

From input to influence: how can the participation of people in poverty shape research and public policy?

Opening remarks: Tania Burchardt, Director, Centre for Analysis of Social Exclusion

Participatory research

- Not a research method, but an approach. Paulo Friere [oppressors and the oppressed], Robert Chambers [putting the last first]
- Fran and Mo talk about "Participatory practice". "People in poverty should be seen as *having a right to take part in the debate and a particular expertise in doing so.*"
- Enormous transformative potential: for the people who engage in it, both people in poverty and formally trained researchers
- Foregrounding experiences and perspectives that have been hidden from view
- But equally enormous pitfalls: of becoming tokenistic; lack of follow through; reinforcing power structures within a given community rather than challenging them. Neatly summed up in poster from Paris May '68, reproduced in Arnstein's article

Participatory policy-making

- Likewise not a unitary method
- A whole range from consultation, through involvement, to control eg through participatory budgeting, from Porto Alegre, Brazil in 1989 to Hackney in the 2010s. (Arnstein's ladder of citizen participation from "manipulation" to "citizen control").
- Rikki argues that it is a mistake to see this as single dimension, and that whilst there are certainly bogus forms of participation, there is also no one 'true' form. Rather different forms of participation may serve a range of *legitimate* purposes for citizen involvement in policymaking and governance.

Research and policy-making are not always – thankfully! – wholly distinct.

- Research influences policy in myriad indirect ways, but more directly, participatory *research* is often action-oriented, seeking to achieve specific changes.
- Then there is a middle ground in which policymakers conduct research (focus groups, typically) seeking the views of people who will be affected by a policy – but this is often extractive rather than participatory. "Input" rather than "influence".
- Then fully participatory *policy-making forums* – rare - but themselves fascinating sites of research – about how power dynamics and inequalities play out and/or are challenged and subverted, how inputs of different kinds and the process of deliberation change people's views, and what all of this tells us about the nature of democracy itself.

Our specific **focus today** is on the participation of people in **poverty**. Too often people in poverty are treated as a "problem to be addressed" rather than as equal citizens. And unlike other forms of inequality – gender and ethnicity, for example – there is much less awareness of the need for representation and inclusion. Public service providers that involve service users may have targets for including equal numbers of men and women, but they rarely pay attention to including people in poverty.

My interest in helping to convene this event is partly selfish. I've been involved with deliberative forums with members of the general public on issues of inequality and standards of living – but this falls a long way short of full-blown participatory research. **Intrigued and committed but slightly intimidated** by the demands that adhering to participatory principles make on research. More generally I think **we as academics have a lot to learn** about how to make the participation of people in poverty **effective rather than tokenistic** – and specifically about ATD Fourth World's approach and what they have learnt through many years of experience.

At the same time, I hope it may be useful for those of you who are involved in the front line of participatory work to have the **opportunity to reflect on how what you are engaged in is distinct from, or connects to**, other forms of participation in policy processes and the **different functions** that participation can play.



FIGURE 1 *French Student Poster. In English, I participate; you participate; he participates; we participate; you participate . . . They profit.*