

Participatory research ideals and practice experience: Reflections and analysis

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Abstract

- *Summary:* Consumer participation in decision making and evaluation of services has been a significant theme in social work and other caring professions for over 20 years. This article reflects on a qualitative research study that was conceptualised within participatory principles. It critically examines key features that emerged as challenges to the ideals of participatory research with parents and grandparents about their experiences with child protection services in Victoria, Australia.
- *Findings:* The features examined are differentiated between the visible and familiar and the invisible, often emergent, aspects of social work research. We critically examine the ways in which the visible and invisible features as situated dimensions of social work research may shape how and whether the ideals of participatory research can be achieved. We discuss tensions in the process that have no clear 'solutions'. Instead, we identify the importance of mindfulness and reflexive practice by researchers to find their way through these potential ethical and legal minefields.
- *Applications:* We conclude that while social workers must continue to strive for participation by a range of service users in knowledge generation, we must also critically examine and theorise the meaning of participatory research and the idealised images of consumers and service users to improve such practice. An awareness of situated ethics as a location of the self in interaction with others is essential to promote ongoing reflexive practice throughout all stages of research.

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Introduction

This article critically examines the practical realities that limit the ideals of consumer participation in social work research. Consumer participation, influenced by the notion of 'choice', is conceptualised by the New Right as neoliberal values of market forces, self-reliance, and individual freedom to choose, and by the New Left as the rights of individuals and groups to have a voice, with an aim of promoting equity and advocacy (Ward et al., 2010, p. 66).

Within a rights framework, many 'helping professions', including social work, promote consumer participation as an end in itself (as an ethical principle and practice; Dale, 2004; Ghaffar, Manby, & Race, 2012; Ward et al., 2010) and as a means to an end (to improve effectiveness of services; Dale, 2004; Dumbrill, 2006; Ghaffar et al., 2012). Consumer participation in research assumes that service users have a right to influence how the problems they experience are defined, and how services are designed to attend to those problems (Bourke, 2009, p. 457; Clark, Holland, Katz, & Peace, 2009, pp. 345–346). More pragmatically, services may be more effective if service users participate in researching interventions and evaluating their outcomes (Dale, 2004; Dumbrill, 2006; Ghaffar et al., 2012).

Conceptualised within a rights framework, participatory research (PR) recognises knowledge/power relations and an ethical position of validating different ways of knowing (Clark et al., 2009, p. 346; D'Cruz & Jones, 2014, pp. 35–60). Fundamental are questions such as, what is knowledge (and evidence); what is research and in whose interests is it conducted; the silencing of knowledge that is seen to differ from dominant ways of knowing, and the implications of this for ethical practice and social justice aims (Ward et al., 2010).

There is an argument that the focus of 'consumerism . . . merely . . . with rights of service users' may disregard the 'responsibilities' associated with mutually reciprocal relationships with professionals (Ward et al., 2010, citing Hobsbawm, 1999, p. 66). Further, the privileging of service users' knowledge may depend on the nature of the problem and the field of expertise. For example, medical knowledge may require particular expertise that is less subject to challenge compared with social work knowledge that seemingly attends to problems of daily life, perceived as having common sense solutions (D'Cruz, Jacobs, & Schoo, 2009, pp. 239–244). Hence, different ways of knowing involve political dimensions that must be negotiated if constructive outcomes are to be achieved.

Additionally, the emergence of organised consumer groups, for example, the national forum of Service Users and Carers in the UK (Cheng, Beresford, & Fleischmann, 2012) with greater 'research literacy' may be unrepresentative of consumers who may be 'hard to reach' (Curtis, Roberts, Copperman, Downie, & Liabo,

2004; Kennan, Fives, & Canavan, 2012), and/or less interested or engaged in research (Bourke, 2009, pp. 465–467), but whose experiences and perspectives are nonetheless important to generating knowledge and ‘variant truths’ (Fenge, 2010, p. 889) about social problems and professional interventions (Ward et al., 2010, pp. 76–77). It is even less clear how the democratic value of freedom of choice is applied to children’s participation in research, especially in an increasingly risk-averse research context (Graham & Fitzgerald, 2010, pp. 139–143) and where parental rights as ‘gatekeepers’ may prove detrimental to children’s participation (Kennan et al., 2012, pp. 280–281).

PR in its ideal form involves service users in all stages of research (Bourke, 2009; Clark et al., 2009, pp. 346–350; Graham & Fitzgerald, 2010, pp. 67–69, 71) – from the setting of aims and objectives, to design and methods, recruitment and training of participants (or ‘co-researchers’; Karban, Paley, & Willcock, 2013, p. 67), to gather information (Fenge, 2008, pp. 884–885; Karban et al., 2013, p. 60), to data analysis, reporting and dissemination (Biskin, Barcroft, Livingston, & Snape, 2013, p. 304; Karban et al., 2013, p. 66).

However, PR as an ideal may be undermined by ‘practice dilemmas’ that Bourke (2009, p. 458) conceptualises as ‘participation, method and power’. Bourke (2009, p. 467) comments that ‘aiming for theoretical development may be contrary to a PR philosophy’, where the researcher’s theoretical approach may be less important to participants. The researcher’s integrity may be challenged if participants want findings changed or omitted which Bourke ‘negotiated’ as ‘she... was not willing to share power in this regard...’ (Bourke, 2009, pp. 469–470). David (2002, pp. 11–12) describes ‘the actuality of distortion’ and the potential for academic integrity and critical distance to be compromised as the researcher negotiates multiple agendas related to funding bodies and participants’ perspectives. Others have commented that available resources (time and funds) may not always allow the essential relationship-building, networking, training and reimbursement of service users (Clark et al., 2009, pp. 346–350; Evans et al., 2014; Fenge, 2010, pp. 884–889; Graham & Fitzgerald, 2010, pp. 138–139; Karban et al., 2013, p. 60). However, Clark et al. (2009) argue that research may be described as participatory if the intention is to engage in the

wider challenges participatory research poses [...] including issues of representation and constructing different sorts of knowledge. [...] evident in practices aimed at destabilising unequal power relationships, encouraging marginalised groups to have a say and developing less exploitative research methods; even if not necessarily participatory in the sense of bringing about social action or change. (pp. 346–347)

This article reflects on a research project, which was conceived as participatory in the sense that we aimed to give voice to a hitherto marginalised and silenced group in society, namely children and their families who had been the subjects of a child protection investigation (D’Cruz & Gillingham, 2014). For reasons explored in this article, the project might not be considered participatory in that it did not involve

participants in research design, recruitment and dissemination. We examine the practical realities that may undermine the ideals of PR and, as the discussion above has shown, we are not alone in doing this. We contribute to this literature by showing how our experiences were shared by other researchers in some respects, for example, on 'participation, method and power' (Bourke, 2009, p. 458) and resources (Clark et al., 2009, p. 346). More specifically, we conceptualise our experiences as the *visible and familiar* and the *invisible and emergent*, and explore the implications for achieving participatory ideals. We hope to lay bare the uncertainties related to practice ideals: where circumstances may constrain the achievement of desirable 'ideals' and which instead may be flawed, negotiated approximations of processes and outcomes. We also hope by our reflections that we may continue to foster the ideals of participatory practice while also being less inclined to exercise harsh judgements of ourselves or others for our 'failures' to achieve such ideals.

Conceptual framework

The experiences we examine under 'visible and familiar' are commonly understood using well-known ethical and methodological frameworks and prescriptions, for example, institutional ethics based on 'risk aversion' (Iphofen, 2009, p. 5), professional ethical codes (D'Cruz and Jones, 2014, pp. 96–99) and criteria for methodological trustworthiness (D'Cruz and Jones, 2014, pp. 68–77). In our analysis, we critically examine our actual experiences in the project, compared with the apparent guarantees implied by these familiar frameworks, drawing on concepts of 'situated ethics' (Banks, 2006; Danaher & Danaher, 2008) and 'reflexivity' (Banks, 2006; Lovelock & Powell, 2004).

While institutional and professional codes prescribe ethical practice in research, situated ethics recognises that ethical practice is not external to contexts, but emerges within them (Banks, 2006, pp. 154–155; Danaher & Danaher, 2008), as relationships between participants (Banks, 2006, pp. 54–73, 155), and with concerns about knowledge/power relations between practitioner/researcher and client/participant (Banks, 2006, pp. 64–65). Situated ethics involves practices that are contingent and specific to particular dynamics of power where the researcher negotiates 'tentative and sometimes uneasy relations' (Danaher & Danaher, 2008, abstract) – 'the complexities, nuances and subtleties' – between participants (Danaher & Danaher, 2008, p. 61). In this approach to ethics, prescribed codes are understood as unfolding, 'fluid and transitory' (Danaher & Danaher, 2008, p. 61) practices in which knowledge creation and power intersect.

Researchers' acceptance of situated ethics also requires willingness to practice reflexively, as a '*disposition* to act appropriately in a particular situation' (Pring, 2002, p. 124, cited in Danaher & Danaher, 2008, p. 68, original emphasis). Reflexivity may be seen as 'knowing-in-action' (Schön, 1983), as responding mindfully to events as they unfold with critical awareness of the dynamics of knowledge/power in each, situated interaction (D' Cruz, 2009, pp. 73–74) and with awareness

of the inseparability of theory and practice, values and action (Banks, 2006, p. 160). Reflexivity is therefore an ongoing process, engaged in throughout the research process, as we demonstrate in this article. It may manifest as an internal dialogue by the individual, and, as Doel et al. (2010) suggest, through regular and ad-hoc discussions of dilemmas as a form of 'ethical engagement'. Furthermore, situated ethics through reflexivity engages the researcher in 'ethical self-regulation' whereby 'conventions [are called] into question' (Lovelock & Powell, 2004, p. 217).

Situated ethics provides a specific conceptual framework for the analysis of 'invisible and emergent' issues for research practice. However, it also informs our approach to the more 'visible and familiar' issues, the institutionally acceptable approaches to trustworthy social work research that do not guarantee unproblematic research practice. Hence, similar to Danaher and Danaher (2008, p. 63), we have 'interrogated' our research practices in the particular moments throughout the project. This has included questioning the assumptions that treat participants as a homogeneous group. However, we have tried to avoid reductionism associated with single cases, and instead, focus on principles at stake and the processes by which we have made our judgements, so that we can 'justify actions' as 'moral agents' (Banks, 2006, p. 158).

To contextualise these emerging practice issues and implications, we first describe our research as a case study, using concepts familiar to most researchers.

Describing the research

Aims and conceptual approach

The research was a small-scale project conducted in 2009 (D'Cruz & Gillingham, 2014). Our initial aims were to ascertain the views of otherwise 'silenced voices' of Australian service users (parents and children) who had experienced just the investigation phase of child protection intervention, to find out what needs to change so that child protection services could be improved. Due to a range of systemic issues (discussed below), we had to modify our focus to parents' and grandparents' perspectives.

Institutional ethics

The university gave ethics approval which required Plain Language Statements and Consent Forms to be given to participants prior to their participation, (for example, covering digital recording of interviews). Information and forms were prepared specially for children and young people whose consent we intended to seek, separately from their parents/carers. We also arranged for counselling to be available at a local family support agency in case participants became distressed due to sensitive topics being discussed. Ethical issues that were not covered under organisational requirements, but that we attended to as social work researchers are discussed below, as *Professional ethics*.

Recruitment

The practitioners and managers of the Department of Human Services (DHS) at the regional office in our community were willing to assist with recruitment of parents and children. Within the organisation's legal and ethical guidelines, we proposed that they might use their electronic database to initiate contact on our behalf with families where an investigation had taken place with no further involvement, and inviting these families to make contact with us if they wished to participate. This procedure aimed to ensure all legal safeguards, to protect the anonymity and privacy of the families until they chose to respond to our invitation to participate. However, the DHS Ethics Committee in their Head Office which had to approve the project declined to assist, initially rejecting the project on the grounds of methodology and the researchers' expertise. We responded to these criticisms attaching supporting documentation, which expanded on our research experience and provided further detail about the methodology to argue for approval of the project. We again received a refusal, this time as final, and it was made that clear that no further discussion would occur or explanation be given.

While this process was in train, we were also in discussions with local non-government child and family welfare organisations to assist with recruitment that included displaying a poster on their premises inviting potential participants to contact us. One organisation declined to participate, and another was sufficiently interested and we were almost at a stage of formal agreement. However, at a meeting with this organisation, we told them of the DHS's refusal to support the project. This organisation then declined to participate, stating that they did not wish to compromise the funding they received from the DHS. Another non-government child and family welfare organisation agreed to assist with recruitment by displaying a poster on their premises, after approval for the research was given by their ethics committee.

Resources

Our application for a small grant within our university to fund the whole project was unsuccessful. We submitted an expression of interest in the 2009 funding round to the Foundation for Children (<http://www.foundationforchildren.com.au>) that was calling for applications for research with, and about, children. If the expression of interest was assessed as acceptable, we would then be contacted to submit a more detailed proposal. Our application did not pass this first stage of the process. Projects that were approved and received funding in the 2009 round were medical- or health-related research with specific clinically determined outcomes (Foundation for Children, <http://www.foundationforchildren.com.au/where-your-money-goes/2010.html#projects>). We eventually received a small grant from our university to pay for an advertisement seeking participants in a free community newspaper.

Table 1. Participants.

Mothers who were reported to child protection services (Bonnie, Greta, Daisy)	3
Mothers who reported their male partners (husbands or intimate partners) for sexual abuse of their daughters (Anna, Esme)	2
Grandparents concerned about the care of their grandchildren and who reported the children's mothers to child protection services (Belinda, Peter, Fiona)	3
A mother who had reported her teenage daughter to child protection services as an out-of-control child, and then reported her daughter due to concerns about care of her baby son (Cindy)	1

Participants

We recruited nine participants. The group of participants was more diverse than intended. All were adults who had experiences with child protection services, either being reported to them or reporting family members. Most had experienced interventions beyond the investigation. Some were grandparents and others, parents. All but one were women (see Table 1, pseudonyms are used).

The process was inappropriate to recruit children and young people directly. We hoped that the adult participants would give us access to the children in their care; although as it transpired, this was not possible in most cases as the children were infants or toddlers. Where the children were young adults or pre-adolescent, their mothers' responses influenced our access to the children. We will discuss these experiences in the section, *The subtleties of parental gatekeeping and children's participation* that comprises some of the invisible and emergent issues we have identified.

Methods

We conducted seven in-depth, semi-structured interviews involving nine participants, with each interview being between 90 minutes and 2 hours duration. Most of the interviews involved one participant. Two interviews involved two participants each because family members (Belinda and Bonnie, and Peter and Fiona) wished to participate together. The aim of the interviews was to generate narratives, using an opening question/statement: 'Would you please tell us about your experiences of child protection and how it started'. Participants could tell of their experiences in their own words covering themes and topics of interest to them. We were positioned in 'the active interview' (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995) as former child welfare/protection practitioners. We asked additional questions in an 'informal, conversational style' (D'Cruz & Jones, 2014, p. 113) to clarify or explore further, the participants' experiences and what needs to change.

Data analysis

A detailed description of procedures is beyond the scope of this article. In summary, we generated analytic memos (Neuman & Kreuger, 2003, pp. 440–442) with ‘an emphasis on what [participants] said rather than how it [was] said’ (Riessman, 2004, in Bryman, 2008, p. 553) because we wished to identify themes to contribute to policy change. Throughout the analysis, we aimed to use participants’ language and concepts as they were more evocative than any words we ourselves could generate. However, there is always a sense of discomfort that researchers’ analytical processes ‘interfere’ with participants’ narratives of their experiences and it is essential to recognise that research reports are a re-presentation of participants’ perspectives to meet the aims of the research.

Professional ethics

Institutional ethics attend to organisational risk management as much as legal protections of participants (D’Cruz & Jones, 2014, pp. 96–99). Professional ethics prescribe codes of conduct that reflect professional values and expectations (D’Cruz & Jones, 2014, pp. 96–99). Professional codes informed our practices beyond institutional expectations. Before we arranged a mutually convenient time for an interview, wherever possible, we met with each participant at a location they chose, so that we could explain the research and the participants could establish some rapport with us. We did not want the interview to be intimidating, especially where participants were being asked to tell relative strangers about personal and stressful experiences. We undertook to send participants recordings/transcriptions of interviews and copies of publications arising from the research as a way of recognising their participation and input. We sent regular written progress reports to the participants, summarising actions taken, outcomes achieved and attaching any publications arising from the research.

PR: Practice issues and implications

The issues we discuss in this section are differentiated between the *visible and familiar* and the *invisible and emergent*, aspects of social work research processes. While some of the features of this visible process have presented opportunities for reflection, we also comment on the emergent features that are perhaps accommodated or negotiated by researchers as the process unfolds but do not normally appear in the research account, thus remaining invisible. In our view, both the visible and invisible features have implications for achieving PR in practice.

Visible and familiar

The more visible features of research accounts may be conceptualised as *systemic and methodological*. These features are usually discussed in written and verbal presentations of research, for example, in peer-reviewed articles, books and

conference presentations. In this section, we critically examine the slippage between prescribed frameworks and actual, situated experiences in our project. *Systemic dimensions* are resources and recruitment related to ethical and legal approval by organisations. *Methodological dimensions* are conceptual approach, aims and objectives, recruitment, data analysis and dissemination.

Systemic dimensions. A range of organisations was involved, with associated policies and procedures related to regulating research with people: for example, universities and service-providers (statutory and non-statutory). These organisations' policies and procedures influenced resources available and recruitment strategies, with consequences for the research aims and design, and recruitment and engagement of participants.

Resource constraints. The effects of a decrease in public funding for universities and increase in complex audit and quality assurance mechanisms over recent decades have been well documented (Hornibrook, 2012) with consequences for academic workloads. The time available for research has decreased such that research is often pursued in an academic's own 'unpaid time' (Lyons & Ingersoll, 2010). At the same time, the pressure to write research grant applications to attract external funding and provide demonstrable research 'outputs' through peer-reviewed publications has also increased (Hemmings & Kay, 2010). To manage reduced funding for research, internal grants for relatively small amounts have been made competitive, which not only adds to workload but leads to wasted effort as not everyone is successful, as in our case.

Some might argue that gaining a research grant demonstrates your competence as a researcher, and lack of success, the opposite. While this may be true for our project, it may also be the case that the critical social questions examined by social science researchers often suffer in competitive research grants processes, because industry applications and quick results are preferred in these days of shrinking research funding and government priorities (Davies, 2013; Sheil, 2013).

The practical consequence is that the time and energy available (within what is considered a normal workload) to engage in substantial well-designed research of any kind, let alone the desirable processes to achieve 'true' PR, for example, negotiation, networking, recruitment and training of participants, is reduced (Clark et al., 2009, pp. 346–350). It was a significant stress for us in doing this research, particularly with the problems we faced from key organisations in regard to ethics approvals and recruitment of participants.

Recruitment. The refusal of the key statutory child protection organisation to approve our research, even with the legal and ethical safeguards for privacy and informed consent, along with limited resources (time and funding) significantly affected recruitment and sampling. We had planned to recruit participants using purposive sampling of a clearly defined group of parents and children (those who

had experienced only the investigation stage of child protection intervention). Instead, we had to rely on 'convenience sampling' in accepting participants who responded to our advertisement. Given that this resulted in the recruitment of participants whose experiences of child protection services were broader than our initial focus, we would describe the sampling process as 'haphazard' (Neuman & Kreuger, 2003, pp. 209–210). We were also less confident that we had recruited normally 'hard to reach' parents and children (Curtis et al., 2004) and instead had probably attracted participants who were assertive enough to make contact with researchers in response to an advertisement. We concede that our original recruitment strategy using the local DHS database might also have attracted the more assertive. However, we would have been able to provide more information to participants, such as the arrangements for confidentiality, which may have reassured and encouraged the less assertive. More obviously, organisational gatekeeping processes subsumed under 'ethics approvals' of research in a contentious policy and practice area tend to control the type of research that is conducted and the outcomes related to policy critiques and change. The methodological implications of haphazard sampling are discussed below.

Methodological dimensions

Conceptual approach. We conceptualised our research as 'participatory', but due to a range of systemic issues discussed above, we were unable to meet ideal participatory procedures identified by Clark et al. (2009, p. 355). However, we believe we met *some* definitions of 'participatory research' (D'Cruz & Gillingham, 2014, p. 241) that Bourke (2009, p. 458) has identified:

- 'not... methods but... [researchers'] attitudes...' (citing Cornwall & Jewkes, 1995, p. 1667);
- a focus 'on the practical outcome...' (citing Pain & Francis, 2003), such as advocating with service-providing and policy-making organisations on participants' behalf regarding what needs to change; and
- '...equal partnership between researcher and participant' (citing Lister et al., 2003), for example, our acceptance that participants' perceptions may differ from professionally accepted 'facts' about how services, processes and procedures are meant to operate or actually operate.

As with Clark et al. (2009, pp. 346–347), we believe we have focused on 'issues of representation and constructing different sorts of knowledge', thus framing the research as participatory. For example, see D'Cruz and Gillingham (2014, pp. 252–255), where we gave separate space to the participants' recommendations for change alongside our reflections for professional practice.

Aims and objectives. The systemic issues discussed above reshaped our initial aims because we could not recruit the parents and children who had only

experienced child protection investigations, with no further action. Hence, while we still wished to advocate on behalf of the ‘silenced voices’ of people receiving child protection services, we slightly modified our aims and objectives to match the actual group of participants we were able to recruit directly (parents and grandparents, not children), asking them, what needs to change in child protection, based on their experiences with child protection services. Therefore, we captured a range of experiences with child protection services that went beyond the initial investigation stage, to ongoing involvement and court interventions.

Recruitment. The systemic issues described above that affected recruitment and sampling had methodological implications. As potentially more assertive (and unexpected) participants tend to respond to advertisements compared with those recruited through systematic purposive sampling (Neuman & Kreuger, 2003, pp. 209–210), some participants may be heard on issues of their choice while others, including ‘hard to reach’ (Curtis et al., 2004) groups may remain silenced. Furthermore, the motivations of self-referred participants may be called into question, and the worth of their views thereby discounted. In keeping with participatory principles, we recognised the participants’ significant commitment to the research, as they had done extensive preparation for the interviews, thinking about how they would explain what had happened to them. Some brought prepared notes and one participant gave the researchers a detailed written chronology of her involvement with child protection services. The main aim for many was that by telling about their experiences, ‘others can get the help they need’.

The size and composition of the sample (Table 1) also had methodological consequences. Six adults initially responded to the newspaper advertisement, two of whom invited kin members to participate. ‘Belinda’ invited her adult daughter ‘Bonnie’, whom she had reported to child protection services due to concerns that her learning disability affected her ability to parent her baby. ‘Peter’ invited his wife ‘Fiona’ and they participated together in a single interview. Two people responded to the poster, but one did not proceed. The final number of participants was nine. We were surprised to be contacted by grandparents of children, when we sought parents or carers. Also, as Table 1 shows, some of the participants had been reported to child protection services, and other participants reported family members. However, we accepted all participants as we believe they responded to our advertisement because it had resonance for them – within the provisos associated with self-referred research participants.

Finally, due to the recruitment process and the diverse group of participants, care had to be taken in generating analytical patterns and strength and significance of the conclusions (D’Cruz & Gillingham, 2014, p. 255).

Data analysis. The requirements of research to demonstrate patterns and significance for theory and knowledge at a scholarly level may cut across ideals of PR (Bourke, 2009, pp. 467–470). Some argue that problems of researchers being barriers rather than conduits may be minimised if there is ‘true’ participation

throughout the research process. Yet, in the interests of meeting participatory ideals, researchers who involved participants throughout the process by including them in methodologically acceptable analytical processes familiar to most researchers, found this to be a fraught and challenging process (Bourke, 2009, pp. 467–470; Clark et al., 2009, pp. 352–357; Karban et al., 2013). This was so, even when training and support were offered to participants. Aside from the technical aspects of engaging people unfamiliar with research procedures and processes in the interests of participatory ideals, training and support may also work as mechanisms of co-optation and inculcation of participants ('outsiders') into dominant research cultures and paradigms that define what legitimate knowledge is, and how it should be represented to show 'significance' to those in powerful positions. Thus, even 'true' PR involves participants having to accept researchers' paradigms of legitimate knowledge (how we know, what we know and how it should be represented), rather than the other way around.

Dissemination. Research is usually publicised in various verbal and written formats, for example, conferences, reports and peer-reviewed articles. The need for timely reporting so that participants can see action being taken as promised can be problematic in practice. Data analysis of narratives is usually lengthy. Writing articles suitable for submission for peer-review and a lengthy peer-review process that does not guarantee acceptance for publication can also draw out the relationship between researchers and participants who may be awaiting immediate action. Additionally, there are contradictions in regard to expectations of critical analysis in a scholarly publication (Curtis et al., 2004, p. 173); yet, being non-judgemental of participants' perspectives even if as researchers we do not agree with them (Bourke, 2009, p. 467). We also wanted to meet participants' expectations that at a minimum, we would represent their views in a range of forums. There were expectations that major changes would occur, which we could not guarantee.

At a practical level, we sent regular written progress reports to the participants setting out the ups and downs of what we were doing, our conference presentation on their views (D'Cruz & Gillingham, 2012) and informing them of the rejections of articles submitted for review. In the end, we sent a report to a leading child and family policy organisation that advocates for improved policy and practice, sending a copy of the report to the participants. We were also concerned about the extended contact between researchers and participants as it seemed intrusive as years passed (data generation in 2009 to 2013 when we sent participants our final progress report), and sought to terminate the contact with some sort of credible action on behalf of the participants.

Invisible and emergent

Researchers are most familiar with the systemic and methodological issues we have discussed above, as they are related to the visible and familiar structures within

which research operates, such as institutional policies and procedures, and criteria for research trustworthiness. In this section, we discuss issues that emerged from our research that were unexpected because of the unpredictability of actual research processes with a range of participants with their own agendas. This unpredictability is perhaps increased in research that aims to be collaborative and participatory and therefore less under the 'control' of researchers (Fenge, 2010, p. 889). Perhaps researchers normally respond to such processes as they unfold, without subjecting the situated dynamics that influence relations of knowledge/power and their outcomes to scrutiny. As outlined above, we draw on situated ethics and related reflexive practice to examine invisible and emergent features, in particular, *Informed consent in practice* and *Roles of researchers in relation to participants*.

Informed consent in practice. Institutionally approved ethics protocols assume participants' informed consent based on reading information about the research and then signing a consent form. In practice, this is less clear. In our research, two aspects of 'consent' emerged. The first aspect involved adults who had signed a consent form, but their subsequent actions were ambiguous as to their intentions. The second aspect was about children's participation and the subtleties and ambiguities of parents' gatekeeping. In both cases, it was not always clear what, as researchers, we should or could do in response, but at all times, there was a '*disposition to act appropriately . . .*' (Pring, 2002, p. 124, cited in Danaher & Danaher, 2008, p. 68, original emphasis).

The meaning of adult participants' 'consent'. Our experience with 'Hannah' perhaps emphasised the complex meaning of 'consent' by an adult participant and the ethical and political minefield presented. Hannah was referred by a non-government organisation. She eagerly responded, we spoke at length by phone, and then we arranged a time for an interview. When Hannah did not arrive, one of us phoned her. She apologised, said she was unwell, and that she had sent a text message (SMS) giving her apology. (The SMS was never received.) We then asked Hannah whether she wished to make another appointment because we had recorded in our research notes on our contact with participants that initial contact with Hannah suggested she was ambivalent about participating.

Not sure why I think this but I am of the feeling that Hannah is having second thoughts – she says the project sounds interesting etc (but . . .???)' (Note 1).

Hannah assured us of her continuing interest. We said that we would let her know of a rescheduled date and time. Later the same day, we texted Hannah with the new date and time, asking that she reply by text confirming this, as agreed. As we did not hear from her, a follow-up text was sent suggesting some options if she was unsure about proceeding.

1. Meeting with us informally for a coffee so that she can then decide whether to proceed or not – she does not know us and it may be intimidating to suddenly be expected to attend an interview.
2. Postpone indefinitely.
3. Make a different date.
4. Bring a trusted friend for initial meeting with us and then for the interview itself if she decides to proceed (Note 2)

We recorded our concerns about continuing follow up as that 'would seem like harassment'. As we had not heard from Hannah two days later, we 'assumed the interview was cancelled'.

While our experiences with Hannah could be read as a simple binary of 'consent (or not)', we were alive to the complex possibilities of 'consent', as our notes indicate. Note 1 about Hannah's apparent ambivalence does more than describe the 'facts' of our interaction. It also records an example of reflexive practice, incorporating 'knowing-in-action' (Schön, 1983), mindfulness of knowledge/power embedded in the interaction and the intersection between values and action (Banks, 2006, p. 160). Note 1 encapsulates a researcher's intangible 'feelings' about what Hannah said, and what she may have meant instead, but with uncertainty as to what created that impression.

The list of options we sent to Hannah (see Note 2) aimed to express our understanding of the possible range of issues that influenced her ambiguous responses and offered to her some alternative ways of proceeding that did not preclude withdrawal of her signed consent. Basically, 'informed consent' for us was a set of questions in response to emergent issues arising from a participant's specific actions. Our questions were influenced by a reflexive sense of complex, intangible and unknowable motivations underlying Hannah's responses, as a form of 'ethical self-regulation' and 'questioning conventions' (Lovelock & Powell, 2004, p. 217), in this case, the meaning of 'informed consent'. What does a 'non-response' mean? Should we follow up? If not, why not? If yes, how much? If someone agrees to participate, cancels on grounds of sickness, asks to reschedule and then does not reply to new date and time set, what does this mean for 'participation'?

The subtleties of parental gatekeeping and children's participation. In this example, Anna's and Greta's responses were interpreted by the researchers as boundaries we could not cross to access their children. Greta agreed enthusiastically at her interview that we could contact her to arrange a time to meet with her three pre-adolescent children, but when we followed up, she did not respond. While this is probably a shared experience with other researchers, in our case this response was especially frustrating because there were already so few children we could speak to about their experiences. It was tempting to keep following up with Greta. However, due to concerns about privacy and our interpretation of a non-response as withdrawal of consent, we did not follow up.

In Anna's case, her 'child' was now an adult aged in her early 20s. The alleged sexual abuse ('he had done something wrong') had occurred when the daughter was seven years old. We had told Anna that we wanted to speak to children who had also experienced the child protection investigation. However, she repeatedly said that her (now) adult daughter had 'moved on with her life', and that 'she does not know I'm here today and I don't know whether I will even tell her...'. Again, reflexively looking beyond the 'surface' of Anna's responses, we interpreted these remarks as an unwillingness to allow contact with her daughter and we were unable/unwilling to breach these invisible barriers, especially as Anna herself seemed emotionally distressed at the interview. As with our experience with Hannah, this example is also an expression of 'ethical self-regulation' in an uncertain situation (Lovelock & Powell, 2004, p. 217).

As mentioned, there were institutional barriers that impeded our ability to recruit children, in particular the non-cooperation of child protection services. Our experience, though, draws attention to the invisible barrier that parents, as the ultimate gatekeepers, may present, which may emerge even in the most ideal situations.

Roles of researchers in relation to participants. Usually in research, researchers are represented as disinterested inquirers, so that influence is not unduly exercised on the participants' views or on the outcomes of the research. However, similar to other researchers whose participants expressed discriminatory views – homophobia (Curtis et al., 2004, p. 172), racism (Curtis et al., 2004, p. 169) or class prejudice (Clark et al., 2009, pp. 354–355)—we encountered participants who expressed views about women or children that concerned us. On these occasions, as researchers we were uneasy about the ethical and political limitations of being disinterested inquirers while also finding our experiences did not match the (our?) idealised images in PR of 'consumers' as rights oriented (Beresford, 2000).

We encountered multiple examples that reflected different values between researchers and participants, for example, related to gender equality or children's rights. With regard to women, Peter and Fiona expressed unceasingly negative views about the mother of their granddaughter. Their initial disbelief that their son was the father of the child was underlined by their concern that the child's mother was falsely claiming that their son was the child's father. However, the son agreed to a paternity test and when it was discovered that he was the biological father of the child, the grandparents' surveillance of the mother's care of their granddaughter increased. In this example, we were caught off guard through participants' unexpected comments. We did not know how to question these views without stepping outside the purpose of the research nor did we want to engage in an argument with them.

With regard to children, Cindy's views of the need to 'manage' her teenage daughter strongly influenced her demands for help from child protection services and the police. This view challenged children's rights and citizenship perspectives

that argue for children's autonomy (Graham & Fitzgerald, 2010, pp. 134–137). However, the lived experiences of a mother deeply concerned about her young daughter's association with people misusing substances and engaging in 'risky behaviour' presented an opportunity for a careful conversation about these tensions between principles and experience.

These examples show the ethical and political tensions associated with respecting different perspectives. We wondered whether we were being complicit with oppressive views through our silence and whether it was ever possible for researchers to be activists with, or educators of, participants (Curtis et al., 2004, p. 172). These dynamics may also be a feature of us not having developed an ongoing relationship with participants which may have otherwise facilitated discussion of repressive or oppressive attitudes, for example, as occurred with Clark et al. (2009, pp. 355–357).

These examples also raise questions about the idealised images of consumers represented in PR and their knowledge derived from direct experience as of greater value, rights oriented, or 'more authentic' than that of professionals (Beresford, 2000, cited by Biskin et al., 2013, p. 304; David, 2002, p. 12; Clark et al., 2009, pp. 356–357). The tendency to privilege consumers' knowledge in ideal PR approaches is troublesome in this regard. Instead, it could be argued that 'consumers' are a heterogeneous group with a range of views and perceptions about social problems and social groups' experiences. Furthermore, consumers as participants may express exclusionary and reactionary views as much as any 'right wing' politician or 'old school' professional.

Finally, and more positively, our positioning as researchers and former child welfare/protection practitioners clearly affected how the interviews proceeded. Researchers' 'insider knowledge' of the policy and practice procedures of the local child protection service and the legislation and court processes facilitated in-depth discussion of 'what happened'. The more analytical question of 'why' certain things had happened could be discussed in a way that led to potentially deeper insights, for both the researchers and participants. Collecting data that included not only the participants' reactions to 'what happened' but also why, contributed significantly to addressing our main research question about 'what needs to change'. Hence, we consider that this stage of the research was aligned to the general aim of PR in that the findings enabled us to not only give voice to previously silenced groups but also to do so in a considered and nuanced manner (D'Cruz & Gillingham, 2014).

Conclusions

This article has critically examined the tensions and gaps between idealised approaches to participatory social work research and its practice. We have discussed the literature that aspires to rights-based participation by service users and the experiences of a range of researchers who have struggled with this approach in practice.

We have presented a descriptive overview of our research conceptualised in intent as ‘participatory’, and then critically examined the tensions and gaps, focusing on both the visible and familiar, and the invisible and emergent, dimensions. The visible and familiar aspect has revisited what others have also discussed but with the specifics related to our own field of interest and research particulars. The invisible and emergent aspect has attended to what is less well known; yet, it presented challenges through the unexpected dynamics associated with participants with their own agendas and positioning on the topic of interest. We have concluded that while social workers must continue to strive to be inclusive in knowledge generation with participation by a range of service users, we must also critically examine and theorise the meaning of PR and the idealised images of consumers and service users to improve such practice. An awareness of situated ethics as a location of the self in interaction with others is essential to promote ongoing reflexive practice throughout all stages of research.

Ethics

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