

Can we define ethical standards for participatory work?



by JOHN ROWLEY with MARILYN DOYLE, SUSIE HAY and the Participatory Practitioners for Change (PPfC) member

Introduction

This article discusses the attempts over the last ten years of a small group of people in the UK to outline the ethical issues facing them in their participatory practice. The people involved are members of a network called the Participatory Practitioners for Change (PPfC).¹ The group formed around common concerns about the quality of work carried out in the name of participation.

The PPfC members have developed statements of principles and good practice that describe the kind of participation that they hope for in their work. They first defined **Principles** (see Box 1) for their work and then developed **Guidelines for Commissioners** (see Box 2) as a way of helping people think about what would make a good piece of participatory work. More recently, they have produced a set of statements on ethical issues which led to a list of **Promises** (see Box 3) that participatory practitioners might make to a potential client.

This article tells the story of these

repeated attempts to describe better participatory work and define the ethical issues of participation, and asks if clear definitions can be widely approved and applied. Can we define ethical standards for participatory work or do practitioners have to struggle with the ethical issues in each different piece of work?

The work of the PPfC

The PPfC launched a website in 2007 and described one key overarching factor as follows:

Our common issue is that much that is done in the name of participation does not in fact lead to greater involvement of people, nor does it lead to any significant change in the status quo of power and decision-making.

The search for 'genuine' participation is driven by the excitement of having seen significant and lasting change occur in community-led processes – and by frustra-

¹See: ppfcuk.wordpress.com

Box 1: The PPfC principles

Work on defining the principles of participatory work took over a year and in November 2005, a PPfC meeting edited a lot of earlier work into eight simple statements.²

1. Local people are experts in their own lives – others learn from them.
2. Participatory work tries to include everyone relevant to the activity. Participants try to find those who need to be involved and to include voices and ideas that may not normally be heard.
3. In good participatory work people take ownership of the process (using their analysis, their ideas and their words) that is developed together with others from many different backgrounds.
4. Participatory work follows cycles of learning – each step helps decide on the next step.
5. Participatory work requires people to be self-reflective. Practitioners continuously examine and develop their practice.
6. Participatory work is rigorous and ethical. Participants continually check their work and design ways of testing the process and the findings.
7. Participatory work should lead to action.
8. Good participatory work identifies the role of power in relationships and seeks to lead to empowerment of those disadvantaged by the existing situation.

The importance of honesty, handing over power and helping to bring about action can be seen clearly.

See: ppfcuk.files.wordpress.com/2012/02/ppfccoreprinciples.pdf

tion at seeing initiatives fail where participation is weak. There is also frustration at seeing the word ‘participatory’ become essentially meaningless. People can be disappointed by a weak consultation process in which, for example, they do not know how their ideas have been used nor hear of any results of the process. When this happens, they may choose not to take part in further consultations and develop what is often called ‘consultation fatigue’.

PPfC members are motivated by a desire to see successful, locally led community development work, but they are aware that many initiatives funded in the name of participation may have a limited mandate or limited resources. In such

cases, it may be wrong to attempt a broad participatory exercise if proposed initiatives cannot be carried out. It is, of course, perfectly legitimate to carry out limited public consultation exercises as long as the limits are made completely clear to participants to avoid creating false expectations.

Maintaining quality

The participants at a PPfC meeting in 2001 discussed ethical issues and principles, standards and quality and expressed the view that respect for the principles listed above ‘ensures that participatory appraisal is a process, not merely a tool’. The question of maintaining quality includes issues of inclusion, building confidence and challenging existing ideas. The report on the meeting includes a statement of the need to ensure that the ‘outcome of participatory appraisal is [...] a change in the way decisions are made [...] and that action happens’.

The discussions that PPfC members were having are a reflection of similar discussions that people working in participatory work have had in many different contexts. It seems that it is necessary and perhaps part of participatory practice that practitioners have to develop the ideas for themselves rather than follow a text or guide that sets out how participatory work should be carried out. It is also true that none of the key principles of good participatory practice became institutionalised or standard practice during the 1990s. A publication called *Pathways to Participation* (Cornwall and Pratt, 2003) includes a chapter called ‘Concerns over quality – the elusive nature of good practice’ which voices concerns identical to those of the PPfC members. However, despite the interest shown by practitioners, no definitive definitions or codes of conduct for participatory work have gained widespread acceptance.

One of the most powerful examinations of the meanings associated with participation is the **ladder of participation**

²See: ppfcuk.wordpress.com/2012/02/20/principles-of-participatory-work/

designed by Arnstein (1969). This ladder describes eight levels of engagement of increasingly genuine participation, including levels of tokenism up to citizens having real power. Similar ladders of participation have been developed since then.³ These ladders make clear that there is a wide range of work carried out to promote citizen engagement but much of it is not genuine participation; some of it is misleading and some is ethically wrong.

One could argue that every initiative in public consultation should include an assessment of the level of participation at which it will operate and this could then be made clear to participants. Problems are sometimes caused not by the level of participation itself, but by misunderstandings over the level at which the consultation is operating, or by the differences between the rhetoric and the reality.

Defining the guidelines

One difficulty with principles is that they do not always suggest action that could be taken to improve the level of participation in any particular initiative. They tend to describe an ideal state and may not provide much help in how to get there. This is one of the reasons that the PPfC worked on guidelines for commissioners. The idea behind the guidelines was that practitioners could show them to potential clients to help them to design a more participatory process or to help them choose between tenders for the work. The guidelines were edited down to ten questions (see Box 2).

The complete guidelines are four pages long and explain some of the rationale of the ten questions. The guidelines are quite variable in the demands they put on the imagined 'commissioner'. Question 2 is simply asking that the results of any participatory work are fed back to those who took part. The rationale is simple to understand and the costs of organising feedback are not

Box 2: The PPfC guidelines for commissioners

1. Does the consultation process contain time to think and flexibility so that work can be modified as it goes along?
2. Does the consultation process contain methods for feeding back to participants and for sharing the findings with key stakeholders?
3. Is there someone who will support and promote the consultation process?
4. Will it be possible to involve people in different areas outside the initial brief?
5. Does the process include the intention of promoting action and change at community level?
6. Does the process involve local people and help to build their skills?
7. Does the consultation have the capacity to cope with unexpected findings?
8. Can you find good facilitators for this process; do you know where to search and have clear criteria and methods for selection?
9. Are the key stakeholders informed about this initiative and have they got time allocated to learning about the process and about the findings?
10. Can you identify similar participatory initiatives that have happened recently in the same area or may be planned in the near future?

For the full guidelines see: ppfcuk.files.wordpress.com/2012/02/ppfccoreprinciples.pdf

likely to be excessive. However, Questions 1 and 7 relate to the key principle of believing that one cannot know where a genuinely participatory process will lead and therefore flexibility needs to be built in.⁴ This is harder to explain and even harder to prepare for.

Making use of the principles

Members of the PPfC have reported positively on the usefulness of having the principles and guidelines. In some cases, they find that people working in community development share many of the ideas captured in the principles and that it is very useful to have them made explicit and written down. In other cases, the very existence of the principles is seen as a source of support and as a helpful checklist and a reminder of the useful contributions made

³ See, for example Pretty (1994) and Hart (1992).

⁴ For example, we have had experiences in participatory work commissioned by healthcare organisations that raised issues around transport and street lighting.

by the PPfC to the learning of its members.

The principles are seen as an important framework, which underpins the approach to the work and summarises the responsibilities of the facilitators of a participatory process. They make it clear that the work includes much more than learning a set of interview tools. This has been a major problem because participatory tools have spread much faster than participatory approaches and concerns about the ethical issues of participatory work.

Having a written code of ethics has been important for some PPfC members when working with health services or research institutions, which have strict codes of their own, or where staff expect work proposals to be checked by an ethics committee. Participatory work clearly depends on the personal qualities and behaviour of the practitioners involved and it is surprising that so little has been invested in devising codes of conduct.

According to some members of the PPfC, the focus on power in the eighth principle appears to provide a revelation of something that trainees and participants know and recognise but had not made explicit. It seems to be easy for trainees to think about how change occurs without thinking directly about power questions. It is perhaps rare for questions on power to be acknowledged as clearly as they are in this principle. However, it has always been known that participatory work is political.⁵ This principle is reported to be a helpful way of leading trainees into thinking about how their work will fit into changes which are not part of a neutral process, in which not all stakeholders will have similar views on proposed developments.

The first principle – that people are experts in their own lives – can lead to important discussions of what knowledge local people possess, why it is valuable and how it fits with other information. The forthright language of this principle helps

to focus on the challenge that the people leading a consultation must approach it with the intention to learn. This requires adopting a humble attitude that not everyone finds easy.

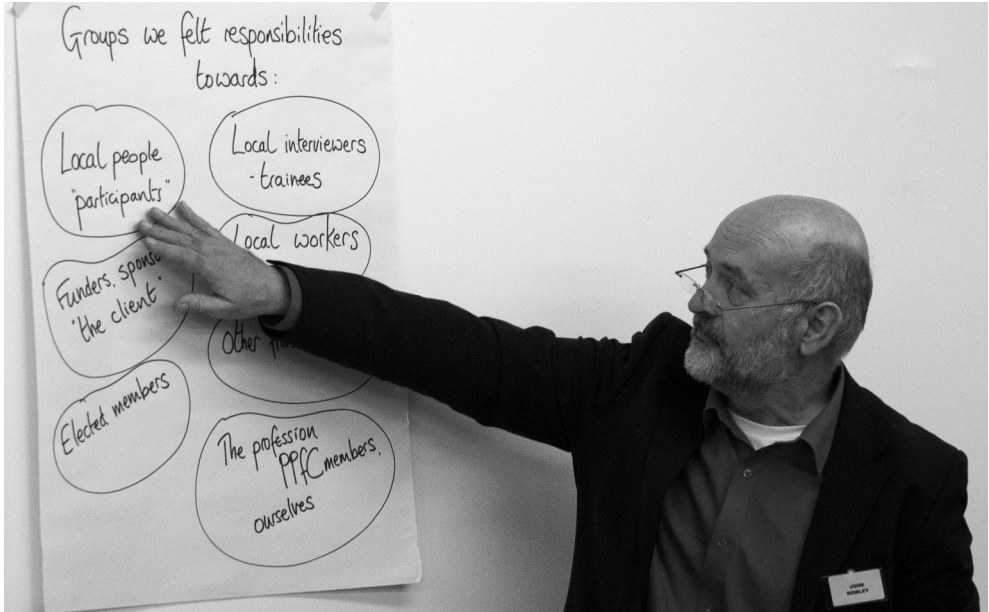
In the experience of PPfC members, getting into a humble learning mode is sometimes more difficult for people for whom knowing about an area is part of their professional role, for example, local councillors. Discussing the principle with such people can help them see how their expertise will be useful and used alongside that of other local people – and that both forms of knowledge are valuable. This highlights the ‘insider’ and ‘outsider’ issues and makes it easier for the facilitator to show participants when their expertise can be brought in and when it might distort the process.

PPfC members have reported that it is often necessary to explain carefully what is meant by saying that local people are experts. For example, the experience of using health services does not make you an expert in medicine but it does give you special knowledge that health professionals do not have and which could be useful in improving those services. There are several forms of valuable expertise that can be useful in designing a development initiative.

The second principle – on being proactively inclusive – has had two impacts on how I have carried out participatory appraisals. First, it has helped me to include exercises that keep track of who we have heard from during an appraisal. This sometimes includes asking participants to put sticky dots in different boxes to identify some important characteristics like their gender, age, the part of town they come from and similar. These observations may be posted on the wall so that all those involved in the appraisal can see who we have heard from. Second, it has led me to add interviews to a process to try to collect views from people we had not yet met. For example, during an appraisal in southern

⁵ See Guijt and Cornwall (1994) (*PLA Notes 24*), which contains a number of papers on power issues in participatory work, including e.g. Guijt and Cornwall; Scoones; Cornwall and Fleming; Mosse.

Photo: Tony Jones



John Rowley presents at the Consequences workshop in 2011.

England we noticed that we had not heard from middle-class men who work in London and who are only in the project area in the evenings and at weekends. We set up interviews on the railway platform from which commuters left to go to London and carried out a large number of very short interviews and collected a lot of ideas to add to what we had already.

In another similar piece of work, we found that we had carried out very few interviews with young women (around 16–20 years old). Young women interviewers went to find some local women of the missing age group and offered them disposable cameras for them to take photos of things they liked and didn't like in the area. This method meant that we had several repeat interviews as the photographs were produced and developed and eventually used in part of a meeting with other local people.

In both these examples, it would have been easy to ignore the missing groups or even blame them for being hard to reach and complete the appraisal without them – except that it would have been counter to the second principle.

The need for participatory appraisals to lead to action remains a key principle for many Ppfc members. Principle 7 is reported to help practitioners focus on which questions and methods are more likely to lead to participant-led action. Some Ppfc members have produced a training manual that uses positive approaches to work and emphasises action and change. Users of the manual tend to think more about what might lead to action when choosing tools to use and in following up different issues.

Some practitioners have experienced tension between the need to manage the process so that it remains ethical and true to the principles and the need to avoid controlling the process so that it can be led by local priorities. For some trainees, this seems to contain a contradiction in that they must control the process and also allow the participants to control it. Discussions of the principles are useful in exploring these issues.

There are clear conflicts in some cases between personal ethics and the ethics of a good participatory process, where the facilitator is confronted by views that they find difficult to tolerate, for example, if partici-

pants in interviews expound racist views or intolerant attitudes on religion or sexuality. It is hugely important that these issues are raised and discussed and ways of working must be agreed before interviews take place.⁶ Sometimes, describing the issue as ethical did not help but made it seem that the ethics of participation were in opposition to, or somehow more important than, people's personal ethics. Nevertheless, it is important that the issues are raised so that they can be addressed explicitly.

Ethical issues

Despite the progress made by having the principles and the guidelines in place and some of the positive experiences in using them, the unease over the ethics of good participation remained a preoccupation for some PPfC members. In 2010, a small group formed to continue work on key ethical issues in participatory work and started by identifying the main groups towards whom they felt they had a responsibility. The scenario imagined was one in which the PPfC member was going to train a number of people to carry out interviews with local residents in order to design a development initiative. This scenario contains the largest number of potential groups that participatory practitioners would have to relate to including:

- Local residents, the local 'experts', the participants – the people who will be interviewed.
- Local interviewers – the people to be trained to carry out interviews. They may be residents, local workers etc.
- Local workers involved in the project as part of their paid roles.
- Funders, sponsors, the client.
- Elected members (councillors).
- Other players, 'frontline' staff, carers, local police, access providers.
- The participation profession, participatory practitioners, PPfC, ourselves.

The group examined the key issues that

relate to each group towards which we feel some responsibility and then expressed these in terms of questions that we should ask ourselves as we take up the work. These are presented in Table 1.

The questions seem comprehensive and potentially useful for people contemplating a piece of participatory work. Again, they include simple good practice activities, such as informing other agencies about your work, and crucial ethical issues such as personal safety, transparency and confidentiality. Some people have reported that the questions are helpful.

The list of questions seemed quite long so we went on to extract from the questions a short set of promises that a practitioner might make to a commissioner of a new piece of work (see Box 3).

Box 3: The promises

1. I will work out with you clear roles and responsibilities.
2. I will keep you informed of findings and changes in the work in a timely manner.
3. I will want to understand the pressures you are under relating to this project and the possibilities that you see for continued sustainable work based on it.
4. I will engage with other key players to increase the possibilities of collective work and sustainable change.
5. The training I provide will include work on appropriate behaviour, which will keep the trainees safe and protect, where appropriate, the confidentiality of the interviewees or participants.
6. Trainees will be selected in order to be as inclusive as possible.
7. The training will, where possible, provide longer term capacity building as well as the skills necessary for this project.
8. We will negotiate informed consent with all participants so that they know what they are contributing to and how their contributions will be used.
9. I will design and run a process that promotes genuine learning by all those involved.
10. The process will be inclusive; we will actively seek out diverse opinions and try to hear from people whose views are less often heard.
11. I will report the findings faithfully including those that may not fit with the initial brief and which may be challenging to you and to other players.

⁶ In one appraisal where racist views were frequently expressed we agreed that we had a duty to listen to the racist views and faithfully report them to the client who had commissioned the appraisal. If the interviewer wanted to respond on a personal level they were required to make it clear that they were doing so outside the interview process. In fact, once the issue had been explored by the team it became relatively easy to manage.

Table 1: Questions for participants

Group	Issue	Questions
Local people, the local experts, the participants	Have the participants given informed consent? ⁷	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have you been clear with them why you are carrying out the project? • Has you explained who it is for and how the results will be used? • Have you explained how their role in the project will be identified in the results? • Have you made clear how the outcomes of the research will be used and publicised? • Have you made clear how they can access the results of the project? • Do participants understand that they are completely free to say what they want or stop if they feel uncomfortable? • Do participants know that you will faithfully report their views?
Local interviewers (researchers, trainees) residents, workers etc. involved in the project	Do trainees know what their roles and responsibilities are? Do trainees know how to keep themselves safe?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have you designed the training to include longer term capacity building for trainees? • Do interviewers know when to provide their own views and when to avoid introducing their own ideas? • Do interviewers know when and how to protect the identity of interviewees?
Local workers involved in the project as part of their paid roles	Do the workers know what their roles and responsibilities within the project are? Do they know how to keep themselves safe?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have you designed the training to include longer term capacity building for trainees? • Do interviewers know when to provide their own views and when to avoid introducing their own ideas? • Do interviewers know when and how to protect the identity of interviewees? • Do workers know how to start to deal with any conflicts of interest that may come up during and after the project?
Funders, sponsors, the client	Do funders know how a participatory appraisal process should work? Have funders guaranteed feedback to participants?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have you explained the risks and benefits of a participatory appraisal approach? • Have you explored the pressures the sponsor is under and what they hope for from this work? • Do they have the resources to support the actions that are identified as part of the research? • Do they have a clear idea of the possibilities for broadening the brief and for continuing the work (e.g. future funding)?
Elected members (e.g. councillors)	Do councillors understand how a participatory process should work?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do you have an understanding of how local councillors will welcome unexpected findings? • Do you know how supportive local councillors are to the project? • Do councillors understand how the project might affect their work?

⁷ Prior informed consent is a phrase which has a legal meaning in many countries. We are using the phrase in the simple sense that informed consent is achieved if the practitioner is able to answer positively to the seven questions in the table. If they can say 'yes' to those questions then the people taking part in the interviews will be thoroughly informed on what they are getting involved in.

Table 1: Questions for participants (continued)

Group	Issue	Questions
Other players, 'frontline' staff, carers, local police, access providers	Do they understand their roles in the project?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have you explored links between different organisations? • Do you know if they will be able to carry on some of the work after the project?
To the profession, to participatory practice, PPfC, to ourselves		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are any other participatory practitioners working in the same area? Are there any opportunities for collaboration and developing more participatory working? • Do you feel confident in taking on the work or are there too many compromises? Do you need to get in other people with different skills to do the job well? • Can you carry out a good process including cycles of learning and build in some sustainability, when this is appropriate? • Have you identified another practitioner to support you to deliver the work? (This could be a co-worker or someone who agrees to mentor or support you to reflect on your practice.) • Will you be able to report confidently on the results?

We were aware that the promises cover the same mixture of good practice and major ethical issues. These promises were prioritised in a workshop in 2011. The results were quite varied but a few promises were clearly seen to be more important.

The most important promises seemed to be 10 and 11, followed by 8 and 5 and then 7 and 9. The participants in the workshop also suggested that the promises could be made more concise and that some mention should be made of the overall aim. This is partly because of the need to monitor success and demonstrate value for money and this can only be done if the objectives were clearly stated.

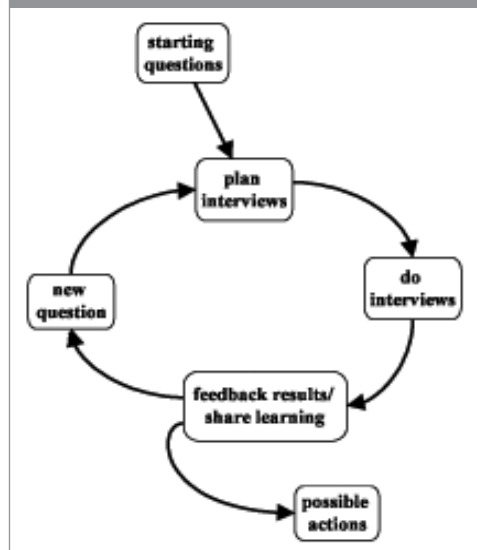
Promise 9, to promote genuine learning, is very important and also appears in the principles and the guidelines. Good participatory processes should have repeated events so that learning from earlier work can be used in later cycles (see Figure 1). It may also hint at the potential dangers of single events or one-off tools like questionnaire enquiries. The success of participatory projects often comes from people changing their understanding through learning. It is rarely acknowledged but the design of good

participatory processes comes from ideas in learning theory.⁸

Shortlist of promises

If we take at face value the learning from the workshop, it should be possible to express the top four promises in shorter phrases and perhaps add a statement of the

Figure 1: The repeated cycles of participatory processes



⁸ For example, Paulo Freire developed an approach to education that links the identification of issues to positive action for change and development. Freire's work has influenced people working in education, community development, community health and many other fields. Source: www.freire.org.

Photo: Tony Jones



Participants at the Consequences workshop in 2011.

overall purpose. Then the PPfC members' promises might be:

- My participatory work will be proactively inclusive.
- The process will include repeat contacts to improve learning and feedback.
- It may produce results that are challenging and which might not fit the original brief.
- I will teach all trainees to keep themselves

safe and protect interviewees.

- We will negotiate informed consent with all interviewees (participants).
- The work will lead to action and raised skills and confidence among local people.

Summing up

Telling the story of the PPfC members' attempts to define and promote genuine participation leads us to this short list of

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NOTES

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