Community of Practice in Ecosystem Approaches to Health

CoPEH-Canada

Communauté de pratique sur les approches écosystémiques de la santé

Implementing participation

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CONNECTS WITH:
Participation and Research – Working with Partners for a Healthy Environment – Gender

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INTRODUCTION

Description

This module focuses on the implementation of participation in intervention research contexts in occupational and environmental health. It uses concrete examples from both fields to illustrate common issues that arise while conducting intervention research and to reflect on ways of addressing them. For activities related to participation and appreciative inquiry, critical perspectives, reflective practice and collaboration with aboriginal communities, you can consult our Participation and Research module (Parkes et al. 2012).

This module, Implementing Participation, is accompanied by six videos:

- Introduction - Johanne Saint-Charles presents the six orientations (principles) of the ecosystem approaches to health. (In French; video length 7:43)
- Episode 1 - Mélanie Lefrançois speaks with Johanne Saint-Charles about her research with cleaners in the transportation sector. She discusses participation and knowledge to action. (In French; video length 18:47)
- Episode 2 - Caroline Jolly speaks with Johanne Saint-Charles about her research looking into the management of pesticide use in apple orchards, and discusses participation and transdisciplinarity. (In French; video length 12:47)
- Episode 3 - Aline Philibert speaks with Élise Ledoux about her research exploring mining in the Congo and the impact of mercury exposure on women, addressing issues of

participation and social and gender equity. (In French; video length 17:45)

- Episode 4 - Marc Fraser speaks with Élise Ledoux about his research on the health and environmental concerns of communities with regards to industrial activities in Madawaska, New Brunswick. He discusses participation and social equity. (In French; video length 10:20)
- In the concluding episode, Élise Ledoux and Johanne Saint-Charles share their thoughts on the four interviews. (In French; video length 13:45)

Aims/Goals

The aims of this module are to:

- Offer examples of how participation has been implemented in intervention research in occupational and environmental health, highlighting how some of the principles of the ecosystem approach to health are implemented.
- Provide educational resources for teachers to help them support the learning of**:**
    - understanding the complexity of networks and the links between actors;
    - the constraints and opportunities of real-life situations;
    - how to take into account different perspectives at each stage of research.

Guiding Questions

- How can a truly participatory process be implemented while taking into account specific contexts (that are sometimes barriers)?
- How can obstacles and constraints to participation be overcome?

Working terms

The aim of this module is to invite learners to link the definition of the following concepts to their intervention research context:

- Power relationships
- Diversity of points of view
- Social interactions
- Validity of different types of knowledge
- Contexts that have their own ongoing trajectories

Learning Objectives

1. Understand that participatory intervention research begins well before the first research activities in the field.
2. Understand the need to consider the complexity of the human ecosystem in which the research takes place.

3. Recognise your own positionality.
4. Develop a critical approach to the beneficial and deleterious effects of participation.
5. Develop strategies for better integrating participation into your research.

Directions

First, this module covers its objectives, core content, and some of the issues involved in participatory research. The “activities” section includes four activities, some of which make use of the episodes produced by Cinbiose and CoPEH-Canada for this module. You can use these episodes for these activities as described or as “stand-alone” presentations to illustrate aspects of participation or the other principles discussed (see above list). These episodes can serve as case studies. You can also create your own case studies and adapt the activities to suit them.

Key Content

Since the aim of this module is above all to offer concrete examples to stimulate reflection on participatory research, the content we propose is essentially a reminder of the foundations of this type of research.

Firstly, it is important to remember that the environment[1] existed in all its complexity before researchers arrive. Rules, rituals and complex systems of relationships were already in place before the researcher even took interest. A team wishing to conduct participatory research must therefore consider the environment as a living entity that has a before, during and after. The environment is an ecosystem in flux.

Episode 1 from 1:54 to 4:36 (navigating different objectives); Episode 2 from 7:40 to 9:10 (understanding exposure); Episode 3 from 9:39 to 10:28 (making a preparatory visit) and Episode 3 from 11:06 to 14:11 (understanding the context)

Participatory intervention research is an integrated whole, but for the sake of clarity we will look at different aspects in terms of preparation, implementation and broad dissemination. It should be borne in mind that all these moments are interrelated. For example, some of the knowledge built up during the preparatory or implementation phase can benefit from being shared widely and early dissemination. Similarly, the implementation phase may begin while the preparatory phase is not necessarily complete.

[1] The word ‘environment’ is used in a broad sense and refers here to an organisation, a geographically located community or groups of people with common characteristics (for example, workers in the same field).

Preparation involves understanding the context, getting to know the stakeholders, grasping their concerns and expectations, clarifying the research team's position, discussing the scope and scale of the research and seeking funding. This is a long-term phase, sometimes taking longer than the actual implementation of the research. The implementation phase is when the research team usually has a greater presence in the field, when the data is collected and analysed, the results are co-constructed with stakeholders and shared with others less directly involved in the research. Since we are referring here to *intervention* research, implementation is also the period in which action is taken, where appropriate. Finally, the phase of wider dissemination and sharing of the results outside the research-participating environments may last several years after the fieldwork.

Preparation

While the research is being planned, the research team should keep in mind the following:

- Considering that the research environment has an existence of its own, a researcher who arrives onsite should be seen not as a neutral entity, but as an agent who has an effect on the system (and vice versa).

Episode 1 from 9:40 to 10:45 (real-time impact of research)

- It is important to think about how you position yourself as a researcher before starting the process of reaching out to the community, especially when the request doesn't come directly from the community (often it comes from another institution (e.g. a workplace)). Here are a few things to consider: understanding who we are, what our values are, what our ethical position is with regard to research-related issues, what our intentions are, what our limits are and how we want to present ourselves to the community. Reflective practices can help in this process. This reflective exercise must be put into dialogue with the expectations, concerns and values of the community, which are also in flux.
- Knowing that your very presence in the environment will have an impact, it is important to modulate activities there. A research team's ‘non-participation’ can be effective in order to open up participation to others or to encourage local people to share more freely. It is important to develop sensitivity to this to ensure that participation in the research is positive for the people involved.

An excellent example of ‘non-participation’ can be found in Aline Philibert's capsule, in which she talks about her contact with women working in artisanal mines. Episode 3 from 7:11 to 9:26.

- Your presence in the community can bring a lot of hope, especially when the community is going through a difficult time. However, your presence is not a magic formula, and your research is not a miracle. Therefore, you need to be careful about false, even (or especially) unintentionally. Preparing for participatory research also means preparing for your departure and making sure that the environment does not depend on your presence. One way of doing so is to discuss expectations before the research is carried out.
- It is also important to temper our own expectations while not underestimating the influence of our intervention research, which can be subtle and long-term.

Episode 1 from 10:45 to 11:34 (subtility of impact)

Practical considerations:

- The origin of the research request will have a major impact on the way it is carried out. It is important to identify the origin of the project. Is it a request from the community, and if so, from which groups in the community (an interest group, the trade union, company management, municipal authorities, etc.)? Did the university community initiate the project? Was there a request from an external institution (government, trade union centre, professional association, etc.)? Identifying the source of the research request and its funding will help you identify who needs to be involved, why the research is needed and to whom you are accountable. This will enable you to open up the research explicitly to other categories of stakeholder.
- Given that the environment is dynamic, there are times when participation is more likely to be well received. You need to do some 'investigative' work to understand the community's temporal issues.

Implementation

The complexity of a community or organisational ecosystem lies mainly in the network of actors that makes it up. All the actors who surround, support or participate in your research have their own interests, their own visions of the world, which interact with a cultural, religious or socio-economic context that may differ from your own. Inclusive participatory research requires an understanding of the dynamic network of relationships in the ecosystem and how it is structured. Prior understanding is necessary, but there is also constant relational work to be carried out between the research team and the actors involved, whether from afar or up close (see our modules on social networks). In particular, it is important to diversify the links we develop with a view to reaching people regardless of their position in the network.

Episode 2 from 3:00 to 3:54 and Episode 3 from 3:35 to 6:59 (diversity of actors); Episode 4 from 2:06 to 4:42 (snowball effect of first contacts)

One of the important aspects of the network is the degree of influence or power of each individual. Power is therefore one of the analytical lenses that can be used to understand the complexity of a network of relationships. It helps to identify who carries more weight in decision-making processes or who is capable of mobilising others. Here are some examples of questions to ask yourself: Who has the most influence? What aspects or processes does this influence affect? How does this influence manifest itself? Who has the most resources (financial, knowledge, authority, etc.)? How do the actors at different levels of the hierarchy interact? Are people excluded on the basis of certain characteristics? Understanding these dynamics can help you adjust your actions to avoid reinforcing power imbalances or to give a voice to less influential people.

Episode 2 from 10:21 to 11:27 (participants' expertise)

Another aspect associated with the network of relationships is the concept of social control that taints participation. This phenomenon occurs when certain people put pressure on research participants to exert a certain amount of control over their actions. For example, in the workplace, the choice of participants is sometimes strongly guided by company management. In such cases, voluntarism may be questioned. This control can also be invisible, as is often the case with gender issues. In some contexts, participation in research may entail the fear of reprisals by influential members of the community. The role of the research team will vary according to the sensitivity of the situation, but an attitude of respect, empathy and patience will always be necessary to ensure a context that encourages participation rather than imposing it.

Episode 4 from 4:43 to 5:32 (challenges with engaging potential participants)

Certain people can act as intermediaries between the research team and stakeholders with whom they have special ties. For example, this could be a community organiser who knows the region well and who points the research team towards potential participants, or a 'cultural broker' who helps build a relationship of trust between the team and groups of people who would not have been spontaneously at ease with the team. Identifying and approaching these intermediaries will lend credibility to your approach and give you access to information or people who would otherwise be difficult to reach. However, you need to bear in mind that these people can both facilitate access and block it.

Episode 3 from 4:30-5:47 (cultural brokers)

Getting hands-on can also help to build trusting relationships with local people. In research terms, this is known as participant observation.

Episode 1 from 4:00 to 6:12 (bonds of trust)

The meaning of words can differ from one place to another. Ensuring that you have a common understanding of the definition of a term, for example empowerment or mobilisation, will help you in your exchanges with the community and avoid misunderstandings. There may also be taboos or sensitive terms that are commonplace in the language of the research team, but are not well-received in the community (and vice versa). You also need to make sure that you adopt the vocabulary of the community, while obviously avoiding discriminatory language. It is the research team's job to learn this vocabulary and adapt to the context. (See Activity 3 'Negotiating participation').

In workplaces, the research team must have a good knowledge of the organisational characteristics and hierarchy of the environment. Administrative obstacles can be frustrating, but you have to try to overcome them with patience and flexibility. No research goes according to plan, but correctly identifying the organisational characteristics, the structures that support them and the people who need to be contacted will ensure a greater degree of success.

In participatory research, it is important to put in place conditions that give a voice to all those involved in the project. One way of doing this is by valuing experiential expertise. Due to a number of factors, including the aura associated with academics, participants may have a negative perception of their knowledge or expertise, for example a worker may say: ‘All I do is put biscuits in a tin.’ However, given that it is in the participants' knowledge that the richness of participatory research lies, it is the responsibility of the research team to value their expertise in order to encourage them to speak about it. For example, if a worker says: ‘All I do is put biscuits in a tin,’ the answer might be: ‘Yes, but what does putting biscuits in a tin mean? What does it involve? How do you manage to make such precise movements?’ It is important to remember that the aim of the research is to hear the points of view of the participants and not just their own pre-conceived ideas, so it is the job of the research team to ensure that the participants' voices are heard. To do this, it is necessary to think about the conditions that need to be put in place so that these voices can be expressed, such as interviews in a quiet place, sufficient time for group exchanges, intermediary objects that can support the exchange of ideas, and prompts (videos, photos, processes, etc.) of what people are doing that make it easier for them to explain it to us.

Episode 1 from 13:32 to 15:38 (choosing when to take part); Episode 2 from 3:55 to 5:56 (the meeting of different voices); Episode 2 from 6:00 to 7:40 (the importance of providing proper information prior to participation); Episode 4 from 5:47 to 8:24 (specific considerations for working with Indigenous communities and municipalities).

The co-construction of knowledge with the participants involves numerous validation loops and exchanges about the results, which then become new data to be integrated into the research.

In participatory research, the research team’s involvement does not end once the data has been collected. Participatory research requires ongoing relationships and long-term monitoring, not least to support change. Participatory research therefore implies accountability to the people involved.

When the results are disseminated within the participating communities it should be done with the participants and the community in mind. This means using channels that are accessible to the community and providing information in accessible language. It is important to think of more creative ways of conveying information than scientific articles, for example, a day of activities to explain the results to the participants, a video involving the participants or the use of radio.

Broader dissemination and sharing of results

It is important that the lessons learned from participatory research be shared with other groups, such as trade unions, governments and the scientific community. This is one of the mandates of research. Here are some examples of wider dissemination in participatory research projects (other than the publication of scientific articles):

- Zona Cruda: This documentary (English and Spanish) highlights the results of a study looking at the levels of mercury and polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons (PAHs) in riverside communities in three basins in the Peruvian and Ecuadorian Amazon, and the experience of producing an interactive play with research participants in the Andean Amazon. The results were presented by the research team to the communities in the form of participatory theatre aimed at providing the information needed to reduce the risks of exposure while maintaining a balanced diet. Presenting the results in the form of a play proved to be an engaging method for prompting reflection and encouraging dynamic interaction between the research team and the communities. The scope of the documentary was twofold: 1) it was widely shared and seen, increasing the state of knowledge about contamination in the Amazon, and 2) teachers and research teams have been using the documentary to illustrate research done using ecosystem approaches to health and as an example of good practice in disseminating research results.
- Exchange sessions on research findings at professional conferences. For example, Caroline Jolly led this type of a workshop as part of the annual conference of the Apple producers of Québec and took part in the Rendez-vous de la science, a lunchtime conference (French) organised by the Institut de recherche Robert-Sauvé en santé et sécurité du travail, the organisation that funded her research.
- Mélanie Lefrançois presented her analyses on atypical schedules and occupational health and safety (French) as part of an event organised by a union.
- As part of the Caruso project in the Brazilian Amazon looking at mercury levels, workshops were organised in communities close to the research sites. Some of these workshops were led by research participants. The team also created a comic strip (Portuguese) that was distributed in the region.
- Technical fact sheets (French) aimed at a group of workers concerned by the results of a research project on pesticide use.
- An online capsule (French) summarising the main results of the same research project on pesticides.

Issues specific to the participatory approach

Confidentiality

Confidentiality is a cornerstone of research ethics. However, it becomes more complex in a participatory context, particularly when the community is small and several people from the same community are involved. This reality has the potential to reinforce the power of community norms: without the certainty of anonymity, people may feel less comfortable expressing non-mainstream points of view.

Limits to participatory research

As with all types of research, participatory research represents only a part of reality. It provides access to a complex and nuanced picture of that reality, but it is important to remember that it will always be only a part of reality. Accepting that it is impossible to cover everything in a research project is part of the process. From this perspective, the choice of the reality to be explored must be judicious and useful to the community.

'Costs' of participation

Participatory research is a long process for you, but also for the community. It must be borne in mind that the people who take part have a life outside the research and that a number of external constraints affect their participation. Some people's lives leave them little time to participate. Workplace contexts, even if participants are exempted for part of their shift to take part in the research, this may delay their or their colleagues' work or increase their colleagues' workload, all of which may limit participation. People can also choose not to participate and should not have to justify this choice.

ACTIVITIES

The remainder of this module describes four activities that can be carried out in different contexts. The first two encourage learners to reflect on what participation, in a intervention-research context, means to them, while the last two focus on integrating participation into their projects. These activities can be conducted independently, and you may choose to use all of them, or just one or two (or three), depending on the length of your course and its objectives.

Activity 1: Video segments

TOTAL TIME: variable, depending on the number of capsules used.

The aim of this activity is to create a context for discussion on the challenges of participatory research, based on four examples of projects in environmental and occupational health.

Depending on the time available, the exercise can be done with all the vignettes or just one or two.

Materials

- Projector/white board
- Video capsules on participatory research

Instructions

1. For each of the vignettes that will be used for the exercise: play the project presentation section (see box).

Box 1: Video segments in which projects are presented

Video	Beginning of the project presentation segment
Episode 1: Participation and knowledge-to-action with Mélanie Lefrançois and Johanne Saint-Charles	Begin at 1:54
Episode 2: Participation and transdisciplinarity with Caroline Jolly and Johanne Saint-Charles	Begin at 2:55
Episode 3: Participation and gender equity with Aline Philibert and Élise Ledoux	Begin at 3:13
Episode 4: Participation and social equity with Marc Fraser and Élise Ledoux	Begin at 1:42

2. Ask learners to identify possible issues or challenges to participation that each of the projects might have encountered.
3. Present the rest of the capsule.
4. Highlight the issues identified by the learners and the researcher. Ask the learners what surprised them (or not), and get their reactions to the actions taken by the researcher to respond to the issues identified, if any.

Activity 2: Schematic diagram of concerns

TOTAL TIME: 30 minutes to 1 hour, depending on the importance given to the activity in the overall training schedule. For example, if the group is preparing a participatory research project, you may want to give them more time.

The actors who support, participate or are on the periphery of a research project have their own interests, concerns and world views, which interact with a cultural, religious and socio-economic context that may differ from that of the research team. In the preparation phase, it is important to explore with key actors what their expectations, concerns and needs are in relation to the upcoming research.

Activity 2 invites learners to try and put themselves in the shoes of certain key actors, and to imagine what their expectations and concerns might be. The idea is then to assess whether the concerns of each of these people diverge or converge.

Materials

Paper, pens/pencils

Instructions

- Create dyads in the group (if the group is composed of an odd number of people, a trio is preferable to a one-person group).
- One person in the dyad briefly describes their research project and the dyad draws up a list of the key actors involved in the project, also including external players (e.g. representatives of institutions) who could be affected by the project.
- For each stakeholder, identify two or three concerns and expectations that seem relevant to you.
- Group the concerns together using the table in this link. For an example see Figure 2.

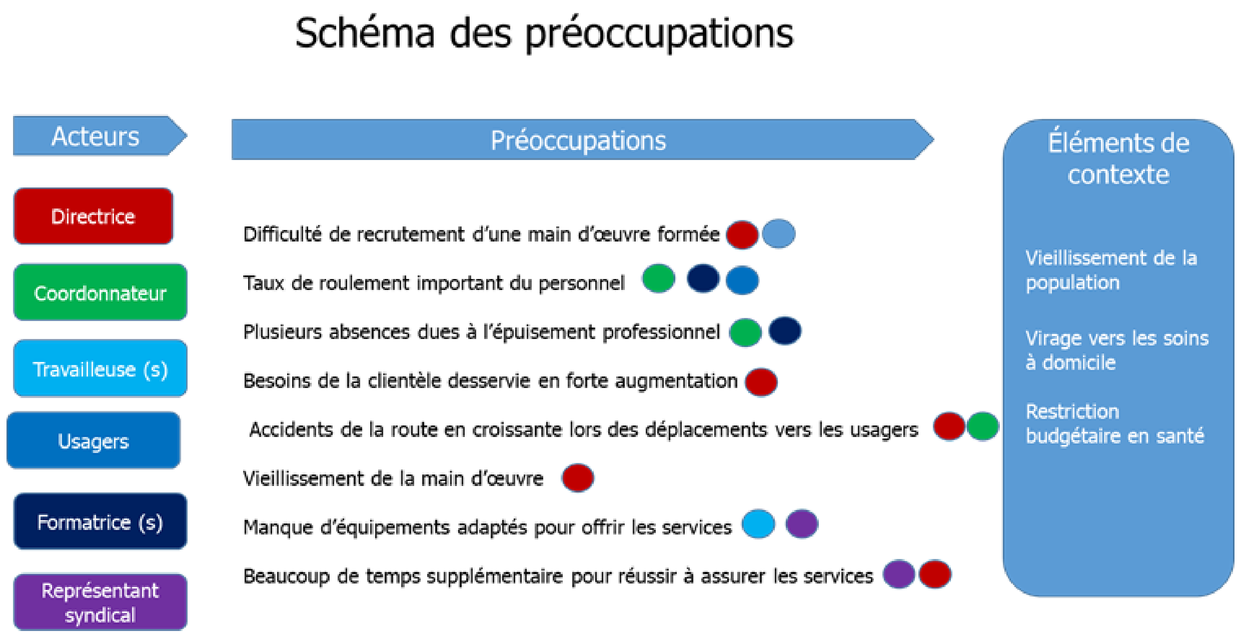

Figure 2: Example of a schematic diagram of concerns in a workplace context (adapted from Folcher et al., 2017)

- Once the work has been completed, the participants are invited to analyse the table using the following questions as a guide: What concerns do the actors share? Which concerns diverge? What are the implication of these concerns and their structure for participation?
- Repeat steps 2-5 for the other person in the dyad.

Adaptation: If you are developing a case study in your course (see the module Using and developing an ecosystem approaches to health case study in your teaching), you can use this activity as a collective brainstorming session on the contexts, stakeholders and concerns surrounding the issue. Adapt the instructions above by projecting the diagram onto a whiteboard and filling in the elements together.

Activity 3: Negotiating Participation

TOTAL TIME: discussion version, 30 minutes; Full version, 60 minutes

Materials: perspectives (see below), paper, pencil

This activity prompts a reflection on the fact that "participation" (in the context of participatory research) means different things to different people.

Discussion version

This activity is inspired by the "Negotiating Health" activity in CoPEH-Canada's Health - from multiple perspectives to an ecosystem approach module. If you have already done this activity during your training, we suggest a discussion of how the learners participated during the activity:

- Who participated more than others? Why?
- Were "natural" or strategic alliances formed?
- Were any strategies used to build relationships, foster trust, and foster participation?
- Can what you have learned here be transferred to the context of participatory research-intervention? How?

Full Version

This activity aims to make learners aware of the fact that the definition of participation can vary from person to person, often depending on how they are situated. The activity consists of three stages, including two periods of working groups and a plenary.

STEP 1: Defining participation from a particular perspective (15 minutes)

In small groups of five or six people.

- Each group is given a different perspective or point of view. Each group must produce a definition of participation in the context of intervention-research from this perspective or point of view, and which takes into account the evolution of participation over time. Some ideas for perspectives are given below. Of course, you can adapt this list to your training context.
- Perspectives from which to define participation (ensure that there is gender balance)
  - A homeless person
  - A social worker
  - A bus driver
  - A human resources director at a large technology company
  - A pharmacist, owner of her own business
  - A person who is the president of an association for the defence of the rights of a minority group
  - A cleaner in the transportation field
  - An apple grower who owns his ow establishment
  - A teacher in an isolated community

STEP 2: Common definition of participation (20 to 30 minutes)

This step takes longer than the first step, because this is where the real negotiation process begins.

- Rearrange the groups so that members of the new groups come from different groups in step 1.

- Each person presents the definition from Step 1 to their new group.
- The group must produce a new definition of participation in the context of intervention-research taking into account the different perspectives involved.

Notes: Each new group may not have a representative from all perspectives represented in Step 1. Some groups may not reach consensus or a common definition within the prescribed time frame.

STEP 3: Summary discussion (approx. 20 minutes)

- Bring the participants back into plenary.
- Ask each group to provide their definition of participation in the context of intervention-research.

Note: If a group has not been able to produce a definition, explore with them why they think that is and how they feel about it. Explore whether it was the words that stood in the way and if another type of representation (image, sound, etc.) could better synthesize perspectives and experiences.

- Identify similarities and differences within the definitions.
- See if the group can narrow down the five definitions to three (or even one).

Debrief the negotiation process. Examples of discussion questions include:

- How did the following elements affect the definitions produced:
  - Homogeneity of point of view in the first group and diversity in the second?
  - Self-identification with the perspective of the first group?
  - Differences in status and values between the characters/perspectives?
  - Classroom space and proximity of other groups? The possibility of influence (hearing what others were saying)?
  - Time available?
  - Autonomy of the groups (instructions on the objective and not on the means to achieve it)?
  - Personal ties (beside the assigned groups) between the members?
  - Simplicity of the technology (tables, pencil and paper)?

Note: There may be frustrations at this stage. Discuss and comment on this by reviewing the process.

Activity 4: Making connections with your own project

The goal of this activity is to get learners to consider issues of participation in their own project. Depending on the time available, you can briefly present some participation grids (see examples below) to help participants better position their research on participation scales.

Examples of grids or scales

In 1969, Sherry Arnstein, in a seminal paper, proposed a participation ladder aimed at nurturing dialogue on participation. The ladder consists of eight rungs, two of which at the bottom of the ladder are considered non-participation, three halfway up as tokenism and finally the three top rungs as different levels of authentic participation. A graphical representation of the scale can be found in the original article.

Biggs (1989), for his part, drew on nine participatory experiments in agriculture to propose four modes of participation: contractual, consultative, collaborative and collegiate. A concrete application of the grid can be seen in the article by Mertens et al. (2005) in the context of environmental health research in the Brazilian Amazon.

Neef and Neubert (2011) suggest instead that participation should be framed in terms of different aspects of research: the type of project, the research approach, the characteristics of the research team, the interactions between the research team and stakeholders, the characteristics of the stakeholders and the benefits they could derive from the research.

STEP 1: Invite participants to answer these questions even if, at this stage, their project does not have a participatory element.

- How do you plan to integrate participation into your research?
- Using one of the grids presented, what type of participation would it be?
- Who will be the key actors with whom participation will be organized?
- How do you foresee power sharing will play out in your research?
- How will you prevent the harmful effects of participation on participants?
- What are the elements to consider to make participation worthwhile for participants?

STEP 2: Key lessons to transfer to your poster

This second step is optional in that it requires participants to have created a poster for their project (see the cross-cutting module Posters).

After watching the videos and discussing, ask the learners to rework their posters and incorporate the lessons learned. You can give them a focal point, for example, "What are the power relations in your project? Which actors have you omitted? This module can act as an agent of "disruption" or "discomfort" as suggested in Step 3 of the Posters activity.

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