one goal, or you could have one goal plus several sub-objectives or outcomes. One way to identify the goal and possible objectives is simply to reverse the statements in your problem tree from negative statements to positive ones. For example, "lack of awareness" becomes "increased awareness", "increased deforestation" becomes "reduced deforestation". An example of this is shown below. This example was created by reversing the statements in the previous problem tree.



Another example of a problem tree – blank template



Method 3: Photovoice

Taken from: Photovoice – Research Methods for Society and Mental Health, https://researchmethodstoolkit.com/more-approaches/photovoice/

"Photovoice is a visual research method that puts cameras into participants' hands to (…) [empower] them to document, reflect upon and communicate issues of concern (…) [and] stimulate social change." (Budig et al., 2018)

Photovoice is one of many participatory action research methods (PAR) which seek to redistribute power from the researcher to the participants during the research process. Photovoice participants document their experiences by taking photos. These photos are then further discussed in group discussion sessions to explore these experiences in greater depth and eventually formulate actions for social change.

What is the purpose of photovoice?

- to reflect on a community's strengths and concerns
- to promote critical dialogue about these experiences
- to empower communities to create their own knowledge throughout the research process
- to raise public awareness of community concerns and reach decision-makers to achieve meaningful social change (Wang & Burris, 1997; Community Tool Box, 2022)

Who gets involved in a photovoice project?

The **participants** in a Photovoice project are also *co-researchers* who are in control of their own knowledge and how it is used. The **researcher** takes on multiple roles facilitating discussion, collecting and analysing data, supporting with resources, organising meetings, and helping with and promoting social actions (Jones et al., 2022).

What is the power of photos?

Using photos allows participants to creatively explore aspects of their lived experience beyond verbal or written dialogue. Photos can highlight vivid details about the participants' daily life which can produce strong emotions in the viewer. This can be particularly impactful when attempting to influence decision-makers as it is hard to deny the existence of problems when seeing them first-hand (Community Tool Box, 2022). Examples of such work is varied and can include:

- evaluating co-produced mental health services
- promoting women's leadership and political participation in climate change activism
- exploring young people's experiences of UK adoption and related support
- language barriers and approaches to language learning among refugees and asylum seekers

How is a photovoice project organised?

Photovoice can be organised into the following phases:

Phase 1– Introduction to Photovoice and research ethics

Phase 2– Take photos

Phase 3– Discuss photos

Phase 4– Process photos

Phase 5– Community exhibitions and/or other social actions

While each phase is important, the Discussion Phase (Phase 3) is particularly insightful. It allows everyone involved to better understand the problem and to develop social actions that could meaningfully address it. Such group discussions can be facilitated using the **SHOWED** method which involves asking the co-researchers:

1. What do you **S**ee here?
2. What is really **H**appening here?
3. How does this relate to **O**ur lives?

4. **W**hy does this concern, situation or strength exist?
5. How can we become **E**mpowered through our new understanding?
6. And, what can we **D**o?

At the end of the project, participants should feel empowered to share their experiences, advocate for their demands, and work with decisionmakers to bring about meaningful social change to improve their lives. (Author: Raza Hussain)

The Five Key Concepts of Photovoice (Taken from: Wang C. Photovoice: A participatory action research strategy applied to women's health. *J Women's Health*, 1999;8(2), 185–92).

1. **Images Teach -** It's true when they say "a picture is worth a thousand words". Images have the potential to convey more meaning, feeling, and connections than text. The meanings we weave into images further add to their power and influence.
2. **Images Can Influence Policy -** Although images on their own will not shape policy, they can influence people's worldview. Therefore, images can influence policymakers, community advocates, and society as a whole.
3. **Community Members are the Ones that Create and Define Images -** Photovoice is not just about people taking photographs, it's about capturing images and scenes that provide context and meaning to one's story and perspective.
4. **Importance of Engagement –** It's critical to engage community advocates and influential people to serve as an audience for community members' perspectives displayed through photovoice.
5. **Action-Oriented -** Photovoice emphasizes individual and community action.

Ethical issues to bear in mind with photos (compiled by Sarah Banks)

- Will people be in the photos? If so, they need to give consent to be photographed and informed about how the images will be used.
- If children/adults are in photos and they/their guardians can't consent, faces can be blurred.
- It can be easier not to include people if the research is about places.
- The person taking the photo should give permission for its use in exhibitions, publications etc.
- Decide whether the photographer or people in the photos want to be named or anonymised.
- Be aware of the emotional sensitivity of working with photos depicting aspects of people's lives.

Other materials on Photovoice

- Community Toolbox, https://ctb.ku.edu/en/table-of-contents/assessment/assessing-community-needs-and-resources/photovoice/main
- Participedia, https://participedia.net/method/5016
- Research Methods Toolkit, https://researchmethodstoolkit.com/more-approaches/photovoice/
- Photovoice Blog Series, Blog #1: The Photovoice Method, Ogai Sherzoi,
- https://medium.com/knowledgenudge/photovoice-blog-series-96477db68e05
- Maine Youth Action Network, https://www.myan.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/photovoice-guidance.pdf

Method 4: World Café Conversations



Extract from *Café to Go*, quick reference guide,

http://www.theworldcafe.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/Cafe-To-Go-Revised.pdf

The World Café is built on the assumption that ... People already have within them the wisdom and creativity to confront even the most difficult challenges; that the answers we need are available to us; and that we are Wiser Together than we are alone.

- Seat four (five max) people at small Café-style tables or in conversation clusters.
- Set up progressive (at least three) rounds of conversation, approximately 20 minutes each.
- Engage questions or issues that genuinely matter to your life, work, or community.
- Encourage participants to write, doodle and draw key ideas on their tablecloths (and/or note key ideas on large index cards or placemats in the center of the table).
- Upon completing the initial round of conversation, you may ask one person to remain at the table as a "table host" for the next round, while the others serve as travelers or "ambassadors of meaning." The travelers carry key ideas, themes and questions into their new conversations, while the table host welcomes the new set of travelers.
- By providing opportunities for people to move in several rounds of conversation, ideas, questions, and themes begin to link and connect. At the end of the second or third round, all of the tables or conversation clusters in the room will be cross-pollinated with insights from prior conversations.
- In the last round of conversation, people can return to their first table to synthesize their discoveries, or they may continue traveling to new tables.
- You may use the same question for one or more rounds of conversation, or you may pose different questions in each round to build on and help deepen the exploration.
- After at least three rounds of conversation, initiate a period of sharing discoveries & insights in a whole group conversation. It is in these town meeting-style conversations that patterns can be identified, collective knowledge grows, and possibilities for action emerge.
- Once you know what you want to achieve and the amount of time you have to work with, you can decide the appropriate number and length of conversation rounds, the most effective use of questions and the most interesting ways to connect and cross-pollinate ideas.

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3. READING - Core texts that are comprehensive and useful for many topics:

Abma, T., Banks, S., Cook, T., Dias, S., Madsen, W., Springett, J., Wright, M.T. (2019) *Participatory Research for Health and Social Well-Being*, Switzerland, Springer (Useful comprehensive core text on all aspects of participatory research, with practical examples). **E-BOOK**

Banks, S. and Brydon-Miller, M. (eds) (2019) *Ethics in participatory research for health and social well-being: Cases and commentaries*, Abingdon, Routledge. (Overview of ethics in participatory research and chapters on key topics with case examples). **E-BOOK**

Burns, D., Howard, J. and Ospina, S. (eds) (2022) *The SAGE Handbook of Participatory Research and Inquiry*, London, Sage. (Variety of chapters on different approaches and methods). **E-BOOK**

Bradbury, H. (ed) (2015) *The Sage Handbook of Action Research*, 3rd edn, London, Sage. (Variety of chapters on a range of topics)**. E-BOOK**

Fine, M. and Torres, M. E. (2021) *Essentials of Critical Participatory Action Research,* Washington DC, American Psychological Association. (Comprehensive text on critical PAR with and for communities that have been historically disenfranchised in traditional research).

Groundwater-Smith, S., Dockett, S. & Bottrell, D. (2015) *Participatory Research with Children and Young People*, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage (Very good on methods and approaches in general, with particular reference to young people)

Gubrium, A. and Harper, K. (2016) *Participatory Visual and Digital Research,* Abingdon: Routledge. (Excellent coverage of visual and digital methods, ethics, etc).

Gubrium, A., Harper, K. and Otañez, M. (2015) *Participatory Visual and Digital Research in Action,* Walnut Creek, CA, Left Coast Press. (Very useful for practical methods) **E-BOOK**

Kindon, S., Pain, R. and Kesby, M. (eds) (2007) *Participatory action research approaches and methods: connecting people, participation and place*, Abingdon, Routledge. Comprehensive coverage of a range of topics). **E-BOOK**

Martinez-Vargas, C. (2022) *Democratising Participatory Research: Pathways to Social Justice from the South*, Open Book Publishers (Explores how academic participatory research and the way it is carried out can contribute to more, or less, social justice). https://www.openbookpublishers.com/product/1511 **E-BOOK, E FREE TO DOWNLOAD**

Some journals

Action Research (Sage); *The Canadian Journal of Action Research* (Nipissing University); *Educational Action Research* (Taylor & Francis); *International Journal of Action Research* (Rainer Hampp Verlag); *Journal of Participatory Research Methods* (University of Cincinnati; *Research for All* (UCL/NCCPE).

Web

- *Centre for Social Justice and Community Action, Durham University, further information, toolkits, films, and case studies on ethics: https://www.durham.ac.uk/research/institutes-and-centres/social-justice-community-action/toolkits/*
- *Participatory Action Research & Organisational Change*, https://participaction.wordpress.com/
- *Participatory Methods*, website of information and resources from the Institute of Development Studies www.participatorymethods.org/resources
- UK Participatory Research Network *http://ukprn.weebly.com/*
- *Patricia Maguire, Feminist Participatory Research, Educational and Teacher Action Research*, *https://www.patriciamaguire.net* Personal website established by Pat Maguire with a range of publications, documents and interesting resources.
- *International Collaboration for Participatory Health Research,* http://www.icphr.org website of publications, resources, position papers and networking/meetings.