RESEARCH AND REVIEWS

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# Putting "Participatory" Into Participatory Forms of Action Research

**Wendy Frisby**
University of British Columbia

**Colleen J. Reid**
Simon Fraser University

**Sydney Millar**
University of British Columbia

**Larena Hoeber**
University of Regina

Although there has been a rise in calls for participatory forms of research, there is little literature on the challenges of involving research participants in all phases of the research process. Actively involving research participants requires new strategies, new researcher and research-participant roles, and consideration of a number of ethical dilemmas. We analyzed the strategies employed and challenges encountered based on our experiences conducting feminist participatory action research with a marginalized population and a variety of community partners over 3 years. Five phases of the research process were considered including developing the research questions, building trust, collecting data, analyzing data, and communicating the results for action. Our goals were to demonstrate the relevance of a participatory approach to sport management research, while at the same time acknowledging some of the realities of engaging in this type of research.

There are a number of epistemological and ethical reasons for the rise in participatory forms of research in a number of academic fields, including sport management.[1] A participatory approach is appropriate when researchers seek to understand the lived experience of those involved in, affected by, or excluded from various forms of sport and physical activity, especially when that lived experience is markedly different from that of privileged researchers (Frisby, Crawford, & Dorer, 1997; Reid, 2004). In order to gain a better understanding of this type of experiential knowledge, researchers are entering into interactive relations with research

Frisby is the Chair of Women's Studies and is with the School of Human Kinetics, University of British Columbia, 210 War Memorial Gym, Vancouver, BC; Reid is with Simon Fraser University, 3655 West 2nd Avenue, Vancouver, BC; Millar is with University of British Columbia, 2050 West 1st Avenue, Vancouver, BC; Hoeber is with the University of Regina, Faculty of Kinesiology & Health Studies, Regina, SK.

participants in some or all phases of the research including collectively deciding on relevant research questions, determining appropriate data collection methods, collaboratively analyzing the results, and communicating the findings (Greenwood, Whyte, & Harkavy, 1993; Reid, 2000; Ristock & Pennell, 1996). The goal is to surface the experiential knowledge of participants as distinct and important, whether they be managers, organizational members, consumers, athletes, or marginalized populations, to name a few groups of interest to sport management researchers.

A participatory approach contrasts considerably with positivist research methodologies that are characterized by an expert-researcher-driven process and detached researcher roles (Harrison, MacGibbon, & Morton, 2001). Rather than taking the multiple perspectives of researchers and participants into account, traditional approaches explain social phenomena from the point of view of the researcher and the model she or he is using to guide the study (Bartunek, 1994). Although researcher–research participant relations in positivist research are distant with the aim of ensuring objectivity, participatory methods and various forms of action research acknowledge that the subjectivity associated with multiple meanings and interpretations of social and organizational life is an inescapable aspect of research (Bartunek, 1994; Greenwood & Levin, 1998; Reason & Bradbury, 2001). What knowledge we are able to observe and reveal is directly related to our vantage point and our interaction with the social world is affected by our gender, race, class, sexuality, age, physical ability, and how these aspects of our identity intersect. This does not mean that facts about the social world do not exist, but what we see and how we go about constructing meaning is a matter of interpretation (Kirby & McKenna, 1989). Reason and Bradbury (2001, p. 7) situated participatory action research (PAR) in relation to other epistemological viewpoints when they wrote that:

> A participatory view competes with both the positivism of modern times and with the deconstructive postmodern alternative—and we hold it to be a more adequate and creative paradigm for our times. However, we can also say that it draws on and integrates both paradigms: it follows positivism in arguing that there is a "real" reality . . . and draws on the constructionist perspective in acknowledging that as soon as we attempt to articulate this we enter a world of human language and cultural expression.

The key argument underpinning the rise of participatory forms of research is that the relevance and trustworthiness of the data, collected with the aim of improving the human condition, is enhanced when research participants are actively involved in the knowledge production process (Bray, Lee, Smith, & Yorks, 2000).

There are also a number of ethical reasons for conducting participatory research. Engaging participants helps to demystify the research process, making it more accessible to those who are normally excluded from knowledge production and policy making (Park, 2001). In addition, opportunities for reciprocity are created through mutual learning, which helps lessen the likelihood of exploitive forms of research that mostly benefit the careers of academic researchers (Greenwood & Levin, 1993; Lather, 1988). There is also a political dimension to participation in this form of research because it "affirms people's right and ability to have a say in decisions which affect them and which claim to generate knowledge about them" (Reason & Bradbury, 2001, p. 9).

At the same time, Tom and Herbert (2002) remind us to carefully consider the ethical challenges of deliberately entering into relationships with people to learn more about them. They argue that although the close researcher–research participant relations that develop in participatory research can alleviate power imbalances to some extent, these same relationships can make research participants more vulnerable. For example, participants might reveal more about themselves than they normally would and might feel abandoned if researchers do not take care when leaving the field (Reid, Frisby, & Ponic, 2002).

It is these types of tensions and paradoxes that our research team was concerned about when we entered into a feminist participatory action research (FPAR) project with approximately 100 women on low income (including single mothers, middle-aged and older women, and recent immigrant women) and 12 community partners (representing municipal recreation departments, family service agencies, community schools, and a women's center). Although we were persuaded that a participatory form of research was appropriate and highly desirable given the context we were studying (which is described in more detail later), we found little literature to guide us in ensuring participation in all phases of the research process. This was surprising because reflexivity, or reflecting on the research process and the power relations that underpin it, is strongly advocated in the participatory and feminist literatures (Lather, 1988; Park, 2001; Reid, 2000; Richardson, 2000). For Ristock and Pennell (1996), reflexivity means including the researcher in what is being studied and being accountable for one's actions in this regard.

To address this gap, we tracked the strategies we employed in order to encourage participation in our field notes over the 3-year duration of the project. We encountered a number of challenges along the way, some of which were anticipated and some of which were not, and these were recorded in field notes and reflected upon at our regular research team meetings. Our purpose is to share some of the lessons learned in attempting to engage in a participatory research process with a traditionally marginalized population and a number of community partners. In this article, we divided the research process into five phases: setting the research questions, building trust, collecting data, analyzing data, and communicating the results for action.

To set the stage for our analysis, we first outline some of the key tenets of PAR and FPAR and then describe the research context in more detail. This is followed by an analysis of some of the key strategies employed and challenges encountered over the five phases of the research process. We conclude by highlighting the strategies that were most effective in encouraging participation and by identifying the challenges that were most daunting, as well as discussing ideas for future research.

## Key Tenets of PAR and FPAR

> Participatory research is action-oriented research activity in which ordinary people address common needs arising in their daily lives and, in the process, generate knowledge. (Park, 2001, p. 81)

Participatory action research arose during an era of reflection on the purposes of social science research, the power relations among researchers and research participants, and the ethics of data collection and reporting (Green et al., 1995).

The term *participatory* refers to the formation of partnerships among people with problems to solve, researchers, and those who control public services so all parties can mutually learn about the structural constraints affecting people's lives and together explore the transformative possibilities. PAR is a way of empowering people to take effective action toward improving conditions in their lives in order to promote social change (Park et al., 1993; Ristock & Pennell, 1996). PAR is based on the assumption that people have the capacity to create progressive knowledge by analyzing their own circumstances; thus, the role of the researcher is expanded to include facilitating such reflection (Comstock & Fox, 1993). There is also an educational component to PAR because it involves research participants developing skills in collecting, analyzing, and utilizing data (Maguire, 1987). Participatory research is done "with" research participants, it is not something done "for" or "to" them (Ristock & Pennell, 1996).

The specific form of PAR that informed our study was feminist participatory action research (FPAR). Despite the democratic ideals espoused by PAR, gender and women's diversity were made invisible by early assumptions that women are automatically included in terms such as *people*, *community*, or *the oppressed* (Hall, 2001). Maguire (1987) contends that the social problems faced by women were not specifically acknowledged in PAR studies until the 1980s. FPAR overcomes the essentialist and andocentric limitations of PAR by centering the diversity of women's experiences in the analysis, while at the same time moving beyond feminist critique by linking theory and method to praxis (Cancian, 1992; Maguire 1993; 2001; Reid, 2000; Reinharz, 1992). Whereas both PAR and FPAR advocate for the democratization of the research process and an action orientation that leads to personal and social transformation, FPAR specifically considers how gender embeds itself in power structures, institutions, and interpersonal relations in ways that oppress women (Lather, 1988; Maguire, 2001). Layered into this analysis is a consideration of how gender intersects with other forms of oppression such as race, class, and sexual orientation and a critique of how these dynamics are socially constructed, sustained, experienced, and resisted (Maguire, 2001).

The shift to participatory forms of research like FPAR requires reconceptualizations of power relations between researcher and research participants, the negotiation of diverse discourses and agendas, time-intensive data collection techniques, and new ethical considerations regarding the ownership of data. Reid (2000) is among the few to acknowledge the considerable challenges faced by researchers who lack information and training regarding the numerous pitfalls that could be encountered when engaging in FPAR. She showed how it was impossible to achieve one of the lofty goals of FPAR because power relations between middle-class researchers, service providers, and low-income research participants can never be completely leveled. In addition, she found it challenging to provide space and opportunities for research participants to challenge her interpretations of the data. Our goal is to build on Reid's (2000, 2004) and Maguire's (1987, 1993) work by revealing additional challenges related to encouraging participation in FPAR projects. By doing so, we hope to provide other researchers with a better road map to engage in participatory research with a social justice agenda.

## The Research Context and Process

For 3 years we conducted FPAR in collaboration with a community-based organization called WOAW (Women Organizing Activities for Women).[2] Members of WOAW included a diverse group of women on low income, community partners, and a research team.[3] The social problem WOAW members were tackling was restrictive policies and practices hindering access to community-based recreation programs for women on low income.

WOAW was formed after a full-day workshop conducted by the first author who was invited by two of the community partners to lead a discussion on the barriers and benefits of recreation participation and strategies for inclusion of low-income populations. An outcome of the workshop was that WOAW was formed to keep the women, community partners, and researchers together to tackle the social problem of exclusion from community recreation. Shortly after its formation, WOAW members collaborated to write a research grant that was subsequently funded. Over the following 3 years, WOAW members worked together to organize dozens of recreational and social activities, to challenge municipal policies and engage in other political action, and to address the research questions set out in the grant. Participation in the research was completely voluntary (in accordance with ethical guidelines at the University of British Columbia) and not all members of WOAW chose to be involved. Most members, however, clearly saw the research as being integral to the community-based organization as revealed in the following quote. "Thank God we have the research team. WOAW would not be WOAW without it. It helps WOAW root itself and it will grow just like a tree with roots and branches" (woman on low income).

As Park (2001, p. 81) acknowledged, "Dialogue occupies a central position in inquiry, by making it possible for participants to create a social space in which they can share experiences and information, create common meanings, and forge concerted actions together." The data collection process entailed travel (often several times per week to the research site), attendance and recording of discussions at WOAW meetings, interviews, "research parties," and thousands of pages of field notes. Research parties were a term we used to describe the biannual 3-hour meetings in which refreshments and child minding were provided. The research parties created space for the collective analyses of the research questions and the functioning of WOAW. We typically held one research party for the women on low income and one for the community partners every 6 months. Separate research parties were held because some of the women and community partners indicated in their interviews that they would like a space in which they could express the challenges faced collaborating with each other. Often times, strategies for dealing with tensions were discussed that we later saw implemented (e.g., some of the women approached one of the municipal recreation partners to express dissatisfaction about being charged for meeting rooms, and a community partner approached one of the women on low income to discuss how she might share leadership more with other members in her subgroup).

The women on low income were provided with various options for being involved in the research depending on their interests and availability and were provided with honoraria, bus tickets, and refreshments. At WOAW meetings, in which a considerable amount of data were collected, community partners provided

child minding and free meeting space. Accounting for the barriers of transportation, childcare, and accessible meeting space enabled the participation of many women on low income.

As mentioned previously, for the purposes of this article we conceptualized the research process as having five major components that were constantly being negotiated by the researchers and research participants. In reality, these steps were iterative and did not unfold in a linear fashion. For example, data were collected in 6-month cycles, and our collective analysis from one stage informed our data collection methods and analysis in the next stage. A strength and challenge of collaborating with research participants was that the women on low income and community partners did not necessarily think in terms of "stages" of the research process and, therefore, would be hard-pressed to name the five stages as outlined here. Most of the time the research was integrated into the overall functioning of WOAW.

## Setting the Research Questions

Participatory research begins with a problem identified by those who are being affected by it that calls for collective action (Park, 1993). As previously mentioned, the women on low income, community partners, and researchers came together for the first time during a workshop to address the barriers and benefits of recreation participation and strategies for inclusion of low-income populations. Although the women felt entitled to publicly funded municipal sport and recreation services and saw this as contributing to their health, they experienced a number of constraints linked to their living conditions and the policies and practices of the municipal recreation departments that limited their involvement. The workshop itself was participatory in nature, providing participants with an opportunity to work in small groups and express their concerns. The discussions created a common ground for action because the women and community partners, who had some control over local resources, defined the social problem as one that was relevant to other women in the community. In this way, the workshop was the launching point for a sense of ownership, collective power, and shared leadership (Frisby & Millar, 2002; Selsky, 1991).

The latter was important because no one individual was responsible for all the organizing that would be required over the next 3 years. The women reported encountering a number of struggles surviving on a daily basis, the community partners reported being over-burdened in their public-sector jobs, and the researchers did not feel it was appropriate for them to take a major leadership role in the community-based organization. As a result, many members expressed relief that responsibility for WOAW's sustainability would be shared. Whereas the role of individual "champions" has been identified as important to the success of local health promotion initiatives, our previous research has demonstrated that these initiatives can collapse quickly if the champion is no longer willing or able to assume the major leadership role (Frisby & Hoeber, 2002).

The success and participatory nature of the workshop was the result, in part, of the fact that several community partners already had strong relationships with women on low income and had encouraged them to attend. We had expected about 20 women, but 85 attended, and this was largely the result of the recruiting done

by the community partners in family services, the women's center, and community schools. As we have reported elsewhere (Frisby & Millar, 2002), the recreation staff admitted they did not have relationships with citizens on low income because their programs catered primarily to a middle-class clientele. An obvious prerequisite to participation in FPAR projects is the active involvement of the individuals or groups experiencing the social problem; an intimidating environment would have been created if the researchers and community partners outnumbered the women on low income.

It was only after the workshop that the first author became aware of a funding opportunity available through a federal research grant agency. She subsequently invited attendees from the workshop to attend a meeting. By this time four WOAW subgroups had formed, based in part on geographic region and interest. Ten women on low income and eight community partners attended the meeting. The researcher described the parameters of the research grant competition and asked WOAW members if they would be interested in being involved. Considerable enthusiasm was expressed because the women on low income and community partners saw the research component adding legitimacy to WOAW and the social problem they were tackling. They also were keen to access the findings to leverage support for change within their community organizations.

A challenge arose when the researcher indicated that the research grant should be written around research questions deemed relevant to WOAW members. Neither the women on low income nor the community partners were clear on what a research question was. During the ensuing discussions, WOAW members focused on physical activity programs that would relieve various health problems, such as diabetes and osteoporosis, and on attracting funding opportunities. Unfortunately, the researcher had to explain that she did not have the expertise to investigate these types of questions and that some of the areas were too applied to qualify for research grant funding. The researcher referred members back to the initial workshop discussions in which a considerable amount of time was spent discussing social isolation and a lack of access to local sport and recreation services. A lively discussion ensued, and the women identified three general areas of interest. The researcher offered to write a draft of the research questions based on discussions, and these were presented to members for review at a second meeting. After more discussion and input, three research questions were agreed to and included: (a) What are the lay meanings of physical inactivity, stress, and social isolation for this diverse group of women on low income? (b) What community organizing practices lead to effective collaboration and action? and (c) How should a community-based initiative like this be evaluated?

The next challenge arose after the researcher had prepared a draft of the research grant to share with WOAW members. Not only were literacy and English as a second language major issues, but there was a huge gap among the academic discourse required by the granting agency, the lay discourses of the women on low income, and the professional discourses of the community partners. The researcher had anticipated these difficulties based on her involvement in a previous study (Frisby et al., 1997; Frisby & Fenton, 1998) and did her best to describe each section of the research proposal in lay terms. The meeting was very interactive and many questions were raised by the research participants, thereby creating space for mutual learning. One of the benefits of this strategy, even though it was

challenging, was that the researcher was able to explain the key features of FPAR to WOAW members. She also explained the academic system that required her to publish in academic outlets and follow guidelines set out by the Ethical Review Board at the University of British Columbia and the federal granting agency. This discussion helped make the research process more transparent (Ristock & Pennell, 1996) even though some of the academic jargon used in the proposal might have remained a mystery to some members. Through letters of support that the women on low income and community partners wrote to accompany the grant application, the researcher was able to demonstrate to the granting agency that she already had a commitment from research participants, thus increasing the likelihood that the project would be successfully carried out.

## Building Trust

Building trust was central to encouraging participation throughout the FPAR project and that is why we have identified it as one of the five phases of the research process. It is important to point out, however, that the women on low income trusted the community partners involved long before the project was initiated, and this was a key reason why they came to the workshop in the first place. It is also important to point out that although building trust is crucial in the early stages of any participatory project, developing and maintaining trusting relationships must be central throughout any FPAR project.

Over the course of the 3-year project we were vigilant about building and maintaining the trust of WOAW members. We used many strategies to develop trust, which was important because some of WOAW members were suspicious of university-based researchers. When we asked why this was the case, one community partner replied:

> Some of the older women were very suspicious of the research initially. In the past, researchers have come in and have taken what they need, and we never hear from them again. I told the women not to worry, that you were different, that you were a community development type of researcher who will listen to them and give something back.

The researchers already had some credibility with some community partners through a research project conducted in another municipality. A workbook generated from the learnings of that study (Frisby & Fenton, 1998) had been widely distributed and findings had been presented at professional conferences that some of the community partners attended. Trust from other WOAW members began to build when these partners expressed confidence in our commitment to the issue and our ability to carry out the FPAR project.

We attempted to engage in open discussions regarding the research process instead of adopting a researcher-driven style in which we made all of the decisions and then tried to convince members to participate. Despite FPAR's participatory ideals, however, it is likely researchers will drive certain aspects of the research process, such as writing the interview questions, conducting the interviews, and writing final reports and manuscripts because of time constraints, the specialized knowledge required, accountability, and ethical considerations. There were times when we made decisions about the questions to be asked during interviews and

research parties in order to keep the individuals or group on track and to deepen the discussion around the research questions.

Another key to building trust was creating an environment that valued the diverse perspectives of the women on low income (e.g., their experience living in poverty and accessing community services), the community partners (e.g., their knowledge of policies, systems, and politics within their organizations and how to work within those constraints to affect change), and the researchers (e.g., their knowledge of the literature and research techniques). Our research parties facilitated the valuing of different types of knowledge. For example, during one 3-hour session, the women on low income filled out 17 flipcharts listing over 200 skills they thought they were bringing to WOAW. Some of these skills were directly related to the research component as illustrated by a comment made by one woman on low income, "It is us who know what it is like to live in poverty, so you need us to do this research."

A challenge that is also closely tied to communicating the results was the tension between the academic rewards system that values the publication of peer-reviewed articles and our desire to engage with WOAW in a maximally reciprocal and respectful way. From the outset we recognized that peer-reviewed journal articles are inaccessible to many community members and decided to prepare biannual WOAW reports with initial analyses and key findings. The reports were written in plain language, audiotaped for members with language or literacy difficulties, and contained sections on the key features of FPAR and our approach to recording and coding data. Although we cannot be sure the reports were read or listened to, they helped forge trust because we were making an effort to get findings to members in a timely and accessible fashion. Fawcett et al. (1996) had alerted us to the fact that participants desire timely feedback on the impact of their efforts, and that this can help sustain their participation.

Possibly the biggest source of tension that affected trust and the data collection phase was the distribution of the grant money. The grant we received came directly through the university, and we were in the position to administer the funds to WOAW members. There was considerable confusion over what expenses could and could not be covered by the grant. For example, some women were angry that funds could not be used to pay for their participation in recreation programs, even though this was not connected to the research. The researchers, as "gatekeepers" to the money, had the power and privilege to manage the budget. This was, of course, inevitable given how funding structures operate at universities, yet served as a constant reminder of the power we held in the FPAR project. To deal with this tension, we organized biannual meetings to discuss the budget and prepared information sheets to explain what costs were research-related, and these reports were widely distributed.

As researchers we were very conscious of our privilege and power, and it was a challenge to actively engage in WOAW without "taking over" in a way that would silence other members of the organization. We tried to make ourselves accessible by attending WOAW meetings and offered our opinions when we thought the information might be of value to the group. Not all WOAW members, however, interpreted our actions as we had intended. For example, some interpreted our silences at meetings as us needing to maintain "an objective researcher role." Chataway (1997) discussed silencing herself to avoid influencing the research and commented on the inherent contradictions of doing so when she wrote,

> Withholding information such as one's own opinion does not just allow space for the other to speak, it can also be an act of power that forces the other to carry the burden of speaking or acting if the relationship is to be maintained (p. 758).

We constantly reminded WOAW members that if we had information that might be helpful to group discussions, we would share it, but it was not our role to make decisions for them.

Other members looked to us to take a more active leadership role in the organization because we had facilitated the initial workshop and obtained the research grant. The confusion over roles was compounded by the fact that the community-based organization and the FPAR project were intimately intertwined, and new members were constantly joining the organization. Although we were able to foster participation in the research process to more collaboratively build knowledge, we agree with Reid (2000) that it is impossible to level power relations between middle-class researchers and community partners and women on low income.

Another issue that affected trust building was that some research findings and comments made at meetings were critical of the policies and practices of the organizations that the community partners represented. This directly affected the participation of two community partners from one municipal recreation department involved in the project. From comments made by these partners, it appeared that they were confined by the bureaucratic structures and policies of the department they worked for and that being supportive and involved in WOAW and the FPAR project was risky for them. These two partners rarely attended WOAW meetings or our research parties and ceased their involvement about halfway through the project, even though we made repeated attempts to include them. For other community partners, however, the research's critical stance provided support for their own efforts to effect systemic change.

One indication of our success in building and maintaining trust over the 3-year duration of the project is indicated in the volume of data collected. Fifty-one women on low income and 10 of the community partners signed the ethics forms and actively participated in the research. Only data from those who signed the ethical consent forms were subsequently analyzed and included when reporting results. Over 100 interviews were conducted, and transcripts and field notes from 75 WOAW meetings and 10 research parties were recorded. It is unlikely that WOAW members would have participated in the research to this extent over the long term if we had been unsuccessful in building and maintaining trust.

## Data Collection

Building trust was essential to debunking some of the myths WOAW members held about research, particularly myths around the data collection methods. The appropriateness of data collection techniques was discussed at the two meetings prior to submitting the research grant. Before the researchers had a chance to explain the qualitative data collection methods that they had expertise in, one of the women on low income said, "There is no way that I am going to fill out a survey or let any researcher measure the amount of fat on my body." She explained she had agreed to be involved in a research project at the seniors' center she belonged to, but the project involved filling out surveys that she had difficulty interpreting,

and she found the fitness assessments embarrassing and intrusive. She was initially fearful that we would be using similar data collection techniques. When we explained that their words were our data, and that the research questions could best be addressed through interviewing, group discussions (our research parties), and observations of WOAW meetings, her fears and some of the reservations of other members lessened.

Once again, participation in deciding on appropriate data collection techniques was only partial because all the women who eventually participated in the research attended these initial meetings. This was unfortunate because once the research grant was written and approved, we were committed to the methods outlined in the proposal. This is a further illustration of how the constraints imposed by the grant process limited the possibilities for emergent research designs that evolve over time and foster broader based participation (Tom, 1996).

There were three other strategies we used to encourage participation with respect to data collection: (a) reviewing the ethics letters requesting informed consent (as required by U.B.C.), (b) providing interview questions and discussing topics for the research parties in advance, and (c) providing the women on low income with options for obtaining honoraria. The letters requesting informed consent were given to all WOAW members and only those who signed the letters participated in the research. Because language and literacy were issues and the jargon required in the letter of consent was intimidating for some, one member of our research team went over the contents of the letter verbally with each individual WOAW member. In addition to stating the purpose of the study and the rights of research participants (in terms of confidentiality, withdrawal from the study), the letter described the project's research methods. We were able to check the degree of comfort members had with the proposed data collection techniques and address concerns that were raised. For example, although the letter of informed consent suggested that interviews would take place in a central location, we were able to accommodate requests for alternate locations since most women on low income preferred to be interviewed in their own homes, and many of the community partners preferred to be interviewed in their offices.

Because some research participants admitted being nervous about the interviews, we decided to provide the interview questions in advance. This seemed to alleviate concerns because the participants realized they were being asked to share their experiences and that there were no "right and wrong answers" to the questions. By the second round of data collection, many were visibly more comfortable and enjoyed the interview process and research parties, as revealed in the following quotation:

> You always get to voice your opinion. I'm still overwhelmed that someone actually wants to hear what I have to say. I like it because you get all these people together and you get to say, "That's happened to me to. Now, what can we do about it?" (woman on low income)

Thirty to forty women on low income typically attended the research parties, and some women were uncomfortable speaking in front of such a large group. Because they had input into the research process, we were able to accommodate them and discuss some topics in smaller groups before reporting back to the larger group. Similar to Lather (1988), we found the combination of interactive interviews

that elicited personal experiences followed by group discussions that provided the opportunity for deeper probing and consciousness raising about structural conditions was an effective way of fostering collaboration.

As mentioned previously, there were a number of tensions associated with the honoraria provided for the women on low income during the data collection phase, even though several options for participating in the research were provided.[4] One of the tensions was that the principal researcher and the community partners were being paid through their regular salaries, and the graduate students were being paid through the grant to be involved in WOAW and the FPAR project. Only the women on low income were not being remunerated thus reinforcing class and privilege differences. Although we were relieved the granting agency allowed honoraria to be paid, some women on low income told us they participated in the research because they needed the money; we feared that this added a coercive element to participation that we had not fully anticipated. We discussed the issue of honoraria at length during our research team meetings and with research participants, but this issue was unresolved by the end of the project. Our fears about how voluntary participation was affected by offering honoraria were lessened to some extent when one of the graduate students held separate sessions to collect her data, and many of the same women attended without being paid honoraria (Reid, 2004). This demonstrated that the women were genuinely interested in the research regardless of whether or not they were paid for their involvement. In the end, we recognized that honoraria would most often be problematic, but that not providing honoraria to value the knowledge and time committed by the women on low income was distasteful. In future projects, we plan to spend more time discussing the tensions surrounding honoraria with the research participants.

## Data Analysis

Similar to Reid (2000), we found this the most challenging phase of the research process to actively engage research participants in, and it involved considerable trial and error. The data were transcribed and coded in *Atlas.ti* (a computer software program with analytic coding, memo writing, and network capabilities) by the graduate students, and although we described this process in some detail in our biannual reports, we did not invite research participants to be involved in it. On the one hand, we might have erroneously assumed that this would have been too onerous for them, and we did not have time to provide the type of training that this would involve. On the other hand, we were committed to maintaining confidentiality as required by ethical guidelines, and having a research participant involved in analyzing other participants' interviews would have breached our ethical responsibilities. Rather than involving research participants in this level of the analysis, we asked for input after we had pulled preliminary findings together in our biannual reports. This was partially successful, although at times it seemed that the research participants were unsure of how to respond to the reports and were uncomfortable challenging our interpretations of the data. Additionally, the reports took time to prepare, creating a time lag between when the data were collected and when we met to discuss it. Because WOAW members were involved in planning and participating in a number of activities besides the research, they had often moved on to other things by the time we held meetings to discuss the reports.

In the end, the strategy that was most successful in encouraging joint analysis was the research parties. For example, we had observed that the women on low income referred to being socially isolated in almost every WOAW meeting we attended. We shared that observation with 40 women at the beginning of one research party and explained that we did not fully understand what being socially isolated meant to them, nor were we clear on the role of organizations like WOAW in possibly reducing their isolation. This approach allowed the women "to educate us," and for the next 3 hours they had small and large group discussions and drew pictures about their experiences of social isolation. In this way, the women developed their own "local theories" (Bartunek, 1994) and did not have to react secondhandedly to our academic interpretations. The following quote reveals how one woman saw herself collectively participating in data analysis:

> We're researching people's situations. We are delving into places that have not been uncovered before because of the shame. People normally do not talk about these things. They keep it to themselves because they are feeling so badly. (woman on low income)

The women on low income and community partners' analysis at the research parties also revealed strategies for personal and structural transformation that were discussed at future WOAW meetings and were sometimes acted upon.

An added benefit of the group discussions at research parties was that the women realized others were encountering the same problems and, rather than blaming themselves for their situations, they began to consider how structural conditions were contributing to their isolation. This was in keeping with Maguire's (1987) contention that it is important to link participant interpretations of their experiences back to the structural conditions affecting the social problem at the analysis stage.

## Communicating Results for Action

Communicating results for action is the final phase of the research process to be considered, but it is important to note that various types of communication were ongoing throughout the project. This contrasts with traditional approaches to research in which results are communicated only after the completion of a study. As Maguire (1987) noted, involving research participants as partners in the entire research process increases the potential to distribute the benefits of the research more equitably, particularly when the findings are communicated beyond traditional academic outlets. It was a challenge, however, to determine how the data could be used to initiate or enact social change, and we struggled with how much we should direct this or let it emerge from discussions among members of the community-based organization. Our views on what counted as action shifted considerably over the course of the project because we initially thought that larger and more visible changes (e.g., to municipal recreation policy) would be markers of successful action. It became clear, however, that a much wider range of actions were experienced and valued by research participants, and that actions were occurring on a number of different levels (individual, group, organizational, and community). For example, several of the women talked about how "getting out of the house" to be involved in WOAW and the research was a personal action that

helped to reduce their social isolation. Action was also unfolding differently at the subgroup level within WOAW: One subgroup, composed primarily of single mothers, was concerned about obtaining affordable childcare so they could participate in recreation programs, whereas transportation, not child care, was a major action item for another subgroup of women who were primarily over 50 years of age. It was clear that action was occurring on an organizational level, as well, because the community partners routinely reported that the organizations they represented were considering changes to policies and practices based on the research findings. At the community level, the partners talked about how new partnerships were being created and how resources were being shared to support an organization (e.g., WOAW) that had not existed before. As researchers we were also committed to action within the academy, and we communicated our results in that venue with the aims of filling some gaps in the literature while calling for more of this type of research.

Yet, the question remains, do these deliberate examples of personal and local action contribute to or constitute the broader types of social change advocated in the PAR and FPAR literature? We do not feel that this question has been adequately addressed, and it is beyond the scope of this article to do so here. Maguire (2001, p. 66), however, provided a useful starting point when she defined social change as "the long haul struggle to create a world in which the full range of human characteristics, resources, experiences, and dreams are available to all our children." Alternatively, Greenwood and Levin (1998) described it as a process of altering the initial situation of a group, organization, or community in the direction of a more liberated state. Whereas this project certainly did not eradicate the poverty experienced by the women, it did disrupt some of the taken-for-granted assumptions that the women, community partners, and researchers brought to the project, and a community development model evolved that could be replicated in other communities to shift policies and promote inclusion (Frisby & Millar, 2002).

The communication strategy that unfolded to foster action was multifaceted and included word of mouth communications, newsletters, local media coverage, internal reports written and presented by the community partners, biannual reports (which were distributed to WOAW members and over 150 academics, policy makers, and practitioners across Canada who had requested copies), and various conference presentations and academic publications. This was the phase in the research process in which the most widespread participation occurred, though the communications often occurred independently rather than collaboratively. For example, the women on low income prepared the newsletters, spoke to the media, and commented on the research without consulting us, and we prepared manuscripts for publication and distributed copies but did not ask for direct input. None of us wanted to police the communications of the others, although we did regularly discuss who would take responsibility for the different forms of communication.

In one instance we did actively collaborate to communicate our research findings because one of the biannual reports was written with participants who were interested in contributing to it. The theme of that report was "action," and we invited the women on low income to submit short articles on individual and collective actions they had taken since joining WOAW. Although this clearly would have been an intimidating task for participants with language and literacy difficulties, we received 26 submissions that were all included in the report. One member of the research team played a major role here because she encouraged the women to

submit and was available to assist them when they had questions. This experience has encouraged us to consider alternative ways that we could cowrite with research participants in the future.

Communicating the results led to another challenge because as researchers we were concerned about issues of representation such as voice, respect, and consideration for multiple interpretations of sensitive issues. FPAR and PAR researchers have grappled with how their voices and those of research participants are represented and interpreted, placing new demands on researchers and participants in communicating findings (Maguire, 2001). Lincoln and Denzin (2000) raised important questions such as: How as researchers can we speak authentically about the experiences of others? There is no doubt that our position as white, middle-class, healthy, and well-educated women framed how we wrote about and presented our findings in academic settings. Rather than making grand claims that we are representing the experiences of all those who participated in our study, we were careful to position ourselves in the research and to explain how our social locations created a certain lens for interpreting the findings.

As Green et al. (1995) have suggested, another key challenge when communicating results is determining who has ownership over the data. We were challenged on this point by one woman on low income who wanted to "look at our files" so she could include some of the data from the interviews in a newsletter she was preparing. Because of confidentiality and other ethical guidelines, it had been clearly stated in the letter of informed consent that only the researchers would have access to the raw data. If all research participants were to have access to all of the data, they would have had to waive confidentiality, and that would have undoubtedly affected the trustworthiness of the data and our ability to obtain ethical approval to proceed with the study.

## Reflections on Power Relations

In our delineations of each phase of this FPAR project, we suggested that power issues arose and were at times problematic. We spent a significant amount of time reflecting on the power dynamics and determined that power needs to be constantly negotiated and managed despite good intentions, deliberate group processes, and ongoing reflection. For instance, each phase of the project was rife with power issues—determining the focus and research questions, developing democratic and trusting relationships, collecting and analyzing the data, and communicating the results for action.

As FPAR researchers we argue that the goal is not to eliminate power differences (because it is impossible to do so) but to work in authentic and meaningful ways to acknowledge and, when possible, manage them by engaging reflexively with research participants. At its core, reflexivity is about reflecting on power—a researcher's power to perceive, interpret, and communicate about others. In her discussion of developing authentic student–faculty relationships, Tom (1997) describes a deliberate relationship as one that is entered into consciously and ethically. Often the reasons for wanting and entering a relationship are unclear and very different. As feminist participatory action researchers, we strove to be "deliberately reflexive," to take responsibility for thoughtful and reflective practice, and to remain conscious of the inherent power dynamics in the research process (Reid,

2004). Indeed, being deliberately reflexive does not resolve "power plays," but it can increase the complexity of the research process by employing an analytical approach that "doubles back on itself" (Ristock & Pennel, 1996).

Calas and Smircich (1992, p. 240) contend that reflexivity is also about constantly assessing the relationship between knowledge and the "ways of doing knowledge." Reflexive research turns the attention to the researcher and the problematic nature of power relations, language, and narrative representation (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2002). Throughout our FPAR project we remained cognizant that our analyses portrayed only a partial picture of the women's experiences that was conveyed through the lenses of our social locations. As a group of researchers, we were studying the Other—in this case a group of marginalized, stereotyped, and poor women. Our representational efforts did not assume a cure or a solution, nor did we wish to join a "university rescue mission in search of the voiceless" (Viweswaran, 1994, p. 69, cited in Lather, 2002). Necessarily, we focused on the limits of our knowing and acknowledged that texts are inevitably shifting and always a site of failures of representation (Lather, 2002). Yet what resulted from these dilemmas was a crucial tension between the desire to know and the limits of power relationships that enabled us to question our authority as a means of informing our research practices.

## Conclusions

Collaboration with research participants can range from merely inviting them to contribute their interpretations to the findings to involving them in all aspects of research (Greenwood & Levin, 1998). Participatory research is fundamentally about the right to speak, and it is the researchers' role to facilitate the breaking of silence. According to Maguire (2001, p. 62), "the telling of, listening to, affirmation of, and reflection on personal stories and experiences 'from the ground up' are potentially empowering research strategies." To accomplish this, however, FPAR researchers must constantly critique and change their own practices as the research design emerges over time (Tom, 1996).

In this article we have outlined some of the strategies used and the challenges encountered when participating with a marginalized group and community partners in five phases of research. A participatory research process represents a significant departure from the dominant research paradigm in sport management in which researchers largely control the process with little or no input from research participants. We have argued that although there are a number of challenges to conducting participatory research, the coproduction of knowledge has a number of benefits, and we hope the insights shared will inspire others to engage in this type of research.

We do, however, have some important caveats and cautions to add in this regard. FPAR endeavors are extremely time and energy consuming and do not fit well within traditional academic programs and the reward systems in many universities. Masters and doctoral students must be aware that, despite their ideals to engage in transformative research, it might be easier and more instructive to try becoming involved in an ongoing or established participatory project in which they can contribute to the work without having to mobilize the entire project from scratch (Maguire 1993; Reid 2004). The masters and doctoral students involved with WOAW were in the enviable position of having a large-scale, resource-rich

FPAR project in which they could conduct their own research. Unaware researchers could invest a considerable amount of time and effort with no guarantees that the project will get off the ground. In addition, because of the complex process and ethical issues involved in participatory research, it is essential that those engaging in it have adequate training.

Some of the strategies we used clearly fostered active involvement in the research, although participation at the various stages was often partial. The initial workshop that was held served as an important mechanism for bringing potential research participants together to determine whether there was a shared sense of a social problem requiring action (Park, 1993). Holding subsequent meetings with interested participants to negotiate research questions represented a unique way of encouraging participation at the very beginning of a research project. Whereas the research questions that were eventually settled on were relevant to the women on low income and community partners, negotiation was necessary to ensure that the expertise of the researchers matched up with the questions to be investigated.

Open discussions with research participants also served to demystify the research process because the researchers explained the culture of the academy to some degree (Ristock & Pennell, 1996). Certainly, considering the barriers that would limit participation, in this case transportation and childcare, and taking steps to eliminate them were crucial (Frisby et al., 1997). Two additional strategies that were particularly effective in fostering participation in the FPAR project were the research parties and the biannual reports. Whereas these strategies provided a forum for women on low income and community partners to educate us about conditions affecting their daily lives and to link the personal to the political, it is important to acknowledge that these strategies might not be as effective in future participatory research projects. The key here is that they need to be discussed with research participants to determine interest and comfort levels, which may vary from group to group for a variety of reasons.

In part, the biannual reports and the answering of questions about the research process performed an educative function (Park, 1993), but upon reflection we realized that we could have gone further in helping research participants develop skills so they could collaborate with us more fully. In future FPAR projects, we plan to discuss whether a series of interactive workshops with supportive documentation (e.g., worksheets, definition of terms) would facilitate this.

As Maguire (2001, p. 63) acknowledged, "turning the relationship between researchers and subjects inside out by promoting the approach of co-researchers in an effort to share or flatten power is at the heart of action research." There was no doubt, however, that the gaps among academic, professional, and lay discourses, as well as the management of the research budget, perpetuated power imbalances. The power exerted by researchers, however, is not always negative because of our capacity to affect change while attempting to be accountable for our actions (Ristock & Pennell, 1996). Although the participatory approach that we used did not remove power imbalances, it certainly shifted them from those typically observed in positivist research. In this vein, it is important to note that it is naïve to assume that all power imbalances can be removed; at best we must remain conscious of them and take as many measures as possible to level them.

Other challenges that we encountered included working within the restrictive guidelines of granting agencies and ethical review boards that are not always

equipped to deal with participatory projects. Yet, it is encouraging to see a rise in this type of research, as well as debates about how to ensure that the integrity of research is upheld while honoring the differences in research protocols. Additionally, important issues surrounding voice appropriation arise when communicating the results of participatory research, and this should be carefully considered and negotiated.

A question that remains is: How much should researchers expect from research participants, and at what point does participation become too onerous? Comstock and Fox (1993, p. 109) remind us to be aware of competing interests and activities that constrain the degree and types of participation that can be expected. An advantage of the community-based organization that we collaborated with was that there were numerous ways that women could be involved: from planning recreational activities, to participating in the activities, to participating to various degrees in the research, and this participation fluctuated for a variety of reasons (e.g., poor health, moving away) over the 3 years of the project. In the end, it is clear that as researchers we had considerable power in the process. Nonetheless, our knowledge of the complexities of the research questions we were investigating was deeply enriched by learning from the women about their experiential knowledge of living in poverty and their struggles and successes accessing public services, as well as from the professional knowledge of the community partners regarding power structures and community resources. Reinharz (1992) contends that the very act of cocreating knowledge creates the potential for social change, because the paucity of research about certain groups accentuates and perpetuates their marginalization.

When we started our research we were idealistic and assumed that actively engaging research participants would be easier than it was. FPAR is demanding of both the participants and researchers. It demands researchers bring forward a level of consciousness, reflection, and integrity to engage meaningfully and respectfully with community groups and individuals. Although we have discussed the considerable challenges involved in FPAR, we remain committed to engaging in it and to developing FPAR methods that strive to bring into balance inequitable power relations. By doing so, researchers can take part in the work of social change and potentially have a transformative impact.

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## Notes

[1]See the Special Issue of the *Journal of Sport Management* (1997), volume 11, number 1, for examples.

[2]We gratefully acknowledge the research grant received from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada for this project (SSHRC 82819991045).

[3]The research participants used the terms *poor women*, *low-income women*, *women on low income* , *women with limited resources*, and *isolated women* alternatively. Although there was no consensus, *women on low income* was used throughout this paper.

[4]For example, typically 3 to 4 research activities were available every 6 months, and members could receive an honorarium for participating in 2 of them. The research activities included one-on-one interviews, participation in group meetings, tracking activity sheets for their WOAW subgroup, and journaling.