Photovoice as a participatory health promotion strategy

CAROLINE C. WANG
Department of Health Behavior and Health Education, School of Public Health, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI, USA

WU KUN YI
Yunnan Province Family Planning Commission, Kunming, Yunnan, China

ZHAN WEN TAO
Yunnan Province Bureau of Public Health, Kunming, Yunnan, China

KATHRYN CAROVANO
International HIV/AIDS Alliance, London, UK

SUMMARY

Photovoice is a participatory action research strategy by which people create and discuss photographs as a means of catalyzing personal and community change. The use of photovoice as an effective tool for carrying out participatory needs assessment, conducting participatory evaluation and reaching policy-makers has been discussed elsewhere. Here the authors examine the claims made for the effectiveness of photovoice as a participatory method. To do so, they describe one large-scale case study and then consider where it succeeded or failed in fulfilling its participatory aims. Differences among participants in political power, class, education and control over one's life illustrate certain advantages and potential costs of participation, and suggest considerations for minimizing the risk of unintended consequences.

Key words: participation; participatory action research; photographs; photovoice

INTRODUCTION

Participatory action research (PAR) strategies are increasingly valued by health professionals. Photovoice is a PAR method by which people create and discuss photographs as a means of catalyzing personal and community change (Wang and Burris, 1994). Using cameras, participants document the reality of their lives. They may focus on a wide range of individual, family, and community assets and needs. By sharing and talking about their photographs, they use the power of the visual image to communicate their life experiences, expertise and knowledge. As they engage in a group process of critical reflection, participants may choose to become advocates for change in their communities. The use of photovoice as an effective tool for carrying out participatory needs assessment, conducting participatory evaluation, and reaching policymakers has been discussed elsewhere (Wang and Burris, 1994; Wu *et al.*, 1995; Wang *et al.*, 1996a,b; Wang and Burris, 1997). Our purpose here is to examine, from an explicitly critical perspective, the claims made for the effectiveness of photovoice as a participatory method, as well as costs and benefits. To do so, we shall describe one large-scale application of photovoice and then consider where it succeeded or failed in fulfilling its participatory aims.

Stage of photovoice	Participants				
	Rural women	ACWF cadres			Staff of *Women's Voices*
		T	C	P	
Conceptualizing the problem					
Defining broader goals and objectives					
Selecting the sites					
Selecting the methodology					
Securing funding					
Training the trainers					
Sampling and recruiting		×	×		
Implementing method and analysis					
Conducting photovoice training					×
Devising the initial theme for taking pictures		×	×		
Taking pictures	×				
Facilitating group discussion	×				
Critical reflection and dialogue					×
Selecting photographs for discussion	×	×	×		
Contextualizing and storytelling	×	×	×		
Codifying issues, themes, theories	×	×	×		
Writing down stories	×	×	×		
Conducting the formative evaluation					
Disseminating findings					
Selecting slides and stories for presentation					
Making community presentations	×				
Making conference presentations					
Writing journal articles				×	
Advocating policy					
Recruiting policy-makers					
Reaching policy-makers				×	
Policy decision-making	×				
Implementing policy			×		
Conducting the participatory outcome evaluation	×			×	

Fig. 1: Participants in the Yunnan Women's Reproductive Health and Development Program by stages of photovoice. (ACWF = All-China Women's Federation; T, C, P = township, county, provincial.)

MODES OF PARTICIPATION

What is participation? A dictionary definition such as 'to take part in or to share', will be of little help. More usefully, Biggs (1989) identifies four modes of participation in the realm of research:

(i) *contractual*—people agree to take part in the enquiries or experiments of research projects;

(ii) *consultative*—people are asked for their opinions and consulted by researchers before interventions are made;

(iii) *collaborative*—researchers and local people work together on projects designed, initiated, and managed by researchers;

(iv) *collegiate*—researchers and local people work together as colleagues with different skills to offer, in a process of mutual learning where local people have control over the process.

These categories offer a starting point from

Participants								
Policy-makers			Local anthropologists	Cadres of County Project Office	Chinese university scholars	Cadres of Provincial and County Guidance Group	Foreign technical advisors	Donor agency program officers
T	C	P						
					×	×	×	×
					×	×	×	×
	×	×			×	×	×	×
							×	×
								×
							×	
×					×		×	
						×	×	
							×	
			×					
				×			×	
			×				×	
							×	
					×		×	×
						×		
							×	×
×	×	×				×		
×	×	×				×		
				×	×		×	

which to address the question, 'With whom does actual power reside?' At the same time, we recognize that any participatory inquiry, like any research approach, has many different stages. These stages may include conceptualizing the problem, selecting the methodology, defining goals and objectives, securing funding, training the trainers, sampling and recruiting participants, conducting participatory analysis, evaluating the results, disseminating the findings, and advocating policy. In addition, communities are made up of many different types of local people—for example, children, parents, teachers, community organizers, farmers, pastors, nurses, journalists and policy-makers. We might therefore ask, 'With whom does actual power reside at each stage of the research?' We address this question with a case study that illustrates theoretical and methodological implications of photovoice as a participatory strategy.

THE YUNNAN WOMEN'S REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH AND DEVELOPMENT PROGRAM

To show how a photovoice project can operate, we shall examine *who* participated in each stage of the Ford-Foundation-supported Yunnan Women's Reproductive Health and Development Program (YWRHDP). Analysis of the participants named in Figure 1 suggests an overall hierarchy of status, in which rural women and participants on the left-hand end of the spectrum had the least economic, social and political privilege and the foreign technical advisors and donor agency program officers had the most. The key participants in the YWRHDP were 62 village women; cadres of the All-China Women's Federation (ACWF) at the township, county and provincial levels; staff of the *Women's Voices* magazine published by the ACWF; policy-makers at the township, county and provincial levels; local anthropologists; cadres of the county project office; cadres of the Provincial and County Guidance Group; Chinese university consultants; foreign technical advisors; and donor agency program officers.

While the hierarchy of the Chinese political system may be unfamiliar to many, one can recognize the general qualities suggested by this array of participants: the Yunnan Program involved Chinese farm workers and urban intellectuals, people with no formal education and people with advanced degrees, constituents and policy-makers, grant recipients and a foreign donor, and Chinese and US citizens. Participants therefore had vastly unequal levels of political, social and economic power, privilege and status. Participants were also multi-sectoral, representing many Chinese organizations concerned with women's health and development. Our choice of the term 'foreign technical advisors' rather than 'consultants', 'researchers', or simply 'technical advisors', is deliberate; we wish, after all, to clarify the power relationships and the differences in class privilege implied in this participatory process. We shall analyze here who participated in each stage of the process, discuss why they did so, and examine the strengths, limitations and implications of the process for community participation.

Conceptualizing the problem

In the Yunnan Program, the focus on women's reproductive health and development was pri-marily defined by the donor agency's China office, with assistance from Chinese university scholars, the Provincial and County Guidance Group, and foreign technical advisors. The program area of 'women's reproductive health and development' was a major component of their larger agenda to 'empower women to better understand their own reproductive health needs and to articulate and act on these needs' (Ford Foundation, 1990).

Defining broader goals and objectives

Chinese academics, leaders from the Provincial and County Guidance Groups, foreign technical advisors and a donor agency program officer devised the following broader goals and objectives of the Yunnan Program.

 (i) To enable women and women's organizations, particularly in poor communities, to better understand, articulate and act on their health needs.
 (ii) To institutionalize a planning process in which communities are involved in decision-making and program design, so that reproductive health policies reflect locally defined needs.
(iii) To strengthen individual institutions by encouraging a structure in which needs are identified at local levels and inform policy at higher levels, and in which assistance provided by higher levels most effectively supports local levels in addressing those needs.
(iv) To bridge the bureaucratic divides between vertically organized institutions to facilitate better coordination in addressing the social, economic, cultural and biomedical components of reproductive health.
 (v) To enhance provincial-level institutions of health, education, culture, economics and the social sciences in their capabilities for training, human resource development, program planning and evaluation.

These program goals and objectives reflect an element of beneficence: power resides with urban intellectuals and policy-makers who wish to become more responsive to locally perceived needs, and to build up the technical, political, managerial, programmatic and fiscal capacity of local agencies.

Selecting the sites

Chinese academics, provincial and county leaders, foreign technical advisors, and the

donor agency program officer agreed on Yunnan Program sites based on three criteria. First, the county leaders gave Chinese university scholars and foreign technical advisors a fiscal commitment in the form of matching funds, and a philosophical commitment to the underlying goal of community participation. Second, the people's income in the two counties fell in the bottom quarter for the nation; the fact that Yunnan is one of China's poorest provinces was an important criterion to the donor agency. Third, the two county sites were each within a half day's drive of the provincial capital of Kunming. This relative accessibility would enable provincial and county cadres to work together, rather than leaving county cadres to work alone in doing what was mandated at the provincial level. In a different grassroots version of photovoice, a site might be self-selected by community organizers who initiate the process themselves.

Selecting the methodology

The photovoice methodology was jointly conceptualized and codified by a foreign technical advisor and a donor agency program officer, both of whom were US citizens. The use of photovoice in the Yunnan Program represented the first time that photovoice was articulated and codified (Wang and Burris, 1994, 1997). Photovoice was one component of a four-part needs assessment that included the use of a survey questionnaire, nominal group process, and focus groups. The needs assessments were designed to be educational tools that would serve two purposes: to enable local leadership to evaluate their own community problems and assets, and to enable them to acquire permanent skills they could continue to use without the help of experts. In addition to fulfilling the donor agency's goals and providing support for community-based activities, photovoice brought to life much of the survey questionnaire data (for statistics, as Victor Sidel has noted, 'are human faces with the tears washed off').

A different participatory scenario might be one in which a community or group expresses an interest in improving health, and then initiates the selection of the photovoice method (Wang and Burris, 1997). The likelihood of this happening will be influenced by a community's resources, level of empowerment, access to cameras, and familiarity with the method. For example, lay health workers in Detroit, Michigan,

heard about the methodology from academic colleagues at a nearby university and initiated the photovoice process by and for themselves (Parker *et al.*, 1998). In contrast, teachers and high school students in Brighton, Michigan, were approached by a university researcher who described the photovoice method to them as a way of addressing important issues in their lives, and they have begun to integrate the method into their school curriculum.

Securing funding

Funding for the Yunnan Program was obtained primarily by the donor agency's program officer, who advocated the project to her foundation colleagues. Such a protocol was characteristic of this specific donor agency, which was a non-governmental organization. While this approach may put the donor agency program officer in a position to exert inordinate control over the program agenda, it also spares grantees the labor-intensive process of writing a competitive research grant proposal.

Training the trainers

In the Yunnan Program, foreign technical advisors introduced the methodology to local Chinese cadres and county Guidance Group members who then conducted the training sessions themselves. A different scenario would be one in which local community organizers train the trainers; the photovoice method ought to be adaptable for people to use in their own settings without outside consultation.

Sampling and recruiting

Chinese university scholars and foreign technical advisors suggested specific sampling criteria to maximize the representativeness of the rural women's ages, marital status and income. Based on these recommendations, township- and county-level Women's Federation cadres and township policy-makers—all of whom were familiar with local family situations, resources and burdens—recruited women as photovoice participants. They invited rural women who were representative of the range of age (18–56), marital status (single, married and widowed) and income in the villages. Twelve of the 62 rural women represented four Chinese ethnic minority nationalities. Another approach might be one in which people volunteer to participate; in a US photovoice project involving men and women living at a shelter in Ann Arbor, Michigan,

community photographers posted flyers at the shelter and anyone interested was welcome (Stewart, 1997; Wang, 1998).

IMPLEMENTING METHOD AND ANALYSIS

Conducting photovoice training

Senior Women's Federation cadres and foreign technical advisors jointly provided training to rural women in the photovoice concept and method. Later, a noted local photographer for a Women's Federation magazine volunteered time and skill for the training workshops. He inspired the women not to 'shi er bu jian'—turn a blind eye to the obvious—and explained how they could take unposed photographs of relationships, conditions, and chance occurrences.

Devising the initial theme for taking pictures

At the outset, it can be advantageous to provide a theme for what people might photograph. In the Yunnan Program, the foreign technical advisors proposed that rural women photograph 'the spirit of rural women's everyday lives', a broad theme that the Provincial and County Guidance Group cadres approved and supported. In a different context, where lay health workers in Detroit, Michigan used photovoice, community advocates from the city Health Department chose the theme 'assets within our community'.

Taking pictures

Rural women snapped photographs of their everyday activities. Most women took one roll of 36-exposure color film per month for 1 year. Their family members or neighbors also presumably took pictures using their cameras, which were a scarce commodity in the villages.

Facilitating group discussion

Photovoice trainers can be both external and internal facilitators. In Yunnan, the external facilitators were the foreign technical advisors, while the internal facilitators were the local Women's Federation cadres and rural women. Women gathered once a month at cluster training sites for small and large group discussions, described below.

PARTICIPATORY ANALYSIS: CRITICAL REFLECTION AND DIALOGUE

Rural women and Women's Federation cadres jointly engaged in the three-stage process of participatory analysis: selecting (choosing those photographs that most accurately reflected the rural women's concerns); contextualizing (telling stories about what the photographs mean); and codifying (identifying the issues, themes or theories that emerge). This process was based on Freire's (1970) concept of educating to promote critical consciousness, because the women reflected on photographs that mirror the everyday social and political realities that influence their lives. In addition, photovoice specifies that the community's self-portraits be generated by the people themselves (Wang and Burris, 1994).

Selecting photographs for discussion

In the first stage—selecting—participants choose the photographs and, by doing so, define the course of discussion. Rural women selected several photographs they felt most significant, or simply liked best, from each roll of film taken.

Contextualizing and storytelling

The second stage—contextualizing or storytelling—occurs during group discussion. Photographs alone, considered outside the context of participants' own voices and stories, would contradict the essence of photovoice. Rural women told stories about their own photographs and defined the meaning of their images.

Photographers in an English-language setting may be encouraged to take a critical stance by framing their stories in terms of questions spelling the acronym SHOWeD: What do you **S**ee here? What's really **H**appening here? How does this relate to **O**ur lives? **W**hy does this problem or this strength exist? What can we **D**o about this? (Wallerstein, 1987). The purpose of this 'root-cause questioning' is to identify the problem or the asset, critically discuss the roots of the situation, and develop strategies for changing the situation.

Codifying issues, themes, theories

The third stage—codifying—is framed by the understanding that the participatory approach may generate many different meanings for a single image. At this level of analysis, people may identify three dimensions that arise from the dialogue process: issues, themes or theories.

The rural women focused on issues, because the setting and goals of the project called for action-oriented analysis that would produce practical policy guidelines.

Writing down stories

The rural women's stories were written by participants of two types: anthropologists from the Yunnan Academy of Social Sciences, who traveled to the cluster training sites to record rural women's stories; and cadres from the All-China Women's Federation, all of whom had at least a high school education, and who lived locally among the rural women. Chan (1994) offers a crucial distinction here; in this approach, the rural women as potential *interviewees* became *narrators*.

Conducting the formative evaluation

Chinese cadres from the county project office, Chinese academics, and foreign technical advisors conducted ongoing formative (or process) evaluation through the life of the project. The cadres' evaluation served a practical purpose, whereas the evaluation by the technical advisors foremost served an informational function. For example, cadres monitored, undertook troubleshooting, and received local feedback about project implementation. Thus, had a rural woman's camera needed repair, or had she needed motor transport to a training site, or had she not been able to attend a group discussion because of burdens at home, the resident cadres were best equipped to help. By contrast, the Chinese academics and foreign technical advisors described to the donor agency the progress of the project.

DISSEMINATING FINDINGS

Selecting slides and stories for presentation

The selection of slides and stories for public presentation was between collaborative and collegiate in nature. Mechanical aspects of ordering slides for reproduction were handled primarily by a foreign technical advisor able to have them produced more easily than local cadres. Approval of slides to be shown to broader audiences resided with the Provincial Guidance Group, which in some cases has overruled the censorship suggested by local policy-makers. For example, a number of township policy-makers objected to showing publicly a photograph of a rural woman bent beneath a gigantic bundle of rice straw, saying that the image emphasized rural poverty. But senior provincial level cadres approved both the image and the caption, which they perceived as a tribute to the immense strength of rural women.

Writing journal articles

Foreign technical advisors, a donor agency program officer, an anthropologist from the Yunnan Academy of Social Sciences, and provincial Women's Federation cadres shared in the authorship of journal articles about the Yunnan Program. In taking advantage of their diverse contributions to conceptualizing, analyzing and writing up their collaboration, they shared the professional status benefits of contributing to peer-reviewed publications.

ADVOCATING POLICY

Recruiting policy-makers

Policy-makers of the Provincial and County Guidance Group provided a receptive political body to whom rural women could furnish evidence of conditions or problems for which they sought improvement. These policy-makers were recruited and organized by foreign technical advisors, the donor agency and Chinese university scholars to serve as an influential audience for the women's policy recommendations.

Reaching policy-makers

Rural women presented their concerns at slide shows for policy-makers, which were organized by foreign technical advisors and provincial Women's Federation cadres.

Policy decision-making

Policy-makers of the Provincial and County Guidance Groups made the policy decisions. Because rural women had used photovoice to demonstrate their needs, for example, policy-makers constructed day care centers, initiated midwifery programs that train indigenous older women to assist with births, and set up scholarships open to rural girls regardless of family need, in order to combat the feudal assumption that education for females is unnecessary (Wang *et al.*, 1996b).

Implementing policy

Policies have been carried out by a wide range of local agencies and institutions, such as the provincial and county Bureau of Public Health, Family Planning Commission, Women's Federation, Office of Poverty Alleviation, and Education Commission.

Conducting the participatory outcome evaluation

Rural women and cadres of the county project office conducted the participatory outcome evaluation. They turned their cameras back on the projects generated by the community assessment to show the donor agency what did and did not work. For example, one woman photographed a family planning class held outdoors. Participants commented that the trainer could not communicate effectively with such a large audience, and that the audience included younger and older people with vastly different needs for family planning education. The absence of males from the training spurred passionate discussion about the importance of men's involvement in family planning education. The photograph enabled women to describe vividly what was happening within the project site and to suggest how family planning education could be improved.

DISCUSSION

Advantages and benefits of participation

Just as different people may participate in different stages of photovoice, they may also garner different benefits. We shall discuss the benefits received by three types of participants: those vested with more power, such as university researchers and policy-makers; those with the least power, the rural women; and participants in general (Figure 2).

For the most privileged participants, one benefit is the opportunity to learn from local people's expertise. By 'starting where the people are' (Nyswander, 1956), policy-makers and researchers may gain insight into local people's knowledge. Secondly, they may gain the satisfaction of doing work that is valued by others. The oppor-
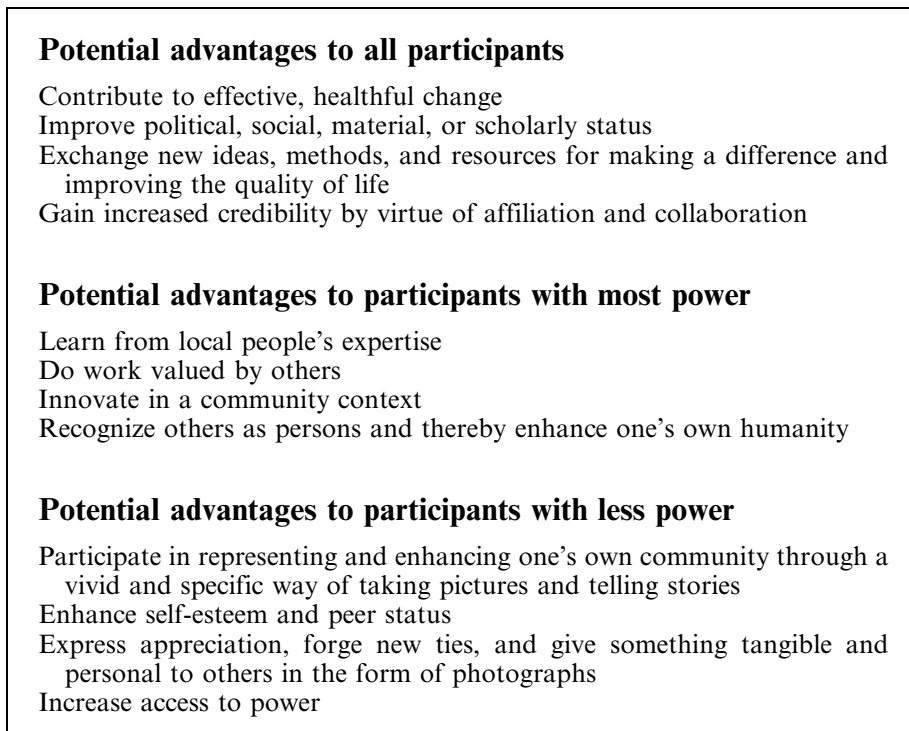

Potential advantages to all participants

Contribute to effective, healthful change
Improve political, social, material, or scholarly status
Exchange new ideas, methods, and resources for making a difference and improving the quality of life
Gain increased credibility by virtue of affiliation and collaboration

Potential advantages to participants with most power

Learn from local people's expertise
Do work valued by others
Innovate in a community context
Recognize others as persons and thereby enhance one's own humanity

Potential advantages to participants with less power

Participate in representing and enhancing one's own community through a vivid and specific way of taking pictures and telling stories
Enhance self-esteem and peer status
Express appreciation, forge new ties, and give something tangible and personal to others in the form of photographs
Increase access to power

Fig. 2: Advantages of photovoice as a participatory health promotion strategy.

tunity to innovate in a community context presents a third advantage; innovation gives them the opportunity to improve their material and social status through publications, visibility, career advancement, and community approval.

In addition to these benefits, which may be substantial, we should mention another, which is often overlooked. People who hold the power to oppress others because of their higher status become dehumanized when they take advantage of other people's rights; a positive result of using a PAR strategy is that more privileged people begin to recognize others as persons and thereby become more fully human. In Freirian terms, education for critical consciousness (Freire, 1970) is a reciprocal process that may restore to the privileged and powerful some of the humanity lost in the exercise of ruling less powerful people.

What benefits accrue to the least powerful community members—the rural women? First, photovoice enables people to participate in representing and enhancing their community through a vivid and specific way of taking pictures and telling stories. The method is designed to enhance people's ability to identify and define their own community's root-cause problems and to advocate change; a basic concept that underpins photovoice is that how a problem gets defined, and by whom, influences the solution.

Second, while we did not collect quantifiable data on how the rural women were affected by their participation in photovoice, comments and observations from the women themselves and other participants suggest that it contributed to enhanced self-esteem and peer status. Most participants had spent their lives working in the fields and had never imagined themselves being listened to by the most powerful policy-makers in the county and province. As the project continued, many shy participants gradually learned to express their thoughts boldly and confidently during group discussion; the process provides a way to affirm participants' ideas, creativity and problem-solving abilities. Third, by giving photographs back to community members, people can express appreciation, forge new ties, and, as an artist does with a painting, bestow something tangible and personal. Most people in the villages had no photographs of their everyday lives, and they clearly valued the ones provided by the rural women.

Fourth, the Yunnan Program has suggested that people from all walks of life, regardless of education, may use photovoice as a powerful tool to convey local expertise and knowledge to other people who govern their lives. By furnishing persuasive evidence, people may have a say in what policy-makers do. Photovoice is a participatory strategy that can increase people's access to power.

In line with an explicit aim of PAR strategies, participants in general may contribute to effective change for a more just society (Park, 1993). Participants also may gain enhanced political, social, material or scholarly status as a result of project outcomes. In addition, people may benefit from diffusion of innovation: the exchange of new ideas, methods and resources for approaching common goals (Rogers, 1983). They may gain increased credibility with some audiences by virtue of affiliation with the other participants. Other positive, even vital, aspects of broad-based participation at every stage of a PAR project may include increased local control and autonomy and researchers' accountability to the community. As Labonte (1994) suggests, the issue of power surrounds all social justice struggles affecting participants with most and least status.

In turn, participation at every stage of photovoice also incurs certain costs and problems. Some of these are addressed below.

Costs and problems of participation

First, the revealing 'distribution of participation' depicted in Figure 1 poses challenges to health professionals who want to maximize the participatory nature of their work. Figure 1 clearly shows that while the rural women implemented the photovoice method and analysis, they had relatively little input into conceptualization, planning and dissemination, and they had no control at all over the policy decision-making. As noted earlier, photovoice enabled rural women to communicate their perspectives to policy-makers, but it did not shift to them the power to *decide on* policy (Wang *et al.*, 1996b). It may be argued that one reasonable objective of photovoice, or community participation strategies in general, is that policy-makers change in how they perceive the importance and legitimacy of women's groups and concerns, and that women's groups change in how they perceive their ability to influence what policy-makers do.

Second, time is costly. While Figure 1 is not intended to show a hierarchy of tasks, it is important to consider the time costs of participating at different stages of the process. Furthermore, the value of participation at each stage

may vary for different participants. In practice, many tasks associated with the PAR process may be burdensome, impractical or even infeasible for some participants. Taking part in protracted meetings to discuss program planning, or writing proposals to get funding, would have consumed time that many participants could not afford. What is more, the local women probably saw the benefits of documenting the reality of their lives, engaging in critical reflection about their lived experience, articulating their concerns and exhibiting their photographs and stories as more valuable to them than the tasks of securing funding. One rural woman wrote in the exhibition guest book: 'I have a junior high school education. I am proud because I never dreamed that my photos would be collected and shown in an exhibition.' There is a danger of paternalism in allowing more powerful participants, however well-intentioned, to determine what level of participation is most valuable for whom. Ideally, participants might decide collectively how to delegate tasks at each stage of the process.

A third difficulty is that social roles, community norms, institutional inertia and internalized expectations can constrain people's behavior. While a goal of photovoice is to promote individual and community capacities, participants ought to acknowledge the limitations of individual action and the difficulties of social action. Participants who are motivated to become actors for change may feel a sense of cynicism, despair, or powerlessness when the results of their efforts fail to match their expectations.

A fourth difficulty reflects the debate over the validity and reliability of participatory research. One perspective argues that community participation may compromise the integrity of the research, because the investigator must relinquish control over the content and process of the research. A cost to university researchers is that participating in strategies that their colleagues perceive as insufficiently rigorous or unscientific may contribute to marginalization within their own institution. But a different perspective recognizes that research is inherently political and value-laden, and that PAR approaches give explicit priority to the community's agenda rather than the researchers' needs. From this perspective, the cost of a *non*-participatory process could be too high, and unacceptable to researchers, institutions, and community members alike. Such a perspective is supported by a time-honored statement from the *Declaration of Alma Ata* [World Health Organization (WHO), 1978]: 'The commitment to health promotion accepts the community as the essential voice in matters of health, living conditions, and well-being.'

Minimizing the risk of unintended consequences

The photovoice method may inadvertently produce unintended consequences—another sort of cost. Photographs are tangible documents, and participants ought to consider the risk that they could be used against them. In Yunnan, we could not eliminate that risk, but strove to minimize it in several ways.

First, the initial training began not with the technical aspects of camera use, but with a discussion of cameras, power and ethics. Trainers contended that to have a camera was to have power. They facilitated the rural women's discussion about the overall goals of the project. They hoped that the photovoice approach would contribute to community *esprit de corps*, as photographers gave pictures back to their neighbors as a way of expressing appreciation, conveying the project's aims, affirming bonds and showing respect.

Second, rural women used their own best judgment in choosing what to photograph. They said that everyone in the village wanted good relationships with one another, because mutual cooperation and support were necessary to survive the harsh demands of everyday life. As photographers, they could practice self-censorship as a way of protecting themselves and their neighbors.

Third, group discussions about images gave participants an opportunity to determine first-hand how best to deal with situations that arose. For example, one photograph showed a woman carrying off wood from public property. Her face was clearly visible. Participants in the group discussion decided that she should not be reported to the authorities, but that a responsible cadre would talk with her about why her actions were unjust. In other words, during the group discussions about the images, participants voiced concerns if they felt that a photograph might inadvertently be used against someone, and then discussed the best solution.

Fourth, the most senior Chinese policy-makers were asked to review any photographs that would be publicly displayed. Of the 200 photographs that other participants had selected for exhibition, policy-makers advised against showing only one, an image of a woman in her underclothes bathing at a lake with other women. They said

that if this woman were teased or ridiculed by others, the ensuing animosity could cause bad feelings that might actually linger for generations. Having as many people as possible take part in approving exhibition photographs was seen as the most practical way to screen out images that might injure or incriminate individuals.

Finally, the structure of Chinese society requires that the most senior and powerful people approve, endorse and take responsibility for new programs; the people whom they govern will be reluctant to participate unless they know that someone higher up than themselves will accept responsibility for the consequences. Provincial-level policy-makers supported the photovoice project and visited the villages to promise their support to county- and township-level policy-makers and the rural women. For the least privileged participants, then, protection is implied in the endorsement and participation of more senior officials. We have found useful the concept of *nemawashi*, 'a semi-formal but systematic and sequential consensus building procedure in Japan by which the approval of a proposed idea or project is sought from every person in a significant organizational position' (Fetters, 1995). This procedure, however, does not free provincial-level policy-makers from all potential risks. An unavoidable ethical limitation of photovoice, and of development strategies in general, is that foreign technical advisors or donor program officers usually have a temporary presence and do not share the potential burden of long-term unforeseeable consequences.

SUMMARY

From an historical perspective, PAR strategies have emerged partly out of the realization that many researchers have conducted studies that have brought little or no direct benefit to the community, though they have taken advantage of the community's time, resources and goodwill. PAR and community-based strategies have also arisen out of an awareness that public health practice organizations and universities have pathologized people in communities, contributed to individually oriented rather than community-oriented solutions, and fostered dependency rather than enhancing interdependence among citizens (Kretzmann and McKnight, 1993). In the worst cases, people in the community may feel exploited or betrayed by researchers. Or they

may feel that data have been misused; as an illustration, Chinese policy-makers often fear that Western researchers seeking data on Chinese abortion rates will publish sensational articles in order to advance their own careers, without regard for the complex issues facing Chinese family planning professionals. Effective participatory approaches avoid these shortcomings.

Should we strive for full participation at each stage of a photovoice project? To answer this question we must weigh several important considerations.

First, Biggs' implicit hierarchy of participation in the realm of research could suggest that researchers and community members ought to vie for full participation and partnership at every stage. However, Biggs' definition of collegiate participation recognizes that community members, local policy-makers, and university academics each bring different talents to the table; in Biggs' words, 'researchers and local people work together as colleagues *with different skills to offer*' [emphasis added], thereby maximizing efficiency and the appropriate use of people's expertise. For example, working together may connect the researchers to local people's point of view; researchers may offer local people new methods, training and consultation. All participants, regardless of their power or privilege, may thus benefit from the opportunity to take advantage of other people's skills, tools, resources and time. An ideal approach may be to offer all participants a *choice* of whether to have a role in any given stage.

Second, different participants also bring to the table different needs. For example, community members need to address urgent local problems; policy-makers seek to demonstrate that they can respond to constituent needs; and university academics may feel pressure to publish articles. At the same time, different participants may be united by the commitment to making a difference and improving the quality of life. Third and finally, participation at every stage of photovoice also incurs certain costs and problems, some of which were discussed above.

This paper has described who participated at what stage of photovoice in the Yunnan Program, certain advantages and benefits of participation, and various problems and costs of participation. Must there always be a difference between who are the 'the researchers' and 'the researched'? The point of PAR is that they ought to be the same. Nevertheless, careful attention should be given to differences among participants with regard to

political power, class, education and control over one's life. To paraphrase Brown (1979) in a different context, if health promotion programs are to serve the essential needs of communities, the people of those communities ought not let the interests of researchers override their own basic priorities. Those who plan, develop and teach in the field of health promotion must consciously evaluate both the material interests that shape their programs and the social, political, and economic consequences of what they do.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Address for correspondence:
Caroline C. Wang
Department of Health Behavior and Health Education
School of Public Health
University of Michigan
1420 Washington Heights
Ann Arbor
Michigan 48109–2029
USA

REFERENCES

Biggs, S. (1989) *Resource-poor Farmer Participation in Research: A Synthesis of Experiences from Nine National* *Agricultural Research Systems*, OFCOR Comparative Study Paper 3. International Service for National Agricultural Research, The Hague.

Brown, E. R. (1979) Exporting medical education: professionalism, modernization and imperialism. *Social Science and Medicine*, **13A**, 585–595.

Chan, S. (ed.) (1994) *Hmong Means Free: Life in Laos and America*. Temple University, Philadelphia, PA.

Fetters, M. (1995) Nemawashi essential for conducting research in Japan. *Social Science and Medicine*, **41**, 375–581.

Ford Foundation (1990) *Reproductive Health: A Foundation Strategy for the 1990s*. Ford Foundation Report, New York.

Freire, P. (1970) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Seabury Press, New York.

Kretzmann, J. and McKnight, J. (1993) *Building Communities from the Inside Out: A Path Toward Finding and Mobilizing a Community's Assets*. Center for Urban Affairs and Policy Research, Evanston, IL, pp. 1–10.

Labonte, R. (1994) Health promotion and empowerment: reflections on professional practice. *Health Education Quarterly*, **21**, 253–268.

Nyswander, D. (1956) Education for health: some principles and their application. *California Health*, **12**, 65–70.

Park, P. (1993) What is participatory research?: a theoretical and methodological perspective. In Park, P., Brydon-Miller, M., Hall, B. and Jackson, T. (eds) *Voices of Change: Participatory Research in the United States and Canada*. Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, Toronto.

Parker, E., Schulz, A., Israel, B. and Hollis, R. (1998) East side Detroit village health worker partnership: community-based lay health advisor intervention in an urban area. *Health Education and Behavior*, **25**(1).

Rogers, E. (1983) *Diffusion of Innovations*, 3rd edn. Free Press, New York.

Stewart, W. (1997) Self-portraits of homelessness. *Ann Arbor News*, 27 July.

Wallerstein, N. (1987) Empowerment education: Freire's ideas applied to youth. *Youth Policy*, **9**, 11–15.

Wang, C. (1998) Practice notes: photovoice involving homeless men and women of Washtenaw County, Michigan. *Health Education and Behavior*, **25**(1).

Wang, C. and Burris, M. (1994) Empowerment through photo novella: portraits of participation. *Health Education Quarterly*, **21**, 171–186.

Wang, C. and Burris, M. (1997) Photovoice: concept, methodology, and use for participatory needs assessment. *Health Education and Behavior*, **24**, 369–387.

Wang, C., Yuan, Y. L. and Feng, M. L. (1996a) Photovoice as a tool for participatory evaluation: the community's view of process and impact. *Journal of Contemporary Health*, **4**, 47–49.

Wang, C., Burris, M. and Xiang, Y. (1996b) Chinese village women as visual anthropologists: a participatory approach to reaching policymakers. *Social Science and Medicine*, **42**, 1391–1400.

World Health Organization (WHO) (1978) *Declaration of Alma Ata*. WHO Regional Office for Europe, Copenhagen.

Wu, K., Burris, M., Li, V., Wang, Y., Zhan, W., Xian, Y., Yang, K. and Wang, C. (eds) (1995) *Visual Voices: 100 Photographs of Village China by the Women of Yunnan Province*. Yunnan People's Publishing House, Yunnan.