An Understanding of Poverty From Those Who Are Poor

Stephanie Baker Collins (2003)

Featured in this article by Stephanie Baker Collins are women who tell their own stories about living in poverty. Based on data collected from a group of Canadian women, Baker Collins identifies four themes that characterize their experiences of poverty: an emphasis on social relationships, the impact of pervasive scrutiny of the social assistance bureaucracy, the importance of community goodwill, and the possibilities for community action.

Introduction

The participatory research project described in this article began with a commitment to include the experiences of persons who are poor in an analysis of poverty. Listening to the voices of households who are poor can provide a deeper understanding of the multiple dimensions of poverty as well as the activities people undertake to make a living and the choices they make when assets are inadequate. Participants in poverty assessments teach others about their daily lives. In order to honour the knowledge and wisdom of those living in difficult circumstances, a participatory poverty assessment was facilitated among a small group of women living on a social assistance income in Niagara Falls, Ontario.

The Participatory Poverty Assessment (PPA) undertaken in Niagara Falls was one component of a doctoral research project.[1] The doctoral project integrated an analysis of the structural and institutional contexts of poverty with an analysis of the everyday livelihood strategies used by households who are poor. The structural and institutional context was explored using the sustainable livelihoods framework, drawing particularly on the concepts of assets and vulnerability. Everyday livelihood strategies were explored through the Participatory Poverty Assessment. The goal of this integrated project is to contribute to a fuller understanding of poverty than that achieved by conventional income poverty measures.

Official definitions of poverty are usually compiled by "experts" who are not themselves poor. Definitions are derived based on decisions about the best proxy (income or consumption) for material deprivation. A certain abstract statistical precision is required since the purpose of such measures is to count the number of poor persons in a particular geographic space to determine the proportion of households who are poor in that society.

Income poverty measures are useful because income data is readily available and they allow for comparisons over time and between nations. At the same time, they suffer from important weaknesses which have been well documented (Chambers, 1995; Kabeer, 1996; Rahnema, 1992). An income poverty line represents an abstraction from lived experience in which important contextual factors are not taken into account (Max-Neef, 1991). For example, the ability to translate income into well-being is shaped by gender inequalities (Kabeer, 1996). Other contextual factors which are missing include: access to local resources (Sachs, 1992); livelihood contexts (Rahnema, 1992); the role of social networks (Appadurai, 1990); and a lack of power (Room, 1995).

Participation in Poverty Assessments

The opportunity to explore these contextual factors is one of the benefits of the introduction of participatory methods to poverty research. Participation in research, whereby persons become subjects and not objects in the pursuit of knowledge, serves a number of important goals. Participation includes the voices of those who are usually excluded. Participation honours local knowledge about life circumstances and coping strategies (Chambers, 1995). Participation changes the role of the researcher from one of "expert" to listener and provides a "view from below" (Mies, 1996, p. 13). Participation can also be a catalyst to working for social justice (Carniol, 2000). And lastly, participation is itself a basic human need. The capability approach to poverty and inequality developed by Sen recognizes that in assessing human capabilities and the resources required to exercise those capabilities, choice and participation are important (Alkire, 1999).

There are also a number of caveats regarding participatory research in general and in this project specifically that should be acknowledged at the outset. Participation in development and poverty assessments has become mainstream and widespread (Botes & van Rensburg, 2000; Holland and Blackburn, 1998; Pratt, 2001; Robb, 1999), with rapid expansion of new participatory methods (participatory poverty assessments, participatory learning and action, appreciative inquiry, open space). It is possible, however, to use the tools of participation without a commitment to the principles which underlie the development of the tools (Attwood & May, 1998). As Ashley and Carney (1999) point out, participatory poverty methods may be used as a set of *tools* for research, as an *objective* (participation by poor households) or as a set of *principles*. Participation as a research tool or technique could remain exclusively within an interpretive or positivist framework, without addressing critical issues such as the structural and institutional forces and power relationships that operate in the lives of households that are poor. In that situation, participatory processes "are approached as technical, management solutions to what are basically political issues" (Guijt & Kaul Shah, 1998, p. 3).

If participation can be used in service to a variety of goals (not all of them beneficial) what did participation mean for this study? The goal in this study was for participation to be a principle of research rather than a technique, with participation tied to advocacy and action taken to improve the livelihoods of households who are poor. Ideally participatory research means participation both in knowledge generation and knowledge utilization (Park, 1993). A partnership is formed between ordinary people and the researcher for the purpose of learning and taking collective action on a particular problem as it is defined by those who are affected. According to Park, the participants should be involved at each stage of the research: problem identification; research design and methods; dialogue; data gathering and analysis; and utilization.

Engaging in participatory research as part of a doctoral dissertation brings with it a specific limitation regarding participation at each stage of the research (Maguire, 1993). The limitation is that the initial goals and plan for the research topics have already been outlined by the researcher as part of the requirements for a dissertation. This limitation, however, did not need to remain in place for the life of the project. One of the goals of this project was to work towards group participation in setting the agenda for the Participatory Poverty Assessment.

There were also several advantages to undertaking a PPA as part of doctoral research. One significant advantage is that the project was not bound by time constraints. The researcher was able to take six months to become familiar with the organization and the members as a volunteer prior to facilitating a PPA. Another advantage is that the project was not bound by the demands of a funding body regarding expected outcomes. The PPA could unfold according to an agenda derived from discussions among the participants.

Procedures and Methodology

The methodology used in this study was adapted from Participatory Poverty Assessments, part of a family of participatory methodologies which have had a long association with international development work (Ros & Craig, 1997).[2] Participatory Poverty Assessments (PPA) use participatory tools to engage households who are poor in an assessment of their own living conditions. The methodology is deliberately non-technical and accessible. Visual methods are used such as mapping exercises, seasonality diagrams, time lines, and ranking exercises. Focus groups and semi-structured interviews are undertaken to draw out perceptions of well-being. The purpose of drawing on the expertise of households who are poor is not just to improve understanding, but to demonstrate the micro-effects of macro-policy (Booth, 1998). An additional purpose is to enable local people to analyse their own situation and develop the confidence to make decisions and take action to improve their circumstances.

A Participatory Poverty Assessment was conducted from June to December 2000 with a small group of women who are members of a food co-operative in Niagara Falls, Ontario. The food co-operative is sponsored by Project SHARE (Support, Housing, Awareness, Resources and Emergency), a multi-service centre in Niagara Falls which serves urban poor households. The Food Co-operative Program has been described as "a self help model that has been a positive solution to hunger, lack of information and self-esteem issues for those who are isolated due to lack of income" (Project SHARE, 2001, p. 6). Members of the co-op contribute a minimum of three hours a month to Project SHARE (usually in the food warehouse, helping with the semi-annual food drives or with the Christmas basket program). In return, co-op members receive a food pick-up once a month for each household. Co-op members also receive special donations that come in such as linens from local hotels or surplus clothing from tourist shops. Members attend co-op meetings which are scheduled bi-monthly and elect an executive once a year at the co-op annual meeting. The co-operative holds social events such as a barbecue in September and a Christmas party in November at which member households receive toys for their children. Fund raising events are held throughout the year to help pay for the Christmas toy baskets.

From the extensive inventory of tools available for participatory assessment (Attwood et al., 1998; Holland & Blackburn, 1998; Pretty, Guijt, Thompson & Scoones, 1995), those tools were chosen that could be adapted to an urban setting and could meet the following goals: to learn about the daily living experiences of those on low-income; to analyse the role of institutions in people's lives; to have agenda setting become a shared task; and to provide the opportunity for setting local priorities in working for change. Participatory topics were sequenced from the general to the more personal so as to begin with the least threatening topics. Topics were presented in such a way that the discussion/findings could be recorded in charts, visual maps, pictures or notes on flip charts. In this way the recording was a group effort, not the interpretation of an individual or of the researcher.

Recruiting Participants

Recruiting participants for the participatory project began with establishing a connection with co-op members through volunteering at Project SHARE and attending several monthly co-op food pick-ups. The researcher met with the executive of the co-op and the co-op support worker to receive permission to present the project to co-op members. Executive members made suggestions for the presentation itself and for meeting arrangements with those who agreed to participate. The co-op support worker offered to consider participation in the project as fulfilling the requirements for monthly co-op work hours.

The invitation to participate in the project was extended in a presentation given at a monthly meeting of the food co-op members. The researcher introduced the project by explaining that the intent of the research was to have people speak for themselves rather than someone else speaking for them. Examples were given of some of the topics that might be discussed and several questions were answered. The co-op members voted to allow the PPA to be conducted among co-op members, with the understanding that a vote to approve was not a commitment to personally participate. Although the co-op approved the project, when interested participants were asked to sign up (name and phone number) at the end of the meeting only a small number responded. The women who indicated an interest in participating became long-term participants in the project.

The Participatory Poverty Assessment was primarily conducted with the small group of women who signed up to participate. There was one additional invitation to co-op members to join the PPA two months later. The group presented the results to date of their discussion at a co-op membership meeting and invited co-op members to take part in a participatory exercise around defining a good quality of life. An invitation for additional participants was extended at this time. This invitation did not result in new participants.

The process of recruiting participants raised a number of issues about the nature of the urban community that existed in the Project SHARE food co-op. Some of these issues were identified in conversations with co-op members during volunteer shifts. Others were identified in discussions within the small group itself. The consensus was that an atmosphere of trust did not exist among the members of the co-op. For example, when the co-op members were invited to participate in the quality of life exercise at the meeting, members were described as reluctant to post any information they had written on a sticky note onto a larger broadsheet because someone might see what they had written. Their concerns about confidentiality were not primarily in relation to the researcher but in relation to each other. The severe cuts to social assistance incomes several years earlier accompanied by the introduction of fraud lines where

recipients were encouraged to report on each other contributed to the atmosphere of fear and mistrust.[3]

In selecting Project SHARE as a site for this research project, one of the most important features was the presence of a food co-operative where a Participatory Poverty Assessment might be undertaken. The reluctance to participate and the mistrust among co-op members are important reminders of the dangers of an assumption of solidarity among the members of a community group or geographical location. An assumption of an idealized community can take several forms including an assumption of homogeneity (Norton, 1998) or an assumption of harmony (Guijt & Kaul Shah, 1998). Assuming homogeneity can lead to a masking of the differences that exist within communities based on gender, age, ethnicity or some other factor. Assuming harmony can lead to a failure to take into account intra-communal differences.

The lack of cohesion and trust within the food co-op at Project SHARE seemed to be based more on a lack of harmony than a lack of homogeneity. Discussions with co-op members did not reveal internal hierarchies based on differences of gender, ethnicity or economic class. All the members of the co-op are part of a marginalized group. But the common characteristics of co-op membership, urban location and income levels did not necessarily in and of themselves provide meaningful coherence (or harmony) to the population of the food co-op (Demers & White, 1997). When the members of the small group that did develop were asked to comment on the distrust in the co-op some months later, they suggested several reasons. People join for the extra food and don't necessarily desire a social connection. People are ashamed; they don't want others to know their situation. Finally, for some people, it isn't distrust but a desire to be by themselves.

It needs to be recognized that participation by its very nature must be an invitation, not a requirement. It must meet the needs of those who are asked to participate. For most members of the co-op what had been an anticipated benefit of participation, an alternative way to meet co-op work requirements that involved informal and closer social interaction with other co-op members, was not perceived as a benefit. Participatory research has a tendency to stress the solidarity of communities and to picture community as a natural social entity (Cleaver, 2000). In reality, communities often embody "both solidarity and conflict, shifting alliances, power and social structures" (Cleaver, 2000, p. 45.) It is important not to deny the presence of conflict, but to make both the forces of inclusion and exclusion part of the analysis.

Moving From Functional to Interactive Participation

The general atmosphere of mistrust within the co-op was contrasted by the atmosphere of trust and enthusiastic participation that developed among the women who participated in the small group. After spending some time getting acquainted, the group began by talking about what makes for a good quality of life. From among a number of examples from other PPAs, the group chose to portray their characteristics of a good quality of life as a sun diagram with a house in the centre. One of the women who had been praised for her handwriting agreed to draw the pictures that emerged from group discussions. As the group became used to using the tools of word pictures and visual representations, there was a growing comfort level with this method of recording the discussion. The early discussions centered around topics introduced by the researcher, but one of the goals of the project was to work towards group participation in setting the agenda.

Functional participation is characterized by predetermined objectives while interactive participation is characterized by joint analysis with the group taking control over local decision making (Pretty et al., 1995). The format of the small group meetings gradually began to move from a functional format to an interactive format. In the first several meetings, the small group followed an agenda which had been introduced by the researcher. This format began to change, as the group gained confidence in their own voice and their familiarity with each other. In the second meeting, for example, concerns about the changes to the education system were raised in the discussion about assets and time was spent drawing out specific concerns around education. The third meeting took place after a co-op membership meeting in which further changes to the administration of social assistance had been announced. When the group was asked what topics they wanted to discuss they identified the changes reviewed at the co-op membership meeting and the cutbacks to social assistance. This led to a general and wide-ranging discussion of life on social assistance. Several personal stories were shared about cutbacks, overpayment rulings and subsequent deductions, and fear of losing an asset such as an inherited house. This was the first of numerous discussions about life on social assistance. By the fourth meeting, the group set the agenda together at the beginning of the meeting or in planning for the next meeting.

The women expanded the agenda for the meetings by expressing and implementing a desire to include a social and celebrative aspect to their time together. This included planning a potluck meal together after one of the meetings and planning a Christmas party for the group. The women also stated a desire to continue meeting after the discussions of PPA topics had been completed. Time was spent at a fall meeting evaluating the discussion sessions and the women stated that they enjoyed the meetings, and that it was helpful to learn they were not alone in their situation. The women expressed a unanimous desire to continue meeting. (The group has continued meeting now for the past three years.)

Lessons From a Participatory Poverty Assessment in Niagara Falls

The participants gave the title "Welcome to the Real World" to the report of their work, a title they chose because it expresses what life in poverty and on social assistance is like and it expresses the view that for someone else to understand that life, they would need to live it themselves. A number of important findings from that report are presented below. The drawings were made by the women themselves. The findings were initially summarized by the researcher and then reviewed by the women in the group who made changes and additions and decided on the title for the report. Except where noted the following summaries of the drawings reflect the findings as reviewed and edited by the women.

A Good Quality of Life

The Participatory Poverty Assessment began with a discussion of well-being. Definitions of poverty reflect and illustrate definitions of well-being, of a good quality of life. The group answered the question, "What is a good life?" by first making a list of items that make for a good quality of life.[4] Then each person voted on the list, designating items into three categories: very important, somewhat important, and not as important. The women developed a key for this drawing in which those items which had the most "very important" votes were surrounded with a heart, those with the most "somewhat important" votes surrounded with a circle and those with the most "not as important" votes surrounded with a square. The diagram of a good quality of life is shown as Figure 22.1. The numbers in Figure 22.1 refer to the number of votes received for that item.

In the drawing of a good quality of life, relationships with friends and with family and children are rated as the most important factors in a good life. Factors that relate to the quality of relationships are also listed as very important, such as love, happiness, and self-esteem.

A number of qualities of a good life point to the need for a cushion: enough to live without stress; to have full cupboards; to have a savings account; to be debt free; to take a vacation; to pursue dreams; and to help others in need. One theme alluded to here is the presence of savings which would mean that emergencies can be weathered with less stress. Another theme is the possibility for celebration, the possibility to treat oneself, and the possibility of rest.

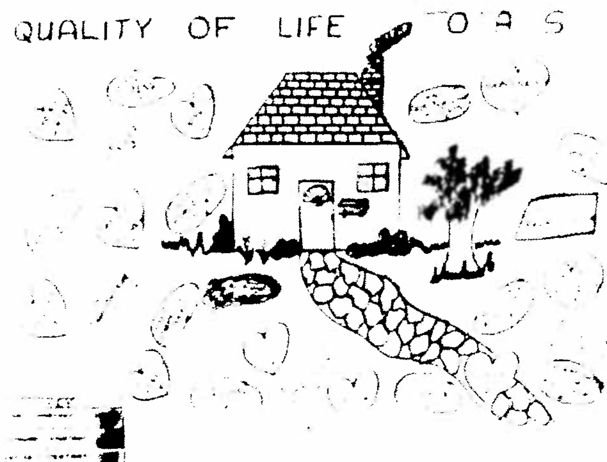

Figure 22.1 Good Quality of Life

There are a number of tangible assets that are mentioned as part of a good quality of life including an automobile, fresh water, a good place to live, health, a good job, and full cupboards. More prominent, however, are intangible qualities such as love, happiness, religion, success, no stress, understanding one another, self esteem and courage. Well-being for this group is not defined primarily in material terms or as material abundance. Money is not even mentioned directly, only indirectly in terms of the material goods that create a good quality of life and that require money. The fulfilling of human needs is portrayed as a means to human functioning, not as an end in itself. A good quality of life is fully embedded in a community of family and friends.

A Poor Quality of Life

The women also drew a picture of a poor quality of life. The heavily drawn caption of this picture is the word, STRESS (see Figure 22.2.) A poor quality of life is a life lived in the context of stress and worry. One of the causes of stress is expressed in the term "giant microscope." The women described life on social assistance as "living under a giant microscope." This feeling of being watched adds to the stress of living on an inadequate income. (The arbitrary and punitive nature of the social assistance system in the province of Ontario was often a topic of conversation.)

While the good quality of life drawings (Figure 22.1) drew extensively on intangible qualities and on the importance of relationships, the poor quality of life drawing (Figure 22.2) is more tangible. It mentions the lack of money and termination of income directly and outlines the consequences of not having enough money. The lack of income leads to not enough food to eat, to poor quality of housing and to poor health and illness. There are also consequences for relationships as shown in "can't afford to help" and "kids on the wrong path." The researcher interprets the intangible nature of the good quality of life drawing to reflect a life in which there is sufficient income that the intangible qualities of life can have a rightful place. And the poor quality of life drawing may reflect a life in which the lack of money looms so large that it colours also the intangible qualities of life.

Seasonality

The relationship between stress and a poor quality of life is further explained in a drawing describing the seasonality of life on social assistance. Seasonality is an important dimension to the experience of poverty in the Southern hemisphere. The seasonality usually referred to and studied in Participatory Poverty Assessments in the South is the seasonality of weather, of the dry and wet season. Weather seasons affect almost every aspect of life including workload, availability of food, level of income and agricultural activities (Attwood et al., 1998).

One of the topics for discussion in the small group was whether there is a seasonality in the Northern hemisphere. This question was pursued by asking what variations are important over the course of a year and what variations are important over the course of a month. Those items which vary by the time of year were identified as changes in the cost of several main expenditure items such as clothing, utilities, medicine, food and school supplies. For some items this is due to an increase in use (utilities, medicine,

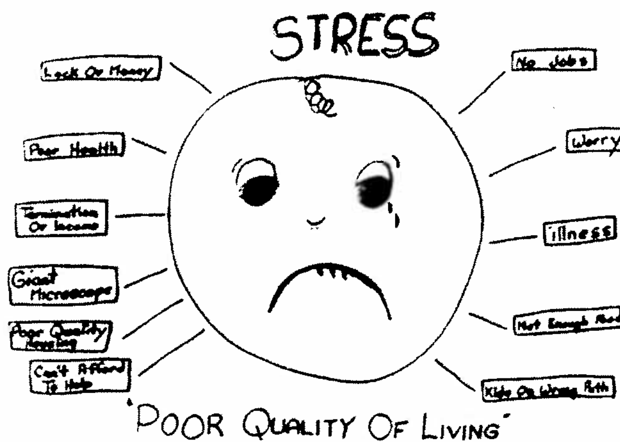

Figure 22.2 Poor Quality of Life

clothing); for others it was due to an increase in price (food). Important dimensions which vary over the course of a month were identified as the amount of stress, the amount of food, the amount of pocket money and the level of indebtedness. The members of the small group were unanimous in identifying the monthly variations as those which have the greatest impact on their lives. A simple chart outlining each of the identified monthly variations was drawn. It appears as Figure 22.3.

The relationship between stress and a poor quality of life is clearly visible in this chart. The end of the month is described as "you've lost it, not enough to buy bread and milk, nerves are gone." In addition, the notices are coming in from bill collectors with possible threats of utility cut-offs. There is clearly a cyclical pattern to the stress. The beginning of the month sees the stress gone, some bills are paid, the cupboards are full and there is even a bit of pocket money. The end of the month looks very different.

Income Group Descriptions

The exploration of what constitutes a good quality of life includes within it an exploration of the relationship between wealth and well-being. This relationship was explored more specifically by asking the question: what distinguishes rich and poor households; how do people compare in terms of income and lifestyle? This question was answered by developing a chart which defined and compared various income groups. The women first talked about how many income groups exist. It was easiest to begin with the two extremes, the rich and those who are very poor. When other categories were filled in, the group identified five income groups. Each income group was described on a separate sheet of paper. When the descriptions were compared it was discovered that each income group description commented on the level of debt, the level of income, the attitude to others and the level of personal contentment. These four categories were then used to develop a chart which compared the five income groups. This chart appears as Figure 22.4.

The *rich* and *above average* in Figure 22.4 are described as those who have "lots of money" and are "living in luxury," but their high income is accompanied by numerous problems. They are described as having high levels of debt and living beyond their means. In their attitude to others they are tight-fisted and competitive. In addition, both income groups experience high levels of stress and the extreme stress of the rich leads them to resort to drugs and alcohol. Ironically, this image of the rich is a mirror image of the stereotypes of the poor, especially with regard to the level of indebtedness and the use of drugs and alcohol. These results parallel the results of a Participatory Poverty Assessment conducted in the Shinyanga region of Tanzania, where, "Wealthy people were seen as those with access to material wealth, but they did not necessarily use this wealth to ensure their well-being" (Attwood et al., 1998, p. 59).

The *average* income group has the most positive description and appears to be the ideal income group in the eyes of the women. This group has enough income to live comfortably. They are not in debt, but "live within their means." They have "good relations" with other income groups and are content though there is some stress in their lives. The *low income* group, which the women in the small group belong to, is pictured as being in debt and living with stress, but they are happy, and

MONTHLY SEASONAL VARIATION

	Start of month	*Middle of month*	*End of month*
Stress	Fine/stress is gone	Starting to come	At end of month, you've lost it, not enough to buy bread and milk, nerves are gone
Food	Cupboards are full	Little bit low	Run out of meat, milk, bread, butter, eggs, potatoes, veggies, fruit, and toilet paper
Bills	Some bills paid, some not; borrowing from Peter to pay Paul	Same as start of month	Notices coming, pay interest, threat of disconnection, notice from collection agency
Pocket money	Might have $5.00	Some months may have extra from GST or Baby Bonus, other months nothing	Zero

Figure 22.3 Monthly Seasonal Variation

	Rich	Above Average	Average	Low Income	Destitute
Income	- Lots Of Money - Have It All	- Living In Luxury	- Comfortable	- Low Fixed Income	- None - Need Charity
Debt	- Over Their Heads In Credit	- Not Debt Free - Don't Live Within Their Means - Living Off Next Pay	- Not Over Their Heads In Debt - Live Within Their Means	- In Debt	- Lost Possessions Shelter To Debt - Homeless
Attitude To Others	- Cheap - Tight Fisted - Anything For A Tax Free	- Snobs - Competitive	- Good Relations	- Good Attitude - Looked Down At By Others	- Afraid And Withdrawn
Personal Contentment	- Stress [illegible] - Alcoholics Drugs	- Not Happy - Stress-High	- Happy - Stress	- Happy - Good Attitude - Stress - Majority Are Single Parents	- Depressed - Low Self Esteem

Figure 22.4 Description of Income Groups

have a good attitude toward others. They, themselves, however are looked down on by others. The *destitute* income group is without money or shelter and have lost most of their possessions. They are afraid and withdrawn, with low self-esteem. This group includes the long-term homeless.

There are several comparisons across income groups that surface in this diagram. One comparison is that levels of debt correspond to low income for the two lowest income groups, but debt appears to correspond with lifestyle for the two upper income groups. They do not manage their wealth responsibly. They have enough income to live without debt, but are portrayed as heavily indebted. In addition, there is an undercurrent of tight-fistedness in the description of the upper income groups which suggests that their level of generosity does not correspond to their level of income. Their wealth has not made them generous. One of the recorded comments during the discussion of income groups emphasizes this lack of generosity of those with more income, "People with a lot of money can also be tight with their money."

A cross-income comparison of the comments on *attitudes towards others* suggests that they are essentially a description of the attitudes of other income groups towards those in the low income group. Except for the *destitute,* who are withdrawn and isolated, the diagram suggests that the lower the income group, the better the attitude towards those on low incomes. It may be that the attitude towards others is seen as a function of one's own experience of need or that too much income distances one from those in need. The often repeated comment that for someone to really understand the situation of the low income group they would need to live on a welfare income for several months reinforces this interpretation. In addition, one of the comments recorded during the discussion of income groups suggests that this sharing of experiences ought to go both ways. The comment "I would love to have one cheque to spend how I want," suggests that the low income group would also like to share in the experience of being able to spend freely, without having to worry about making ends meet.

The overall relationship between wealth and well-being in this diagram of income groups appears to be one of diminishing returns. There is a desire for enough to live comfortably, but without all the stress and indebtedness that are seen to accompany the higher income groups. Personal contentment and an understanding attitude toward others are highly valued and they also are seen to exist at their highest levels in the lower and middle income groups.

"Living Under a Giant Microscope": Life on Social Assistance

The power of the social assistance system to shape the lives of the women in the group began to emerge in both the Poor Quality of Life diagram (Figure 22.2) and

the Seasonality diagram (Figure 22.3). The nature of life on social assistance became the focus of a number of discussions among the women, particularly as they began to set the agenda for group discussion topics.

The following statements by the women in the group illustrate a key theme in the discussions about life on social assistance, the feeling of being under constant surveillance:

> It's not right to get into your personal life. You don't feel like a human being.
>
> Even if you know yourself to be honest, you wonder, who's watching me?

The feeling of being watched has at least two consequences identified by the women. The first consequence is "feeling guilty for every little thing you do." The second consequence is that living on social assistance requires giving up enough personal privacy that human dignity is diminished. There is a feeling that the surveillance is pervasive, not just applied to the determination of eligibility or conformity to the rules. For example, recipients must sign a waiver granting access to one's bank account. The bank account is examined not just to determine whether assets are within allowable limits; rather, case workers consider any transaction fair game for questions. Rather than facing specific questions around conformity to specific rules, the women experience a culture of surveillance.

This experience of surveillance is not unique to this group of women, but has been a theme in other explorations of life on social assistance in Ontario after the 1995 reforms. The Interfaith Social Assistance Reform Coalition [ISARC] (1998) held hearings across Ontario during 1997 at which persons who are poor were invited to tell their stories. Participants referred to the "daily humiliations from government agencies" (ISARC, 1998, p. 19) and one participant spoke of being "treated like I'm guilty until proven innocent" (1998, p. 32). In addition, a study of the new regulatory system put in place for determining and maintaining eligibility for social assistance speaks of the "microregulation of the lives of poor people" (Herd & Mitchell, 2003, p. 2). "What is new," state Herd and Mitchell, "is the intensity of surveillance and the technologies employed . . ." (2003, p. 3). The means used for regulation include inordinate requests for information, complicated application and appeals processes, "deliberately confusing" language and processes, and restricted times for the appeal of decisions (Herd & Mitchell, 2003, p. 2).

The World Bank's 47 country Participatory Poverty Assessment reveals that negative experiences with state institutions is a common theme when poor households are asked about their own definition of poverty (Narayan, Patel, Schafft, Rademacher & Koch-Schulte, 1999). The dimensions of humiliation and bureaucratic barriers were commonplace in the country PPAs and included such factors as unreasonable requests for documentation, complicated regulations, corruption, and lack of knowledge about entitlements.

The group discussion of the culture of rules set for social assistance was summarized in a web chart drawing documenting what the women see themselves as giving up in order to receive assistance (see Figure 22.5).[5] The central theme of this diagram is the loss of freedom that accompanies life on social assistance. Freedom to spend, freedom to have a good time, freedom to voice an opinion, freedom to work and freedom to make sensible decisions ("sometimes have to go against good budgeting sense to follow the rules") are all identified as part of the price that is paid. The interaction in the social assistance regimen of rules is seen as one-way. There is no opportunity for input on the part of recipients. Their views are not significant.

In addition to paying a price in terms of freedom there is also a cost in lowered self-esteem. Feeling looked down upon by others was expressed in other discussions with the women, and was strongly represented in the diagram of various income groups. In addition, the reference in Figure 22.5 to "Maple Street School" refers to an incident where neighbourhood protests prevented Project SHARE from moving to a new facility, a school donated by the city. This lack of community goodwill translates into approval of or at least indifference to the public service cutbacks, restricted eligibility, reduced assistance and increased surveillance which characterized the recent political environment in Ontario. The experience of the harsh judgement of the community on people living on welfare is as painful for the women as not having their basic necessities met.

Expressions by the poor of powerlessness, an inability to make themselves heard and a lack of influence with politicians were also common themes in the country PPAs conducted for the World Bank Participatory Poverty Assessment. Participants in qualitative interviews conducted in Georgia (Dudwick, 1997) associated poverty with a "lack of freedom" (1997, p. 19) in words that echo those of the women in Niagara Falls. The summary report of the World Bank PPA (Narayan et al., 1999) noted that these "psychological dimensions of poverty are central to poor people's definitions of poverty" (1999, p. 217):

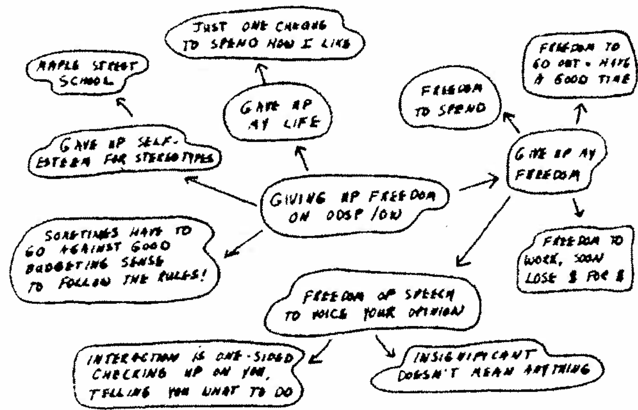

Figure 22.5 Giving Up Freedom

The adverse psychological impact of negotiating their way through the corruption and rude treatment endemic in state institutions can leave poor respondents feeling powerless, voiceless and excluded from state services to which they are entitled. (Narayan et al., 1999, p. 76)

The loss of freedom portrayed in Figure 22.5 speaks strongly to the denial of human agency in the administration of social assistance. The women in the small group do not accept the situation of surveillance without challenge and their resistance takes on two forms. The first form is to resist rules that seem unfair and petty. Winning at bingo is seen as personal good fortune that helps ease the stress of poverty, and therefore should not be subject to the scrutiny of social assistance caseworkers, nor should winnings be deducted from one's cheque.

The second form is a resistance to the pervasiveness of the scrutiny. Having every bank transaction subject to the perusal of caseworkers is seen as unnecessarily intrusive. Because their financial transactions are scrutinized well before they reach allowable asset limits, the women may put their savings under another bank account. To avoid questions about purchases, bills for the purchase of furniture, for example, are put under someone else's name. There is an agreement that some reporting requirements are appropriate, such as major changes in income. But as far as is possible, this will be done on terms set by the women, not by having all of their personal finances an open book. As one woman stated, "I want to feel like a person. I want to have part of my life for myself."

The resistance to the pervasive scrutiny of social assistance caseworkers can be seen as an attempt to recapture human agency, to carve out a piece of life that is free from the gaze of caseworkers. At the same time, it carries the significant risk of being cut off social assistance on a permanent basis. When the women were asked how they distinguish between what they may report and what they may not report, the reply was, "It's a gut feeling. You get to know what you'll tell them and what you won't." When asked whether the distinction was based on the level of risk, the answer was no, "Nothing is petty to them. It's a risk no matter what you do."

Although the women are trying to recapture human agency it is important not to valorize their efforts as if taking action against the social assistance system is one of a number of strategies from which they can freely choose. Refusing to comply with a set of regulations about which there is no negotiation is not the same as being in a position where one can opt out of a punitive system or take part in negotiations around the demands of that system (Feldman, 1992; Johnson, 1997). Refusing to comply may simply mean that the women "equate adherence with unbearable costs, either for themselves or for those with whom they share interests" (Johnson, 1997, p. 15). The women in the food co-op identified these costs as pervasive surveillance and being forced to act against their own best interests in terms of budgeting decisions. The women are engaged in a risky balance between agency and access to income support.

One of the positive benefits of participation in poverty assessments is that respondents have an opportunity to express the full range of their experiences of poverty including the problematic relationship to state institutions. Participation has the benefit of legitimating the knowledge claims of ordinary people, who can teach others about the impact of social policies on daily life (Cornwall & Gaventa, 2001). For example, when an

opportunity was given for evaluating the discussion sessions, the women said that talking about the cutbacks and social assistance had relieved tension in their lives. It was also important to them that the researcher had listened, and had not tried to defend social assistance or to take sides. (The provision of information about social policies does not in and of itself lead to changes in those policies, a dilemma which is taken up in the concluding discussion.)

Working for Change

For the women in the group, the Participatory Poverty Assessment became a catalyst for working for change in the food co-operative of which they are members. The group moved from analysing their own poverty to talking about the food co-operative and the meaningful role it could play as a supportive organization in their lives. The severe cutbacks to social assistance and the increased surveillance had created an atmosphere of mistrust in the food co-op. The women brainstormed about the positive changes that could make the food co-op a place of social support. They took their suggestions to the executive of the co-op and the ideas began to be implemented. Subsequently two of the women ran for the executive of the co-op and were elected. One has since been elected president. They have implemented changes such as: reviewing suggestions and answering questions from members at membership meetings; producing an annual co-op cookbook; holding parties for the children in the co-op; planning an opening fall barbecue; and creating more autonomy for the co-op from Project SHARE as an organization. Membership in the food co-operative has grown from 40 households to almost 70 households. The women also produced, with the researcher, a report of their work. This report was shared in a presentation to the Niagara Social Assistance Reform Committee, a local group that works for improvements to the social assistance system. The report was also made available to the Social Assistance Advisory Committee, an advisory committee to the Regional Municipality of Niagara, which administers social assistance in the region.

The participation of the Niagara Falls women in an analysis of their own poverty contributed some important insights into the importance of social relationships, the stress of an inadequate monthly income and social assistance surveillance, and the deep desire to be treated with goodwill and respect. Participation also made possible the confidence to plan for and implement changes in the food co-operative that made it a more positive place of support in the lives of the members.

Participation and Power

One of the hallmarks of good participatory research is a commitment to reflect on one's own practice (Pratt, 2001). Reflecting on the Participatory Poverty Assessment in Niagara Falls raises some important dilemmas about power and participation in research that has the goal of working for social change. The purpose of participatory research is to give voice, and beyond giving voice, to mobilize for social change. Participatory research by its very nature, however, is communal research. Working for social change must be a communal goal. Local priorities may not reflect a desire to challenge dimensions of the institutional framework that have been identified by participants as problematic for their lives (Maguire, 1993).

One important consideration may be that local priorities reflect local perceptions of what is possible. Participants may choose not to work for social change at the level of state social policy because they do not believe it is within their power to do so. The question which researchers need to ask is what kind of power does participation give? The capacity to describe what's wrong with a system that has a powerful hold on one's life does not necessarily translate into the capacity to change that system. Cornwall and Gaventa report on the work of an NGO which develops alliances with grassroots organizations in India: "SPARC's approach has been to work to use what spaces were available to develop solutions for themselves, rather than to engage directly against state policies" (2001, p. 14). In analysing decisions around working for change, it is important to recognize that not all points of power (particularly state power) are local points of power (Mohan, 2001). Participation in Niagara Falls enabled the women in the group to think about what they would like to be different in their lives and to work for change in the food co-op so that it would be a place of social solidarity. But participation in and of itself did not confer on them the power to change provincial welfare policy.

Households who are poor do not generally have political power. In fact, it is their lack of political power that motivates a desire to make room for them to participate. Researchers must be alert to the possibility of unfair expectations around mobilization for social change and the possibility of an unfair shifting of responsibility for change to those who lack political

power. Participation as a tool for mobilization must be in the context of "the extent and conditions under which social movements can effectively make claims on the state" (Cornwall & Gaventa, 2001, p. 15). Cornwall and Gaventa note that recent work suggests the differences in the nature of the state (which in turn affects the nature and extent of social movements) are more important than differences in the mobilization capacity of poor people.

It is important, therefore, to evaluate participatory research tools and opportunities for citizen participation in terms of their potential to effect change and the nature of the change that is possible. Participation in analysis, such as the Participatory Poverty Assessment in this study, can offer legitimacy to the expertise of people whose lives are impacted by social policies and the administration of social assistance. Changes in policy, however, require participation that goes beyond the sharing of expertise and includes direct engagement with policy makers and implementers. This participation can take many forms, from participation in a user committee to direct engagement in policy making, such as the participatory budgeting process at the municipal level in Brazil (Cornwall & Gaventa, 2001). In the former, citizens can participate in deliberations on the delivery of services, while in the latter they can participate in deliberations on the nature of the services to be delivered.

It is important, then, for academic researchers to share their own power and points of access to the policy process. In this study, for example, the researcher had links to a local social assistance reform committee and facilitated the presentation to that committee by the women of their work. The presentation of the Participatory Poverty Assessment has since led to a proposal for a community based research project in which social assistance recipients will be trained to interview other recipients about their experiences. This research will involve partnerships with community agencies who serve households who are poor and is being sponsored by the local community advisory committee to the regional department which administers social assistance.

This discussion about the limitations of participation in research should not detract from the important principle behind participation, that those who are generally objects of study become subjects and participants in the analysis of their own situation. The knowledge of households who are poor about the complex negotiation between means and ends and the stressful impact of a scrutinizing social assistance system has much to teach those who write and speak about poverty but who do not experience it themselves.

Notes

1. This article is based on research conducted for my PhD thesis, Vulnerability and assets in urban poverty: Bringing together participatory methods and a sustainable livelihoods framework, 2002, University of Toronto. I would like to acknowledge the support of the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada through a doctoral fellowship.

2. Participatory poverty approaches have their roots in several sources. Among the most important are the following: the activist participatory research inspired by Paulo Freire, which contributed a recognition of the capability of poor people and the goal of empowerment; field research which contributed farmers' participation in the analysis of systems and informal mapping techniques; and applied anthropology which contributed the benefits of participatory observation and the validity of rural peoples' knowledge (Cornwall, Guijt & Welbourn, 1993 and Chambers, 1992, both cited in Pretty et al., 1995). There are a number of versions of participatory methods, but they share similar principles: reversal of learning (learning from local people), multiple perspectives, group learning process, context specific flexibility, facilitating role for experts, and research that leads to change (Chambers, 1992; Pretty et al., 1995).

3. A new provincial government cut social assistance rates by 21.6 percent in October 1995. In addition, significant restructuring of the social assistance system took place in 1997/1998 and embodied the view that social assistance should be a system of last resort after all other assets have been used up and that the extent of fraud in the system warranted punitive measures such as snitch lines, where recipients were encouraged to report suspected fraud on the part of other recipients to a toll free number.

4. While all of the other drawings were made by the small group, the quality of life drawing was made by the co-op membership at a meeting of the food co-op. This was the meeting at which the women presented the preliminary results of their work and invited the co-op members to take part in defining a good quality of life. The participants in the PPA presented their quality of life drawing which was then enlarged upon and each item ranked by co-op members.

5. The references to OW and ODSP in Figure 22.5 refers to two kinds of social assistance, Ontario Work and Ontario Disability Supports Program.

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