“Poor” People’s Participation in Poverty Reduction

by

Jane Worton

B.A., University of Victoria, 2002

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements for the Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

Studies in Policy and Practice Program

Faculty of Human and Social Development

©Jane Worton, 2009

All rights reserved. This thesis may not be reproduced in whole or in part, by photocopy or other means, without the permission of the author.
“Poor” People’s Participation in Poverty Reduction

by

Jane Worton
B.A., University of Victoria, 2002

Supervisory Committee

Dr. Marge Reitsma-Street, Supervisor
(Studies in Policy and Practice)

Dr. Kathy Teghtsoonian, Departmental Member
(Studies in Policy and Practice)

Dr. Margo Matwychuk, Outside Member
(Department of Anthropology)

Bruce Wallace, Additional Member
Supervisory Committee

Dr. Marge Reitsma-Street, Supervisor
(Studies in Policy and Practice)

Dr. Kathy Teghtsoonian, Departmental Member
(Studies in Policy and Practice)

Dr. Margo Matwychuk, Outside Member
(Department of Anthropology)

Bruce Wallace, Additional Member

ABSTRACT

People with experience living on low income have an important role in multi-sectoral poverty reduction work: they have a right to participate in initiatives that may influence their well being and can contribute valuable skills, knowledge and resources. Yet they are often absent. This research explores the context-specific factors that support and constrain the participation of people living on low income in poverty reduction initiatives through interviews with 19 people actively involved in such efforts. The findings describe the nuances and tensions related to experiences with nine factors: type of participation, compensation, labelling “poor” participants, opening spaces which support diverse perspectives, expectations of representation, rationale for participation, degree of influence, ratio of “poor” participants and relationships. Findings suggest that poverty reduction initiative would benefit from offering diverse participatory opportunities, being flexible in the supports they provide to match the specific needs of individuals and dedicating revenue to participation costs.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Supervisory Committee</td>
<td>ii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abstract</td>
<td>iii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table of Contents</td>
<td>iv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>List of Tables</td>
<td>vii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgments</td>
<td>viii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 1. Introduction</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 2. Literature Review</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What is participation?</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Types of participation: What are “poor” people invited to do in poverty reduction initiatives?</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Degree of influence: What influence do “poor” people have on decision-making, and is this influence clearly communicated?</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ratio of “poor” to “non-poor” participants: Does the number of “poor” participants matter?</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationships: Do there need to be pre-existing or new relationships formed need between “poor” participants or across income groups?</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Labelling “poor” participants: Do initiatives need to identify which participants are “poor”? Do the words used to identify “poor” people matter?</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Compensation: Do “poor” people need to be compensated financially for participation?</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All this to say</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 3. Methodology</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ten steps to conduct Community Action Research</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decide to join together to address a community concern</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Explore the experiences and expertise of those concerned</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Devise, revisit and reinvent principles</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Develop decision-making procedures</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negotiate resources, access and allies</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Design research procedures</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data collection method</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sampling</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interview guide</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gather and inspect data</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Chapter 4. Research findings........................................................................................................56

Types of participation: “You start excluding people when you say, ‘we can only do this, we can only do that’”........................................................................................................57
  Committees: making decisions.................................................................................................57
  “Poor” people’s groups: creating support..............................................................................59
  Focus groups or surveys: providing consultation.................................................................61
  Public speaking and media work: educating about the realities of poverty..............................61
  Conferences: making connections and learning.................................................................63
  Creating art: gaining insight and sharing messages...............................................................63
  Paid work: gaining experience, status and income...............................................................65

Compensation: “Without the child care money I obviously couldn’t attend any of these things”.......................................................................................................................67

Labelling “poor” participants: “‘Living on low income’ is better than ‘poor’, but no term removes the shame”.................................................................................................71
  Language................................................................................................................................72
  Private labelling......................................................................................................................76
  Public labelling......................................................................................................................76

Opening spaces which support diverse perspectives: “All group members are on the same level and made to feel like we’re equal”.................................................................79

Representation: “Don’t make them the Member of Parliament for poor people”.................................................................82

Rationale for participation of the “poor”: “They have the experience and know what they need and what will work.”.........................................................................................88

Degree of influence: “If I hadn’t been there, would it have made any difference?”.................................92

Ratio of “poor” to “non-poor” participants: “I would have been more comfortable if there had been more people like me.”.........................................................................................98

Relationships: “People who they trust give them the information and then they can decide whether they want to [participate] or not”........................................................................102

Chapter 5. Discussion.................................................................................................................108

Rationale for participation........................................................................................................111
LIST OF TABLES

Table 1  Summary of Participant Demographics...............................................................44

Table 2  Participant Demographics by Participant...........................................................165
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to first and foremost express my deep thanks to my family, in particular my parents, for their love, support, patience and editing skills. In addition, my thanks go out to my supervisor, Dr. Marge Reitsma-Street and my thesis committee, Dr. Kathy Teghtsoonian, Dr. Margo Matwychuk and Bruce Wallace, for their encouragement, gentle nudges and insightful guidance. A special thank you to my advisory committee members who shared their time and expertise with me, and all my research participants, who have helped me to better understand participation and to envision better way(s). Finally, I wish to acknowledge my admiration of and gratitude to Dr. Jannit Rabinovitch, whose work in this area pushes and inspires me.
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

If enough of us build enough cross-class and cross-race alliances, the movements of the 21st century may outshine those of the last century in the transformations they bring.

(Leondar-Wright, 2005, p. 10).

Canadian governmental bodies have historically sought varying levels of citizen participation in multi-sectoral initiatives. In the 1950s and 1960s the Government of Canada established advisory councils, such as the National Council of Welfare, as a tool for citizen involvement. A review of these councils by Shackleton (cited in Wharf, Cossom & Wharf Higgins, 2003) assessed the councils on two criteria: firstly, whether the council was consulted by the government in the planning stage of policy and legislation, and secondly, whether the government on some occasions altered a decision because of council input. Wharf, Cossom and Wharf Higgins suggest that the National Council of Welfare served an additional purpose by providing a much needed voice for reform, regardless of whether or not government policy was changed as a result. Of these advisory councils, only the National Council of Welfare remains. It has, from the beginning, included people living on low-income in its governing body (Wharf, Cossom & Wharf Higgins, 2003).

I share with others, including those who created and now direct the National Council of Welfare, a deep seated belief that people experiencing an issue should be involved in developing solutions to that issue. But I have observed that this is often not the case. My belief in participation, and my concern about the absence of “poor” people in initiatives that affect them, provide the foundation for my thesis study. I had been peripherally involved in poor people’s movements, in which people living on low income

---

1 Throughout the text of this thesis I have purposely used quotation marks around the terms “poor” and “non-poor” to emphasize the false construction of the two groups.
began the groups and were at the centre of decision making and control. Then I began working in a multi-sectoral poverty reduction initiative. Poverty reduction initiatives are multi-sectoral programs, usually including public, private, non-profit groups and individuals which work to reduce poverty in a comprehensive program. They are larger than an individual project and are usually conducted over several years. In the poverty reduction initiative in which I was involved, people living on low income were invited to participate, but they were not at the heart of it and their participation was low in number, limited in influence and lacking in power. Yet this initiative regularly emphasized the importance of participation of people living on low income. I struggled to understand the cause of this disparity between the desire for participation and the reality. I found my experience echoed in literature on participation. In initiatives where the participation of poor people was invited, that participation was often in name only (Tate, 1993; United Kingdom Coalition Against Poverty, 2000; Buckley, 2000; Yeo & Moore, 2003; Wharf, Cossom & Wharf Higgins, 2003; Bennett & Roberts, 2004). This token participation resulted in reduced participation in initiatives that participants considered phony and did not lead to any shift of power (United Kingdom Coalition Against Poverty, 2000). Tate points out that though there has been a lot of talk about “participation” and “empowerment”, the actions of organizations often did not create this reality. Tate stresses that this was not due to bad intentions, but the processes and results were not living up to the rhetoric of meaningful participation (Tate, 1993).

At the same time, it seemed to me that poverty reduction initiatives had greater impacts on social policies than did “poor” people’s movements. Funding organizations encourage partnerships, especially cross-sectoral partnerships. With more funding support, multi-sectoral poverty reduction initiatives, rather than poor people’s movements, seemed to be the new direction. Yet including the voices of people with
experience living on low income was rarely, if ever, a criteria for funding anti-poverty work.

Despite criticisms of the realities of participatory processes, the perception remains that participation of the “poor” in poverty reduction work is important. Bennett and Roberts (2004) summarise the arguments in favour of participatory approaches to poverty research and reduction work as follows. First, people may be more likely to take part in research if they have some control over it (Evans and Fisher, 1999). Second, a more nuanced understanding of poverty is found when the voices of people living in poverty are used alongside other sources (Chambers, 2002). Third, participatory approaches can highlight aspects of poverty frequently missed, such as lack of dignity and respect, dependence on others and lack of voice or choice (Bennett and Roberts, 2004). Fourth, participatory approaches result in more effective outcomes and ownership, in that participants are more likely to help ensure that findings are both usable and used (Norton et al, 2001). Fifth, participation results in “poor” participants gaining confidence, experience and learning (Bennett and Roberts, 2004). Sixth, participation of “poor” people benefits “non-poor” participants by helping them re-evaluate the knowledge they learned by more traditional methods. Meeting people living in poverty is key to changing the perspectives and behaviour of policy makers (McGee, 2002). Hoddinot et al. added to this that the informational advantages possessed by “poor” participants are unavailable to outsiders, and so their participation may lower the cost of antipoverty interventions (Hoddinot et al., 2001).

When I considered for this research where power was situated in poverty reduction initiatives, and how change might come about, I felt it was necessary to talk both with people who were “poor” and people who were “non-poor” about participation and about factors that support or constrain participation of “poor” people. I believed that
“poor” and “non-poor” people would experience the participation of people living on low income differently, and that it was through discussion of these differences that we might come to collectively understand how to better create space in poverty reduction initiatives for participation of people living on low income.

Despite categorizing participants in this research as “poor” and “non-poor”, I recognise that these groups are not homogeneous communities. Yet these categories reflect perceptions within poverty reduction initiatives. Within these initiatives “poor” and “non-poor” participants frequently discuss their opposite group as if all “poor” or “non-poor” people think and act similarly. I note that it is particularly “poor” people who have historically been falsely conceived as a community (Fox Piven & Cloward, 1977; Cruikshank, 1999), with other participants seen simply as not belonging to that community, despite similar variations in income, demographics and perspectives. Throughout the text of this thesis I have purposely used quotation marks around the terms “poor” and “non-poor” to emphasize the false construction of the two groups. I choose to use these terms regardless, as I feel they reflect the culture in poverty reduction initiatives, most of which use these categories, explicitly or implicitly, in designing their work and structure.

I eventually came to the following research question: How do diverse participants in poverty reduction initiatives experience the supports for and constraints on the participation of people living on low income in poverty reduction initiatives? By focusing on this question I hoped to shape my own future practice in anti-poverty work and to provide useful information for poverty reduction initiatives.
The following chapters detail nine factors which support and constrain participation of the “poor”. These factors were identified and discussed first in literature on participation, then by my thesis advisory committee and finally by the research participants. Included are: types of participation, degree of influence, ratio of “poor” to “non-poor” participants, relationships, labeling “poor” participants, compensation, open spaces, representation, and rationale for participation of the “poor”. Interestingly, the thesis research process itself had more limited participation than desired, a reflection of the topic which is addressed in the methodology and discussion chapters. Models by which one might understand or prioritize factors differently, depending on the needs of “poor” participants and the poverty reduction initiative seeking their participation, are proposed in the discussion chapter. Finally, the concluding chapter offers advice for poverty reduction initiatives, based on the findings of this research.
CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Given the research question of how diverse participants in poverty reduction initiatives experience the supports and constraints for the participation of people living on low income in poverty reduction initiatives, it is important to understand not only literature surrounding participation but also the broader context in which poverty reduction work is done in Canada. Additionally, research discussing citizen participation of both marginalized and non-marginalized groups is explored.

Context

This research on participation of “poor” people in several poverty initiatives in one city was located within the neo-liberal politics that currently dominate Canada overall and British Columbia specifically. These neo-liberal politics involved a desire to reduce government intervention in society and a belief in individual or market-driven solutions, and they have provided the framework for social service programs (Rose, 1999). Both the downloading of social services to non-profit and community-based organizations and the drive to welfare reform have affected the capacity of poverty reduction initiatives to engage “poor” people as participants.

Downloading of social services increases the likelihood that poverty reduction initiatives will be led by non-profit groups. Non-profit organizations have greater flexibility to work across sectoral boundaries and to test leading-edge programs. However, despite being arms length from government, these non-profit organizations are affected by the neo-liberal welfare regime (Torjman, 1999). Across Canada, and in British Columbia specifically, there has been an increased demand for social services that stretched the
resources of non-profit organizations. This demand occurred as governments engaged the voluntary sector in service delivery (Torjman, 1999; Quality of Life CHALLENGE, 2004). As governments downloaded responsibility for service provision onto non-profit organizations, these organizations were pushed to conform to government’s operating styles and accountabilities. Non-profit organizations that had historically been rooted in community and civic engagement reported they were forced to alter their governance and service delivery practices. Accompanying the shift away from core funding of social service organizations towards project specific funding was the need to dedicate more resources for evaluation. Additional formal accountability requirements further focused work on performance measures of outcomes that can be quantified, unlike citizen engagement and empowerment (Juillet et. al, 2001; Torjman, 1999). This combined shortage of resources and focus on quantifiable outcomes reduced the desire of participants in poverty reduction initiatives to engage “poor” people in the initiative, as this engagement could be resource intensive and was not a requirement of funding.

The non-profit sector is dependent on volunteers for a significant portion of its work. In 2000, volunteer services contributed over $14 billion to the non-profit sector’s gross domestic product; over 86% of the overall volunteer effort was within the smaller non-profit organizations (Statistics Canada, 2005). Yet, as the need for volunteers has grown, participation in formal voluntary organizations has been declining (Putnam, 2000; Torjman, 2001). Brin Hyatt notes that volunteerism is presented as part of the role of the good citizen, and that this spirit of service is meant to reduce the need for state action. As neo-liberalism flourishes, so does the move away from ‘big government’. This results, as Rose says, not in an abandonment of the will to govern, but rather in a reinforcement of “the view that failure of government to achieve its objectives is to be overcome by inventing new strategies of government that will succeed” (cited in Brin Hyatt, 2001,
The structuring of civil society to require volunteerism by good citizens is one such strategy. Brin Hyatt critiques Putnam's findings that there has been a decline in social capital over the past few decades, suggesting that Putnam looks primarily at formal volunteer organizations. So while formal volunteerism may be declining, informal volunteerism may not be. She notes that “in poor communities…informal, nonhierarchical and open-ended social networks tend to play a far more important role” (Brin Hyatt, 2001, p.207). The culture of self-help, mutual assistance and reciprocity that is well established in poor communities has a far more direct impact on the survival and wellbeing of people living in poverty than does participation in formal poverty reduction initiatives (Brin Hyatt, 2001). Thus, when non-profits seek volunteers for formal poverty reduction initiatives, they may find more “poor” people are not available as they are already engaged in poverty reduction work through informal networks of reciprocity.

The increased emphasis on the role of the individual to volunteer and participate in the provision of social services is tied up with the construct of the active, good citizen. Within this construct of a good citizen is the expectation he or she would participate. But participation requires some equality of status. In theory, a citizen should “feel like a full member of society, able to participate in and appreciate community life” (Wharf Higgins, 1999, p. 290). It has been suggested that equality of citizenship cannot be secured unless social and economic rights have been acquired. Marshall identifies three rights as central to citizenship: civil and legal rights (freedom of speech, thought and religious practice), political rights (voting, holding office), and social rights (participating in the economy and the community’s well-being). Some conservative scholars, such as Mead, suggest that a full citizen not only enjoys Marshall’s rights, but also meets a set of expectations such as being employed, supporting one’s family and respecting the rights of others (Wharf Higgins, 1999).
The drive to welfare reform also created policy constraints on an individual’s participation in poverty reduction initiatives, such as specific regulations which prevent non-profit groups from using government funds to enable participation or prevent participants from receiving payment for participation. For example, Service Canada (previously Human Resources Development Canada) often funds initiatives to reduce homelessness or unemployment. At the time of this research, its funding rules did not allow money it advanced to be used to pay food costs or honoraria for those who participate.

Other factors constrain people who might wish to participate. At the time this research was conducted, people receiving social assistance are constrained from participation in voluntary organizations by several BC Ministry of Employment and Income Assistance regulations. One regulation mandates that social assistance recipients categorized as employable have to be available for work every weekday, making it difficult for recipients to commit to regular meetings during the week. A second regulation prevents people receiving social assistance from keeping any honoraria provided to acknowledge their time and input unless they report the amount. Any earnings reported would be deducted from next month’s assistance of $610. Some Employment Assistance Workers reportedly interpret this regulation to include food received at meetings or transportation subsidies. Three or more instances of not declaring gifts or honoraria received is considered fraud and could result in a lifetime ban from welfare. These regulations constrain the participation of social assistance recipients.

What is participation?
The term “participation” is used to characterize a wide variety of activities within social change initiatives involving differing levels of power and control. While the meaning of participation is not always clear, it is always used by people across the political spectrum as a positive term: “Not only was it seen as a key means of ensuring fair processes, and creating better decisions, but the act of participating would also bring fulfillment and understanding for those involved. Participation, like motherhood, was clearly A Good Thing” (Cornwall and Gaventa, 2001, p.3). The different understandings of what participation is mean that a variety of activities can be carried out and legitimated in its name. But multiple understandings of participation contribute to varying degrees of enthusiasm for creating and engaging in participatory opportunities. For example, the term “participation” is sometimes used to describe token involvement, where participants feel manipulated or powerless in the initiative. These experiences do not motivate people to champion further participatory opportunities, or to take up further participatory opportunities themselves (Frankish et al, 2002).

Interestingly, the definition of participation that most closely fit with my own understanding of the term, at the outset of this thesis research, was coined by the World Bank, an institution many have critiqued for creating only token participatory opportunities. My understanding of participation changed through this research, as described further in the discussion chapter. The World Bank defines participation as “the process by which stakeholders influence and share control over priority setting, policymaking, resource allocations, and/or program implementation” (World Bank, 2002, p. 237). Participation of this nature is a stated goal of much of the work of the World Bank in the developing world. Yet the results of these participatory development processes seem to consistently follow the goals of the World Bank to further implement privatization and user fees. As the goal of poor people is instead for redistribution of
wealth, these results suggest that the participation of poor people has little influence in the direction of World Bank programs (Cooke, 2004). It is not solely in development processes that participatory opportunities are criticized; this criticism is echoed in much of the research on participation of the poor in poverty reduction work (Tate, 1993; United Kingdom Coalition Against Poverty, 2000; Buckley, 2000; Yeo & Moore, 2003; Wharf, Cossom & Wharf Higgins, 2003; Bennett & Roberts, 2004).

It was at the disjuncture between the desire for participation and the realities of the activities and outcomes of participation of the “poor” in poverty reduction initiatives where I entered into this thesis research. I began with the central idea that the disjuncture was primarily due to a different understanding between “non-poor” and “poor” people of what supported and what constrained the participation of “poor” people in poverty reduction initiatives. I assumed that if there was a shared understanding of these factors between “poor” and “non-poor” people, then there would be a foundation for more appropriate conditions to promote the participation of the “poor”.

**Participation supports and constraints**

Multiple factors influence participation of the “poor” in social change initiatives. Some of these factors are covered in detail in academic literature, often tested empirically, and are seen as ‘known’. Other factors are hinted at in academic literature or discussed in practice literature, but are not commonly cited or widely accepted. The disjuncture between what is seen as known about participation factors and what is done in practice to support or encourage participation of the “poor” is intriguing.

From the literature surrounding participation and from my own experience working in poverty reduction initiatives, I selected six important factors which may positively or
negatively influence the participation of “poor” people in poverty reduction initiatives. These factors, followed by questions that outline the importance of each factor, are listed below, followed by comments and research on each factor.

- Types of participation: What are “poor” people invited to do in poverty reduction initiatives?
- Degree of influence: What influence do “poor” people have on decision-making, and is this influence clearly communicated by the initiative to “poor” participants?
- Ratio of “poor” to “non-poor” participants: Does the number of “poor” participants matter?
- Relationships: Does it matter if either pre-existing or new relationships are formed between “poor” participants or across income groups?
- Labelling “poor” participants: Do initiatives identify which participants are “poor”? Do the words used to identify “poor” people matter?
- Compensation: Does it matter if “poor” people are compensated financially for participation?
Types of participation: What are “poor” people invited to do in poverty reduction initiatives?

… participation can be used to evoke … almost anything that involves people. As such, it can easily be reframed to meet almost any demand made of it. Unpacking these meanings and exploring the diversity of practices that come to be labelled as ‘participatory’ is therefore vital, in order to make sense of these claims (Cornwall, 2000, p. 36).

Many different understandings exist as to how one might participate, ranging from user consultation to the engagement of citizens in creating policies which affected them. Cornwall and Gaventa describe a shift in understanding of participation in development work over time. In earlier iterations of participation, participants are characterized as beneficiaries. In later iterations they are seen as citizens who have enacted their rights and responsibilities to participate. Participants are initially invited to consult on projects, but later can be invited to share decision making on policies (Cornwall and Gaventa, 2001). Not all later participatory opportunities engage people as citizens to share in decision making on policy and implementation at a macro level. Rather, it is that the understanding of participation evolves and these opportunities are seen by some as the level of participation for which organizations and governments should strive.

Sherry Arnstein (1969) presents a ladder of participation of eight rungs ranging from manipulation to citizen control, with varying levels of tokenism and citizen power. Arnstein includes citizen advisory committees in the first and bottom rung that she labels manipulation, stating that the goals of developers of advisory committees are often to use participation as a public relations exercise. These advisory committees, she says, often have no legitimate function or power. In the second rung, therapy, poverty is seen
as pathology, and participation is focused on curing “poor” people of this pathology, rather than on changing the societal structures that created this pathology. As participatory opportunities progress up the ladder to rung three, information, and rung four, consultation, people have the chance to hear and to be heard, but Arnstein feels that “they lack the power to insure that their views will be heeded by the powerful” (Arnstein, 1969, p. 3). Rungs three and four include, for example, surveys, neighbourhood meetings and public hearings. White echoes this analysis, noting that the most traditional form of participation is to consult citizens about plans which were already established and then use the consultation as evidence that the plan has the support of the public. “Lay participation as it is preached and practiced is clearly about administrative and political efficiency not democracy, consumer empowerment or community control. It derives its value principally from its role as an administrative strategy” (White, 2000, p.477). Further up Arnstein’s ladder, on rung five is placation, which includes hand picked seats on boards for a few “worthy poor”. Arnstein critiques the lack of accountability of “poor” participants to a constituency and that the balance of power rests with the traditional power elite. In partnership, the sixth rung on Arnstein’s ladder, the power for planning and decision making is shared between citizens and powerholders through joint policy boards, planning committees and mechanisms for resolving impasses. Arnstein notes that this works best when citizens are participating through organized groups. Delegated power, the seventh rung, occurs when citizens achieve dominant decision making authority, so that a program is accountable to them. This can be accomplished with a citizen majority of seats on a committee or through a parallel group with a citizen veto. On the eighth rung, citizen control means that citizens are in full charge of policy and managerial aspects of a program. Arnstein notes that even with this level of control, citizen groups are often not given sufficient resources to successfully manage programs (Arnstein, 1969).
Arnstein’s model recommends participatory opportunities in which marginalized citizens are in control. But practice examples exist in which marginalized citizens influence outcomes even though they do not hold the balance of power. Rabinovitch describes a series of lunches and one on one consultations she conducted with homeless men which led to a report to the City of Victoria on downtown community development. The report outlines the men’s ideas in thirty recommendations that encompassed housing, community facilities, recreation, health, employment, additional service initiatives and principles and policies to support the outlined initiatives. This led to the formation of the Victoria Street Community Association (VSCA), a city funded group led by people who were homeless. Concerned about housing for the hard to house, the VSCA convinced the provincial government to buy a motel, renovate it and help the VSCA operate it, which they continued to do until the VSCA lost funding.

Rabinovitch was a powerholder, but she asked for opinions and reported what she heard to the City. The City was a powerholder, but listened to the opinions of the homeless citizens that Rabinovitch relayed and the City funded the VSCA. The Province was a powerholder, but agreed to support a housing model where some control rested with the VSCA (Rabinovitch, 2005).

Higher levels of citizen control exist in research projects on poverty (Reitsma-Street and Brown, 2003). Yet, even in research projects, it is challenging to find funding for genuinely participatory processes, that involve “poor” people in the preparation of the original research agenda. Funds and energy are required to bring together people living on low income so they are able to describe how they want the research to be undertaken and ensure their areas of interest are included (Bennett and Roberts, 2004). Although poverty reduction initiatives often include components of research, they are, by nature, action-oriented and thus the ability to influence powerholders is important in order to
create action. But it is in the implementation of the recommendations that the power
dynamics were more evident. Countless research projects recommend actions to reduce
poverty which have not been adopted by government or other powerholders.

While much citizen participation involves the middle rungs of information sharing
and consultation, most literature analyzing participatory opportunities within social
change initiatives focuses on the top four rungs of Arnstein’s ladder of participation
Foundation, 2002). This focus on the decision making power of “poor” participants
affected by the research and social change initiatives misses potential participatory
opportunities. Traditional participation processes, such as the top four rungs, can
discriminate against people who are not well educated, well-spoken or well off. A lack of
participation by “poor” people does not necessarily mean a lack of interest. Rather it may
be that the structures of participation are inconvenient, intimidating, inaccessible or
irrelevant. Not every “poor” participant wants, or is able, to sit on a committee. In
contrast, space and time to share experiences as service recipients and to provide input
on program delivery may be as influential as chairing meetings and developing policy
(Wharf, Cossom and Wharf Higgins, 2003). However, vital information may also be
missed through reliance on middle rungs such as community questionnaires, focus
groups, or other processes that rely primarily on consultation. As Rabinovitch states,
"Answers may be obvious to an insider, but if the right questions are not asked, they will
never be heard" (Rabinovitch, 2004, p.109). Discussions of experiences of participation
which encompass a broader scope of opportunities may identify new information about
participatory supports and constraints.
Degree of influence: What influence do “poor” people have on decision-making, and is this influence clearly communicated by the initiative to ‘poor” participants?

Whatever initiative is undertaken, for the process of community engagement to be genuinely respectful, experiential members must play a central role in decision-making concerning goals, objectives, activities and strategies

(Rabinovitch, 2004, p. 113)

Behind Arnstein’s ladder of participation is the assumption that genuine or meaningful participation involves the ability to influence the project in which you are participating. This understanding of genuine participatory processes is echoed throughout research on participation (Bennett and Roberts, 2004; Cornwall, 2004; Cornwall and Gaventa, 2001). Yet influence is not the same as control. Marginalized citizens might not want to control programs, but still want programs to be responsive to their input. One study on visible minority parents’ participation in child care centres found that parents wanted not control, but input, into the centre (Ferguson, 2002). Further to this point, and as stated in the introduction, Wharf, Cossom and Wharf Higgins suggest that government advisory councils, such as the National Council of Welfare, serve as a much needed voice for reform, regardless of whether or not government policy is changed as a result (Wharf, Cossom and Wharf Higgins, 2003). But Arnstein contested the idea that giving voice to a need for reform is a sufficient outcome, stating that success comes when participant’s voices are heeded (Arnstein, 1969). Neither of these positions deal with the reality that people living in poverty, like all other groups, do not speak with one voice. Thus it may not be simple for initiatives to hear or heed the multiplicity of voices and perspectives of people living on low income.

Baker Collins suggests project coordinators need to be clear at the outset as to what kind of power participants will have. She cites work with grassroots organizations in
India which sought to “use what spaces were available to develop solutions for themselves, rather than to engage directly against state policies” (Baker Collins, 2005). In her own research, Baker Collins worked with women belonging to a Canadian food co-op, most of whom lived on welfare. These women were asked to contribute to a Participatory Poverty Assessment, exploring how the social assistance system, community attitudes and poverty shaped their lives. The group followed their analysis of their own poverty with discussion about the food co-operative and its role in supporting their lives. Their participation did not give them the power to change provincial welfare policy, though the results of their research were intentionally distributed through policy decision-making networks, especially trenchant critiques of food pricing that disrupted the capacity of women to care for their households. The benefit back to participants was changes in the food co-op, such as more events, more participation in the executive and co-op policy change, though still seeking a broader system change without raising expectations unrealistically. Participation, then, may be seen as more meaningful by participants if their sphere of influence is clear, whether it be direct solutions for themselves or in changing policy or practice. Baker Collins’ research demonstrates several different ways how poor women could participate in poverty reduction work and change policies at a micro level. While the project was designed to inform policy making at a macro level, if no change at that level occurs, the participants still experience success (Baker Collins, 2005).

While most research on participation of the “poor” identifies the need for participants to hold some degree of influence on outcomes, there is little discussion of how participants are informed of the influence they may have exerted, or how conflicting input from “poor” participants is addressed or resolved. These points are important and
require further examination. Also, it is important to learn how influence is exerted through the differing types of participation reviewed in the previous section.

**Ratio of “poor” to “non-poor” participants: Does the number of “poor” participants matter?**

*If the traditional power elite hold the majority of seats, the have-nots can be easily outvoted and outfoxed (Arnstein, 1969, p.4).*

Arnstein notes the importance of having a majority of marginalized citizens on a board if they are to have influence (Arnstein, 1969). The membership of Women Organizing Activities for Women, an organization which sought to understand the barriers that women faced in their community, was composed of eighty women on low income and eleven community service providers (Reid and Tom, 2006). A National Council of Welfare study found that one of the important factors for “poor” people engaged in multi-sectoral groups was what proportion of the group was “poor” people. The study raises the question of whether participation might be only token because of the low number of poor people represented on boards. It also suggests that the number of “poor” people on boards is too small to have the balance of power (National Council of Welfare, 1973). Funicello made a similar critique: if low-income people do not hold the balance of power in a group, their interests are bypassed. She says: “Cross-class coalitions mean using low-income people for the ends of the middle-class people. It never works unless it starts with a goal that cannot bypass poor folks” (cited in Leondar-Wright, 2005, p. 105). Three Victoria based poverty focused initiatives developed policy or practice guidelines around the ratio of “poor” to “non-poor” involved. One, a group of homeless people, opened their meetings to others, but only to one such person per meeting. This ensured that the members were not overwhelmed with guests, as “they knew they would not feel safe enough to speak out” (Rabinovitch, 2004, p.100). Another
initiative developed a policy that a minimum of two members of each committee or working group must be people with experience living on low income. This policy was intended to ensure peer support within meetings and also to make it more likely that at least one voice of experience would be present in each meeting, as people living on low income are less able to consistently attend meetings (Quality of Life CHALLENGE, 2007). A participant in the Capital Urban Poverty Project reports the decision not to proceed with the project until one third of representatives at the table could speak first hand as to the experiences and realities of poor people. She further states that there are times where a critical mass from a particular experiential community needs to be present, such as “when key research questions and values are decided upon, and key findings are to be interpreted for communication, and when you want as much action as you do research” (Reitsma-Street, personal communication, 2008). In order to get the weight and variety that can influence direction, sometimes this critical mass needs to be the majority, sometimes one third or more, but always more than just one or two persons. This ratio is not necessary for every meeting, but is needed for key decisions (Reitsma-Street, personal communication, 2008). While few initiatives develop policy regarding the ratio of “poor” to “non-poor” people, it is evident in these examples that it is important in practice. But more research is needed on the impact of the ratio of “poor” people.

While research does not definitively establish the specifics of the ratio of “poor” to “non-poor” participants, some initiatives have implemented varying practices to influence ratio, and justify these practices by citing concerns about safety, isolation, lack of power and feelings of tokenism. There are interesting differences from group to group as to which ratio of “poor” to “non-poor” each deemed appropriate. These differences suggest
that a ratio of “poor” participants varies in importance for poverty reduction initiatives and for the participants within them.

**Relationships:** Does it matter if either pre-existing or new relationships are formed between “poor” participants or across income groups?

*A person is not seen as a citizen unless they are recognised as belonging to a human community. There needs to be a conscious relationship between people in poverty and others that is not based on dependency but on the taking of action together, trusting one another and knowing one another’s capacities and potentials (Bennett and Roberts, 2004, p.32).*

If “poor” participants do not hold the balance of power, their relationships with “non-poor” participants may be essential in moving forward their ideas. Participation could lead to the formation of new relationships and networks which, for some, is an important aspect of making participation enjoyable and meaningful. These relationships could provide information sharing routes and help in the development of support networks. Women participants in a Bhutanese income-generating and adult education program reported that alliances formed through working collectively were one of the positive aspects of participation (Greene-Roesel and Hinton, 1998). Relationships are also important for the social opportunities they provide. Volunteers in community resource centres noted visiting, talking and socializing, together with a desire to build profound relationships, as a valued part of volunteerism, especially for volunteers with limited incomes (Reitsma-Street, Maczewski and Neysmith, 2000). Not only does socializing likely make participation more pleasant, but personal relationships may make participants in heterogeneous groups more ready to consider new perspectives. It is unlikely that these relationships could be built through short term participation, such as a
focus group, and the desire and usefulness of relationships points to the importance of longer term participation options. The formation of genuine relationships could make the connection between “poor” and “non-poor” participants more interactive, rather than extractive, and this could mitigate feelings of tokenism (Bennett and Roberts, 2004). Further research including both “poor” and “non-poor” participants might produce useful results on the relative importance of between-income peer and cross-income relationships for these two constructed groups.

The literature suggests that relationships are not consistently important for participants. Respondents in an evaluation of a multi-sectoral poverty reduction initiative reported highly varied responses, from very to not important, to questions as to how important meeting people outside their usual network and forming new working relationships were (Littner, 2008). Similarly, members of a food co-op noted that some people joined simply for extra food, and not necessarily for a social connection. Further, given the introduction of a policy under which welfare recipients were encouraged to report on each other through fraud lines, a culture of mistrust has been developed in some groups of people living on low income. This makes the formation of relationships much more difficult (Baker Collins, 2005). The relationship factor may be more influenced by individual interest than other factors reviewed in this thesis.

Relationships impact participation in more ways than providing opportunities for new relationships to develop. A person’s sense of belonging is both a precursor to, and a consequence, of participation (Wharf Higgins, 1999). Thus, new relationships developed through participation increase participants’ sense of belonging and self esteem and so help support future participation. Given the varying degree of the importance of relationships in the literature, further discussion of experiences of
participation in which relationships are an influential factor may point to useful strategies that can develop the necessary flexibility to foster relationships.

Labelling “poor” participants: Do initiatives need to identify participants as “poor”? Do the words used to identify “poor” people matter?

The reluctance of some people to be identified with poverty is not an argument for excluding people with experience of poverty … Instead it may have broader implications for how existing debates and campaigns organise and address the issues associated with poverty if they are to become more inclusive. (Beresford et al., 1999, p. 47)

Although poverty reduction initiatives bring people from diverse backgrounds together, the initiatives also separate them into categories of “poor” people and “everybody else”. People with experience living on low income are often asked to publicly identify their income status, or label themselves, as part of their participation in poverty reduction initiatives. Labels are useful for poverty reduction initiatives which seek to demonstrate or document the participation of the “poor”, and also to determine who is eligible for subsidies and honoraria. Yet the use of a label may exclude those who do not identify with the label, or may force people to revise their self image in order to participate. Even “poor” participants who label themselves as such may be reluctant to wear this label publicly. In a study of cross class alliances in welfare rights movements, Cummings found that poor women wanted to be treated as activist peers by their middle class allies, keeping poverty labels “out there” and not attached to them (Leondar-Wright, 2005). Similarly, Lister notes the negative reactions to the word ‘poverty’ from many of those with direct experience of poverty, pointing out that we also use ‘poor’ to mean ‘inferior’. “To call someone ‘poor’ was to attach the label to the person, rather than
recognising that poverty is a circumstance that someone falls into, not a personal quality (cited in Bennett and Roberts, 2004, p. 22).

Wood acknowledges the usefulness of labels for government programs, but describes the practice of labelling groups of people as “an act of valuation and judgement involving prejudices and stereotyping” (Wood, 1985, p. 347). Gans also discusses the negative impact of labels on the poor, and notes that negative labels transform behaviour and magnify it into a character failing. “As a result, welfare recipients become defective personalities or deficient moral types; that they are also family members, churchgoers, or neighbours is immaterial. Indeed, one of the purposes of labels is to strip labelled persons of other qualities” (Gans, 1995, p. 12). These negative impacts may occur when labels are used even though poverty reduction initiatives do not intend them.

Some potential participants may refuse poverty labels, and thus be excluded from participation which requires self-identification as a “poor” person. Refusal to identify as part of an income group or class has consequences for collective organizing around economic issues. Savage argues that in Britain there are no longer clear and articulated views about collective class groupings and locations within the class system. In American studies he found that people tend to claim middle class status which is the least loaded of the class categories, even when socio-economic data suggests the middle class is less prevalent. This ambivalence of these false claims may be ways to refuse class identity (Savage, 2000). Leondar-Wright adds that when working class labels were offered as a fourth option, almost half identified in this way. Few people, however, wanted to identify as low class (Leondar-Wright, 2005).
Cruikshank suggests that the “poor” cannot easily refute their status; for example, they cannot refuse the terms of welfare if they are dependent on welfare for income. However, one strategy of resistance for the poor might be to refuse “to be what our relations to the state have made us” (Cruikshank, 1999, p.121). Within cross class alliances which seek to empower the poor, the poor are constituted as a community based on what they lacked. It may be that participating in poverty reduction initiatives with the identity of a “poor” person disallows this key element of political resistance (Cruikshank, 1999).

The use and the types of label may affect participation. Self identification as “poor” is usually found primarily in the very “poor”; those with little to no income or those receiving income assistance. The choice of words to describe poverty can be helpful in attracting a wider number of people who self-identify in this way. The Quality of Life CHALLENGE, a poverty reduction initiative, found that it was rarely able to attract participants using the word “poor”, but had greater success with the phrase “living on low income”. Poverty is associated not just with a deficit of income, but also with a deficit of positive life aspects such as love, happiness and friendship. Stereotypes about who lives in poverty make it harder for people to self-identify. If they are not homeless, on welfare, unemployed or mentally ill, people do not see themselves as “poor”. The stigma associated with related terms such as “homeless” may make it particularly difficult for some people, such as parents who lived with their children in motels, to identify with these labels even if they accurately describe their situation (Quality of Life CHALLENGE, 2007).

Two examples follow of successful selections of labels which are based on the preferences of those being labelled. The first example is the definition of their group arrived at by the Quality of Life CHALLENGE Community Action Team. It decided on the
following definition of their group: “a group of action-oriented people dedicated to making change in BC’s Capital Region. This group of people have experience living on a low, limited or fixed income” (Quality of Life CHALLENGE, 2007, p.1). The ordering of their definition intentionally places the income description last, and leaves the language open to people no longer living on low, limited or fixed incomes. The second example is the decision by Rabinovitch to use the word ‘experiential’ instead of ‘client’ or ‘consumer’, in part because the experiential women she worked with liked it and used it themselves. Further, she says: “Unlike the word ‘client’, ‘experiential’ does not identify a person by her relationship to a program, service or professional or the word “consumer” which suggests someone who purchases or uses goods or services. ‘Experiential’ is merely descriptive, saying, in essence, ‘I have been there’” (Rabinovitch, 2004, p. 13-14).

There appears to be conflict between the desires of participants with experience living on low income not to be labelled as “poor” and the needs of a poverty reduction initiative to document participation of the “poor”. Given this tension it would be useful to learn whether language choice can mitigate the negative impacts of using a label. Additionally, it would be useful to examine the extent that poverty reduction initiatives are willing to give up the labelling needed to document the participation of the “poor” in the hopes of increasing that participation.

Compensation: Do “poor” people need to be compensated financially for participation?

*Simple items like transportation costs are usually taken for granted by more affluent persons when they consider becoming involved in an organization; in a poor people’s group, however, the organization must often provide these costs if its members are to actively participate. A small amount of money can go a long*
way towards building membership by enabling participation (National Council of Welfare, 1973, p. 28)

Compensation is discussed in many practice and in some academic texts as an important part of removing barriers to participation (Leondar-Wright, 2005; Stout, 1996; Conway, 2004; Reitsma-Street, Maczewski and Neysmith, 2002; Ferguson, 2002; Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2002; National Council of Welfare, 1973). Despite this, many poverty reduction initiatives do not consistently pay the cost of participation, or, if they do, do not promote the fact that they do so. Stout reflects on the common argument that groups cannot pay compensation because they do not have enough money in their budgets. She says, “If we are going to work to build diversity, we simply must create the budget that will allow it to happen. It has to be a priority” (Stout, 1996, p. 134). Groups are also reluctant to cover the costs of participation because they feel that participation is not valued unless it requires some energy and effort. Rosado agrees that people were more likely to value participation opportunities for which they have to expend some energy to access, such as fundraising part of the costs of attending a conference, but notes that requiring people to do additional work in order to participate sets up a class barrier (Leondar-Wright, 2005, p. 132).

One further area of concern expressed in the literature is that people would access bursaries even though they had not needed them. However, a participant in an anti-poverty group reports that her organization always helps people with travel costs for its weekend retreats, and does not require them to prove need. She knows of only one time that this practice has been abused (Leondar-Wright, 2005, p. 132-133). Rabinovitch states that being paid for their time and expertise is an effective motivator for marginalized people, providing a statement of respect and value, and acts as positive encouragement. Being paid puts the experiential community member on an equal
footing with staff and creates a culture of co-workers. While the opportunity is there for a “poor” participant to take the money and run, the money itself is rarely the only reason people engage. “Rather, it reinforces the value of their involvement. People see their input is sought after and recognized as necessary, in part because they are paid” (Rabinovitch, 2004, p. 99).

The discrepancy between the importance literature places on compensation and the reluctance of some poverty reduction initiatives to pay compensation is interesting, especially given the stated desires of many initiatives to encourage higher participation of “poor” people. Further discussion on this topic may help to understand whether this discrepancy is due to an overemphasis on compensation in literature, or to overlooking of the importance of compensation in practice, or to resource constraints of poverty reduction initiatives which are aware of the importance of compensation but are unable to consistently provide it.

**All this to say…**

Literature on participation and poverty reduction initiatives was used to identify and investigate a range of possible factors which influence participation of the “poor” in poverty reduction initiatives. This exploration increased my awareness of factors which may be part of the experiences of participation of the “poor” in poverty reduction initiatives. Evidence suggests that types of participation, degree of influence, ratio of “poor” to “non-poor” participants, relationships, labelling “poor” participants and compensation all influence participation of the “poor”. However, the literature in this area focuses mainly on poverty reduction work in developing countries. Additionally, it tends to be focused on a particular type of participation, in which “poor” participants are directly
engaged in decision-making at a board level. While relationships are seen to be important, much of the literature assumes an adversarial working culture in which a balance of power between “poor” and “non-poor” is needed to move work forward.

Based on the above, I have undertaken a qualitative study, set in a western Canadian city, which explores the nuances and tensions of local experiences of participation of “poor” people in poverty reduction initiatives. The purpose of this thesis study is not to present a universal model for participation. Rather the factors identified in the literature served to shape the design of the interviews, and to initiate a context specific exploration of the experiences and understandings of people who participate in poverty reduction initiatives.
CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

This was a qualitative study which explored opinions, attitudes, feelings and experiences about the participation of people living on low income in poverty reduction initiatives. The purpose of the study pointed toward an action research methodology, given the desire to apply the findings both within poverty reduction initiatives and my own future practice. Initially, I had hoped to conduct the research as part of my work as a practitioner in a poverty reduction initiative. However, this was not possible due to budget constraints and so I chose to conduct this research outside of work hours. An action research methodology encouraged me to take time for reflexivity while completing the thesis and to use the lessons learned in further research after completion of this thesis.

The focus on participation suggested a participatory action research (PAR) methodology. Budd Hall describes PAR as “a method of research involving full participation of the community, as a dialogical educational process and as a means of taking action for change” (cited in Carroll, 2004, p. 10). Using a PAR methodology would have entailed a strong role for others in the conduct of the research and so would have required additional time and resources to support research training and to ensure some consistency in data collection and analysis methods. I had concerns about my ability to adequately support a PAR approach for thesis research.

Verna St. Denis summarises community-based participatory research as a “way in which communities without socio-political power can use social science research to support their struggle for self-determination by gaining control of information that can influence decisions about their lives” (St. Denis, 2004, p. 292). The concept of using
research as an empowerment tool was attractive, but literature about empowerment made me question the likelihood of these goals being fulfilled, especially given what was possible within an unfunded part time master’s research project. Kirby and McKenna’s research from the margins was also considered, but not adopted. This was because of the challenge of developing the capacity of people who are normally the objects of research to become the researchers of their own situations.

In addition to concerns about insufficient resources to support people learning how to do research (something I was also learning), I was concerned about my ability to surrender sufficient control over the research to accommodate these methodologies. The completion of a thesis is at least partly an assessment of a student’s own abilities as a researcher, and there were already constraints on methodological and method decisions imposed by the supervisor and committee structure.

It remained key throughout the selection of a methodology that the research question should come from within the community. While the question should nurture my curiosity, it should lead to answers which could be used as part of a community development process. Thus, extensive time was spent developing the question in concert with participants in poverty reduction initiatives. This focus on community led to a Community Action Research methodology.

Community Action Research is rooted in four key values: social justice, agency, community connectedness and critical curiosity (Reitsma-Street & Brown, 2004). These four values were all present in my thesis research. The research was rooted in the social justice beliefs that poverty must be reduced, and that poverty reduction initiatives would be more effective if they included people living on low income. This overt intention to act as agent for change was action-oriented and responded to a need identified by many in
poverty reduction initiatives, such as Vibrant Communities, KAIROS Canada, Christian Aid, Inclusive Cities Canada, Modernizing Income Security for Working Age Adults, Annie E. Casey Foundation and the Commission on Poverty, Participation and Power.

The research was structured to support dialogue and shared learning within the community of those involved in poverty reduction initiatives. It was not assumed that this community was homogeneous; rather it was assumed that there were sharp differences in the lifeworlds of its members. Those who participated directly in the research were to be involved in collective reflexivity about the inclusion of people living on low income. It was hoped that these participants might apply their reflections within their respective poverty reduction initiatives. Building the capacity of those involved in poverty reduction initiatives to develop collective expertise in the inclusion of people living on low income added to community connectedness. Finally, the research was rooted in curiosity. Rather than seeking to prove something practitioners knew, it sought to answer a question practitioners puzzle over: why, when poverty reduction initiatives set inclusion of people living on low income as a priority, did it not occur? The following sections of this chapter were organized using the ten processes of community action research as Reitsma-Street and Brown propose (2004).

Decide to join together to address a community concern

As an active participant in several poverty reduction initiatives, I am aware that understanding how to better support participation of people living on low income is interesting to many other participants in these initiatives. For example, Vibrant Communities (www.vibrantcommunities.ca), a pan-Canadian poverty reduction initiative, identified the extent of low-income participation as a concern when evaluating the first
four years of its initiative. It went on to note the questions it hoped to examine in the next phase, including what impact including low-income residents centrally in the development of an initiative might have, and in what ways low-income leaders might provide input (Leviten-Reid, 2004). This interest to include people living on low income was also reflected in the emergence of the Inclusive Cities Canada movement. Practice based texts have been written documenting the need for participation of the “poor” and strategies to support this participation, by authors ranging from Centre of Excellence for Women’s Health (2004), Atlantic Region Population and Public Health Branch (2002), Annie E. Casey Foundation (2002), to Christian Aid (2001). This topic has also received attention in development work (Hickey and Mohan (eds.), 2004; Gujit and Shaw (eds.), 1998), in disability literature (Campbell, Copeland and Tate, 1999; Yeo and Moore, 2003) and by a range of academics (Wharf Higgins, 1999; Ferguson, 2002; Reitsma-Street, Maczewski and Neysmith, 2000).

This research was conducted in a western mid-size city. Two local poverty reduction initiatives, from which the sample was drawn for interviews, were also committed to better understand participation of people living on low income. This thesis did not study these specific poverty reduction initiatives themselves, but rather sampled members from these initiatives for interviews. To protect the confidentiality of participants in this research, these poverty reduction initiatives are not named.

The two initiatives focused on very different populations. They were chosen in an effort to understand how poverty reduction initiatives engage a diverse group of people who are “poor”. One initiative primarily works with people who are living without stable homes, many of whom are street-entrenched. It provides basic front line service such as food, counselling and advocacy. The other initiative is focused on the working poor and primarily conducted research and communication services to inform policy. It does not
provide direct service to individual people. Both initiatives provide a range of opportunities for participation of people living on low income, such as membership on committees, participation in focus groups, providing one on one advice and delivering services.

Members of my thesis committee are all concerned with poverty reduction, using different approaches and methods to address this concern. They agreed to work with me for a time to support my research on this issue in order to produce a thesis. A community advisory committee agreed to work with me in order to support my research and direct the development of a product to share the findings with poverty reduction initiatives after the thesis was completed. Members of this advisory committee are also concerned about poverty reduction and participation, and all had experience living on low income.

**Explore the experiences and expertise of those concerned**

One source of expertise was the research and analysis presented in the previous chapter. In that research, a key conclusion is that participants in poverty reduction initiatives have documented concerns and questions about how to support the participation of “poor” people in their initiatives. My thesis research sought to provide some answers to these questions, and began with the voices of “poor” people involved in poverty reduction initiatives. As such, the perspectives of people living on low income were privileged and acknowledged as valid in this research, though not the only perspectives explored. Data were collected from both “poor” and “non-poor” people, but the research was entered into through the experience and priorities of people who are “poor”.
As mentioned above, an advisory committee for the thesis research was formed from people who all had experience living on low income and had been involved in poverty reduction initiatives. An advisory group could help to serve as an entry point into a community or network, discuss project goals and research approach, help find potential study participants and promote ownership of research findings (Curtis, 1989). The intention was that the group would actively guide the research. The discussion chapter includes reflection as to how the process of engaging participants in this research mirrored many of the processes discussed in the research. Although four people agreed to be part of this group and signed a consent form allowing me to use advisory meeting and discussions as data, one person never attended any meetings. The three people who did attend meetings also completed interviews as part of their participation. The advisory committee met twice as part of the research, and members also provided advice outside of meetings. The group was further interested in guiding an additional product after my thesis, such as a workshop or handbook, to share the findings of the research in a more practical way with the communities in which they work.

What is absent from this thesis is the voice of “poor” people who choose not to participate in poverty reduction initiatives. Given my limited budget and time, I did not attempt to include this group. Benoit et al discuss the challenges of researching such populations: (a) the size of the membership is unknown; (b) people are reluctant to acknowledge belonging to the group, because membership involves being the object of hate or scorn; and (c) members are distrustful of non-members and are likely to refuse to cooperate with them or to give unreliable answers to questions (Benoit et al., 2005).
Devise, revisit and reinvent principles

The members of the advisory committee and I developed working principles at our first meeting, including respect for each other and our input, confidentiality of discussions and a goal of using positive language which we could all understand. One of the challenges flowing from these principles was balancing the academic demands of writing in the formal style of this thesis with the plain language style to which our advisory committee was committed. While the thesis was not a product primarily for the advisory committee, it was important for members and research participants to be able to read and understand it without feeling overwhelmed so that they could provide meaningful input.

Develop decision-making procedures

The advisory committee discussed decision-making procedures regarding principle selection, research design, interpretation and ownership of data and use of research results (Reitsma-Street & Brown, 2004). This followed Green’s statement that the subjects of participatory processes must primarily decide the ‘how’ and ‘what’ of participation (Green, 1998). It was important to clarify academic requirements for a thesis and to acknowledge how these may differ from other research experiences. It was agreed that the researcher and thesis committee had final decision making authority over the research design, analysis and thesis writing, and that the advisory team made final decisions on working principles, ownership of the data and use of research results outside the thesis, including production of a related product for the community. Despite not having final decision-making control over the research focus and the thesis itself, the
advisory committee members input was used to revise the participatory factors being researched, the interview questions, and the ways research participants were found.

**Negotiate resources, access and allies**

As all research participants were offered the opportunity to choose the location and time of our interviews, there were few related transportation or child care costs. Some interviews happened in coffee shops, some in people’s offices or homes, some in my home, and some in social service offices. All research participants identified by the researcher as “poor” were offered a $25 honorarium as well as compensation for child care or any transportation costs they might have incurred. Not all research participants took the honoraria. Two refused it: one asked me to give the honorarium to someone who needed it more and a second agreed to take five dollars but asked me to keep the twenty dollars or pass it on to someone more in need. Though I mentioned the honoraria in the consent form, I do not believe the honorarium was a coercive factor for anyone to complete the interview. The funds for the honoraria, transportation and child care costs primarily came from my personal budget, with a substantial contribution by a community of friends interested in supporting the research, who held a garage sale to help defray costs.

There were not sufficient resources to financially compensate advisory committee members for their time, so an exchange of services was discussed and agreed to. This exchange offered a thank you for their time for work which first and foremost was for my own benefit. These exchanges included assistance in writing grant applications, support for work search and support for research connected with one member’s own graduate studies.
Other allies supported the research, including the two poverty reduction initiatives from which I drew research participants, my family and friends, my thesis committee, other students in my program, and my workplace.

As part of the process to complete research affiliated with an academic institution, it was necessary to submit an application for ethical review of this thesis research to the UVIC Human Research Ethics Board.

**Design research procedures**

Perhaps every graduate student wants their research to be too big, to answer too many questions, and to test too many theoretical frameworks by using too many methods. This was certainly a challenge for me. I could see multiple methods were possible to answer my question. Textual analysis was eliminated because so much of the processes in poverty reduction initiatives are not captured on paper, particularly the thoughts and feelings of participants (Kirby and McKenna, 1989). Similarly, observation was eliminated as a primary method, as I felt this was a better way of assessing behaviour then understanding opinions, attitudes and feelings (Esterberg, 2002). I have struggled throughout my data collection to remember that I am not using these two methods. However, the literature review included documents from both poverty reduction initiatives from which I drew my sample of research participants. Also, I maintained a journal and wrote memos throughout the research to capture some observations and this assisted me in analysis.
Data Collection Method

The primary data collection method used was interviews with 19 participants to investigate their experiences and feelings about the participation of “poor” people. Interviews allow researchers to go into greater depth with each individual and to ask questions participants might feel less comfortable answering in a group (Esterberg, 2002). Interviews also made it possible for participants to share stories as to times participation had worked and felt good and times it had not. There would have been insufficient time in a focus group for everyone to share a story.

Sampling

Both “poor” and “non-poor” participants in poverty reduction initiatives were interviewed, as this research was premised on the assumption that members of each group may have had a different understanding and experience of participation of the “poor”. Further, a more clear and shared understanding of participation of the “poor” will be a foundation for more fulsome, appropriate conditions to promote participation.

Experiential knowledge is often positioned in competition with “official” knowledge, such as that of service providers or academics. These differing standpoints vie for the space of “truth”. Experiential knowledge is often treated as anecdotal and unrepresentative. Yet, standpoint theorists posit that those who provide knowledge from the margins are aware both of the disconnect between their own experience and the hegemonic worldviews and of the partiality of their own visions, and so they are more likely to produce a credible account (Conway, 2004). Yet activists in marginalized communities frequently reported feeling unheard or ignored in processes which concerned them (Yeo and Moore, 2003, Bennett and Roberts, 2004, Stout, 1996, UK Coalition Against Poverty, 2000, Leondar-Wright, 2005, Knoche, 2004).
Project Inter-Seed, a project to explore the health care experiences of people with disabilities, approached this conflict by recognizing the validity of both positions. The project took the standpoint of people with disabilities by using peoples’ stories of experience to identify issues about health care that were important to people with disabilities. Reported experiences were not treated as truth but as what needs to be researched and understood. The researchers noted, however, that consumers of services often cannot see why some parts of service provision happen as they do. The researchers were not substituting experiential knowledge for official knowledge or vice versa. Each account had different authority, and part of the analysis included consulting policy documents to connect findings to policy. The knowledge goal was to offer a view of services from the bottom up and their actual effects on clients, families and health care providers (Campbell, Copeland & Tate, 1999). This process of blended perspectives is similar to the vertical slice approach Wharf and McKenzie propose. This approach brought together service users, front line staff members, district supervisors and head office personnel into a policy group. Service users and front line staff have “hot” knowledge, grounded in people and their troubles. Policy makers’ knowledge is “cold”, removed from immediate crises. The blending of hot and cold knowledge has the potential for shared learning (Wharf and McKenzie, 2004). Project Inter-Seed and Wharf and McKenzie’s vertical slice place different emphasis on the importance of marginalized voices, and thus on the power these voices have, but both begin from a place of desiring their participation.

We believe that people with experience of poverty have a particular contribution to make to poverty discussions and anti-poverty action…At the same time, we are not saying that only poor people have something to say about poverty, or that they alone have a right to talk or write about it…Instead we want to stress the
importance of an inclusive approach to poverty, which recognizes the validity of all voices seeking to challenge poverty (Beresford et. al, 1999, p. 50).

The sample of participants in my research was drawn with consideration of diversity. My early training in research was quantitative, so I think about trying to create representative samples. I had to rethink how to create samples for qualitative research and look purposefully for samples that attended to theoretical interests so as to ensure rich, diverse data. Several groups of people were identified whose perspective it was important to include, both because of their higher likelihood to experience poverty and because of their unique participatory needs. Incidences of poverty increase with some characteristics: employment, regional variations, age or gender of the head of the household member, and education level (Ramcharan, 1989; Reitsma-Street, M., Hopper, A. & Seright, J., 2000). In the community where the research was conducted, demographic groups most likely to experience poverty are women, single parents, Aboriginal people, new Canadians, people with disabilities, youth and the elderly. These are not mutually exclusive categories (Quality of Life CHALLENGE, 2003). Parents with children living at home were explicitly included, because parents require different support to participate. Aboriginal people were also explicitly included, because participation of Aboriginal people is notably limited in multi-sectoral initiatives despite their disproportionately high rates of poverty. Finally, a mix of genders was included, because men and women participate differently (Gujit and Shaw, 1998; Lang and Leong, 2004). There were other groups I considered attempting to explicitly include, such as visible minorities, people with disabilities and transgendered people. However, given the small sample size, while some participants identified with these groups, members of these groups were not explicitly sought.
In order to further explore the assumption that people with different income levels experience the participation of people living on low incomes differently, income categories were constructed in which to group the participants. The term "poor" was used in this research intentionally. Though there is no homogeneous community of the "poor" (Cruikshank, 1999), within poverty reduction initiatives a dualism of "poor" and "non-poor" is strongly present. People who “belong” to both categories hold assumptions about the homogeneity of the other category, i.e. all “poor” people are the same and all “non-poor” people are the same. Though the research design reinforced these two constructed categories, attention was paid to the diversity within the groups.

As the categories were constructed, it was necessary to have some definition of poverty, despite the many shades of grey between the categories. For the purposes of this research, self definition was used, as Beresford et al. recommend (1998). Most “poor” participants had self-defined as part of their participation in the poverty reduction initiative and I used this self-definition to identify potential participants from each group. Most people categorized as “poor” had at some point revealed their income level as part of their participation. There were some participants who were harder to categorise as “poor” or “non-poor”, being people who had held staff positions which, while low paying, enabled them to maintain a much higher quality of life than the people they served. While income alone might have categorized them as “poor”, they were in relative positions of power compared to the people who used their services. Most of these people who I had initially categorised as “poor” also self-defined as “poor” during the interview. However, some self-defined as “non-poor” instead and these people were later re-categorized as “non-poor” following their interviews. Several other participants categorized as “non-poor” described their history of living on low income, so though they
now had higher incomes, their experiences gave them a different perspective from someone who had never experienced poverty.

The research used a combination of purposive and snowball sampling. Purposive sampling was exclusively used in the initiative where I had many connections, but in the second initiative snowball sampling was necessary to find appropriate and interested participants. In the initiative that I know best, I had many connections and it was easy to purposively identify potential participants. I chose participants who were both diverse in the types of participation of the “poor” they had experienced (such as Arnstein’s ladder) and who were diverse in gender, income and Aboriginal status. I asked approximately half “poor” and half “non-poor” people to participate. It was necessary to carefully consider power over relationships when asking people to take part in the research. Several potential participants were not interviewed because I felt I was in a position of power over them through my work connections. As well, I had to be careful to remember in the interviews to draw out the context of their participation from participants, and not to simply apply my own perceptions or experiences with the examples they provided. Though I had trusting relationships established with people, I had to be clear that this research was for my benefit and that people were being asked to participate not as a favour to the initiative, but to the issue of participation of the “poor” and to me. Multiple roles and role conflict can provide ethical dilemmas and possibly reduce participants’ willingness to fully disclose if the participants are concerned their comments will hurt the researcher’s feelings, or that the researcher may share these comments outside of the nature of the research (Holian, 1999).

I also decided to include myself as a participant. I am the central staff person responsible for supporting and developing the participation of people living on low income within one initiative. As such, I felt it was important to explicitly include my
experience in this research. I interviewed myself using the same questions as others were asked, taped and transcribed my answers, and treated my voice no differently from other interview participants in the analysis.

In the second initiative, connecting with people who did not know me was harder. Early on, it became apparent snowball sampling would be necessary, and a key informant within that initiative agreed to help find other participants who met my sampling requirements (attempting inclusion of men, women, parents and Aboriginal people). I trusted the key informant’s respectful and ethical working style to know that she would be equally careful not to coerce people into doing interviews because of her power over them. Some participants would never have completed an interview had she not made the initial contact, but I believe all participants felt free to refuse, and some people she asked did refuse.

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Summary of Participant Demographics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Demographics of sample</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Income level</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-poor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Men</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aboriginal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aboriginal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-Aboriginal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-parent</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: I am one of the 19 participants.

The final sample included nineteen people, of whom ten were categorized as "poor" and nine categorized as "non-poor", based on self-identification and clarification
through the interview. Though the goal was to have equal participation of participants from both initiatives, the final sample included eleven participants from one, eight from the other; one person was involved in both initiatives. The ratio of men and people identifying as Aboriginal was lower than I had hoped: four of the nineteen were men and two were Aboriginal. Three more people had agreed to interviews, but for various reasons were unable to participate: two of these were men and two of these were Aboriginal. Table 1 above summarizes the participant demographics, while a table in the Appendix gives explicit demographic detail for each participant. Just over half of participants were “poor”, over three quarters were women, two were Aboriginal and over one third were parents with children living with them. Following are very brief comments on four participants, using pseudonyms, to give a glimpse of the diversity of interview participants.

Nathan grew up in a poor family, but went on to a professional career and is now upper middle class. Growing up, he learned about helping others from his family and communities, including the church.

Peggy was a middle class health worker. After an assault, the death of a family member, and a social safety system that failed to support her, she spiralled into poverty.

Peter volunteers with several different groups. He has schizophrenia and receives disability benefits. He thinks he probably could work part time, but sees his volunteer contributions as more important than trying to earn a little money.

Nadine’s upbringing taught her about the advantage to knowing lots of people with different lifestyles and experiences. However, she says “I don’t think I
experienced knowing a poor person until well into my thirties, or knowingly knowing a poor person”.

*Interview Guide*

The semi-structured interviews were one time and approximately one hour long. I used the intensive interview approach Kirby and McKenna describe, seeking “to discover information about the experiences of the interviewee in the language and gesture of that person” (Kirby and McKenna, 1989, p. 68). To begin, I asked people to tell me a little about themselves, and anything that might impact their participation in poverty reduction initiatives. This captured some demographic information identified as important, such as having children, Aboriginal identity and income source. In this section, some participants also brought up unexpected or invisible demographic issues, such as having a physical or mental disability.

Participants were asked for stories of times when people living on low income had participated in a poverty reduction initiative that had worked well and felt good, and for stories of times that had not worked well or felt good. The subsequent interview questions flowed out of the six factors identified in the literature review that were expected to impact experiences of participation of “poor” people. A nuance of the sixth factor, regarding what language is used to describe poverty, was added by the advisory committee when they reviewed the draft interview guide. If participants did not address some of the six factors identified in the stories they presented, they were prompted with specific questions. At the end of the interview, participants were asked about their perceptions of the importance of participation of people living on low income. In sum the six factors affecting participation are as follows while the complete list of questions used is included in the appendix.
• Types of participation
• Degree of influence
• Ratio of “poor” to “non-poor” participants
• Relationships
• Labelling “poor” participants
• Compensation

Gather and inspect data

At the outset, it was challenging to connect with potential participants who were categorized as “poor”. Several did not have phones and we communicated through messages left with friends and calls to a cell phone dedicated to the research. This cell phone was left on during the work day to be more available. As potential participants at times called and asked to do interviews on very short notice, often that day, an interview kit was prepared with consent forms, tape recorder, tapes, notepad, interview questions, honoraria, as well as money for coffee and for potential costs to participants such as transportation and child care. Though I was prepared to meet participants’ needs, on one occasion I needed to make last minute child care arrangements for my son in order to meet a participant the day she called. Several people agreed to participate in interviews but did not do so. One potential participant made two appointments but did not come to either one, and finally said he could not find time to participate. A second potential participant made two appointments but cancelled both due to other
commitments. A third potential participant asked to complete the interview in writing by email but then did not answer the questions.

Participants chose locations for the interviews in which they would feel most comfortable. Interviews happened in participants’ workplaces, cafes, drop in centres, participants’ homes and in my home. As much as possible, interviews in public spaces were conducted in a way to offer confidentiality; sitting at a table out of earshot of others, meeting in an empty room, and choosing a time when a public space is least used. This was most challenging for the drop in centre, which is almost always full.

All participants were asked at the start of the interview if they would be willing to be taped, but always with a notepad present for those who preferred not to be taped. Four participants asked instead to have notes taken through the interviews. All four were people categorized as “poor”. The tape recorder was placed in a spot where it would capture voices but not draw attention to the interview or intimidate the participant. In an early interview, the new rechargeable batteries brought were not charged, and the generous participant lent me batteries (later replaced) from her television remote control. In subsequent interviews I always had a second set of batteries. However, in a later interview, the batteries died mid-interview, and we did not notice for one to two minutes. The participant kindly restated her missed comments for the tape recorder.

The initial intention was to complete between eight to ten interviews, selecting the final two participants to bring forward dissenting or diverging opinions. It was expected that at ten interviews the researcher would find saturation, and new categories, themes and explanations would stop emerging from the interviews (Marshall, 1995). However, more interviews were completed than anticipated, due to my desire to interview more people who identified as Aboriginal or men. In the last interviews, new
ideas continued to emerge, but they were primarily more nuanced understandings of the factors influencing participation rather than wholly new ideas.

**Analyze data and debate interpretations**

Before each interview I wrote a quick memo in preparation of the context of the interview to record what I expected participants to focus on. I based my expectations on my understanding of the individual’s role in the poverty reduction initiative and my knowledge of their interaction with or support for the participation of “poor” people in the initiative. After each interview I added to this memo a quick summary of what was heard, along with a note of how expectations sometimes diverged from results. I wanted to record my own expectations as part of my reflection on the conversations and my interpretation of the results. I was concerned that I might focus on what I wanted to hear, rather than what the participants were saying, and I hoped that by recording my expectations I could check my desire to push the conversation in that direction. I found this strategy helpful to maintain an open and participant led interview. After each interview was transcribed, any general comments, the interview themes, key messages, and questions or notes for analysis later were added to these memos. This ongoing review process made it easier to identify new probing questions and to further explore themes which were emerging from interviews (Kirby and McKenna, 1989).

After each interview was transcribed and the memo completed, a short summary story was written, using a pseudonym, which summarized the key points. Each story includes several quotes and as much as possible replicates the language of the participants. Initially, I also analyzed the specifics of the entire interview transcript using a two column interview approach. The text of the interview was listed in the left column and in the right column I noted themes and personal comments that were identified in
square brackets. After analyzing three interviews this way, I decided the story summary and memo together were sufficient, and stopped using the two column approach. All the story summaries and memos were read and re-read to collect and describe a list of themes which had emerged. Some of these themes matched the six factors identified before the interviews began; other themes were new and were identified by participants as influencing the participation of the “poor”, either negatively or positively.

**Broadcast results to engage multiple audiences**

Community Action Research includes a process where energy and time are dedicated to sharing results broadly. This process was built into my thesis from the beginning, with conversations or meetings with the advisory group. A feedback meeting will be held with all the participants after the thesis has been submitted for approval to encourage ongoing learning and conversation about participation of the “poor”. The thesis participants were all part of poverty reduction initiatives, and the research was intended to spark and support dialogues within poverty reduction initiatives. Another way to share results was through the ongoing advisory committee, who committed to further translating the thesis results into a more usable product for poverty reduction initiatives, such as a guidebook or a workshop, after the completion of the thesis. Finally, research results will be presented through professional and academic circles. For example, preliminary findings were presented at a national teleconference through Vibrant Communities in 2008 to over 50 participants in poverty reduction initiatives across Canada.
Experiment with actions

The final process in Community Action Research is to experiment with actions. Several participants mentioned during the interviews, or following them, that their reflective process in answering the questions posed would cause them to act differently in a poverty reduction initiative they were part of. My own reflections doing this research have also led me to act differently in initiatives I am part of. For example, one group I was part of restructured its board membership to invite both a service provider and service recipient representative, based on a suggestion from several thesis participants. Another group worked on more explicitly engaging people living on low income with experience of the issue they are focused on, rather than looking for “poor” participants in general. More of these specific recommendations are discussed in the final chapter.

Though part of my goal in this research was to create something useful for my community while fulfilling my academic requirements, I was conscious of the point made by Reid and Vianna that “the desire to serve the community through the expertise of our academic discipline may be the strongest motivator, but it is not sufficient for effective programs or successful collaborations” (Reid and Vianna, 2001, p.339). The focus of my research has been, by necessity, structured to meet academic requirements rather than the needs of the poverty reduction initiatives I support. Hence my findings may not be as useful to poverty reduction initiatives as they might have been had the priorities been reversed.

Research limitations

While analysing the research data I found it useful to remind myself what this research did and did not do. It did explore how participation was experienced positively
or negatively for “poor” people who were already involved. The findings may make participation more attractive for “poor” people who are not involved, but this was not its central purpose. The research may help to convince people who do not see participation of the “poor” as important that such participation is important, but again this was not its central purpose.

There were other potential limitations of my sample. Because participants in this research all had participated in a poverty reduction initiative, and had experienced some exposure to “poor” people’s participation within that initiative, their experiences will not be mirrored by all poverty reduction initiative participants or by people who have not participated in poverty reduction initiatives. Furthermore, no participants expressed significantly dissenting opinions, such as maintaining that participation of people living on low income was unimportant or unworkable within multi-sectoral poverty reduction initiatives. I am unsure if this is due to sampling or because few or no participants in poverty reduction initiatives hold these opinions.

Finally, the choice of method was limited by resources of money and time. Had there been more money and time, the research question might have been answered more effectively with a combination of interviews and focus groups. This would have accommodated the need for detailed descriptions of experiences of participation as well as a broader dialogue, harnessing the energy created when people come together in a group to discuss an idea. However, focus groups were expensive because of costs for food, honoraria, and space. They also required additional time for organization, facilitation and transcription. Choosing between the two methods, the research question was better answered by interviews alone then by focus groups alone.
Research strengths

Despite limitations, this thesis research produced rich, good quality data. Cohen and Crabtree reviewed and summarise criteria for good qualitative research, which I used to assess my thesis research (Cohen and Crabtree, 2008). First, the research should be ethical, respectful and embody the values of empathy, collaboration and service. This research was assessed and approved by the UVIC Human Research Ethics Board. The consent forms were reviewed and revised by people with experience living on low income to ensure informed consent. This research was designed using the Community Action Research values of social justice and community connectedness: answering the research question will inform the process of and contribute to poverty reduction work and the research process sought to build connections, relationships and dialogue. The process of an advisory committee strengthened my relationships with those members, as well as their relationships with each other. While not all of the intended group connections have happened prior to this thesis being submitted, processes have already begun to work collectively to discuss and share the findings. The process also reflected the research findings: work did not only happen in meetings and many connections were made one on one.

The second criterion is that research should be important, meaning that it is pragmatically and theoretically useful and advances current knowledge. This research was designed using the Community Action Research value of curiosity; I asked a question I did not know the answer to, a question which had been asked by many other practitioners in poverty reduction initiatives and the findings have advanced knowledge in that area. Another Community Action Research value is agency or action. This research is action oriented, learning how to do poverty reduction work differently. We’ve begun to apply these findings in my office and in other groups I am part of. We’ve taken these
findings, tried aspects, talked about them, revised, tried again. The data is already beginning to live on the ground.

A third criterion is that the research report is clear and coherent. This thesis is organized logically, following the research trajectory from question to conclusions. The research and analysis process also was transparent, making a clear link between data and conclusions. In my report of the research findings I used the participants’ language as much as possible, and include a variety of quotes as well as paraphrasing. This retains the detail of the data in the report of the findings. The use of pseudonyms in reporting findings demonstrates that data from all participants was used. Following a principle of the advisory committee, the language in the research process (e.g. consent forms, interview questions) and in presenting the findings (e.g. the thesis) is positive language we can all understand. A fourth criterion is that the research uses appropriate and rigorous methods. The sample size more than met the needs for master’s level research, and I strove for saturation. The thesis presents a clear description as to how research participants were chosen, how the data was collected and organized and a rationale for the methodological choice. The qualitative approach to this research was a good fit with the topic, allowing the diversity of experiences of factors which surround participation to emerge. This presents poverty reduction initiatives with information needed to start conversations about participation.

There are three more criteria sometimes used to evaluate qualitative research. The fifth criterion is that research should address potential researcher bias. The thesis attends to reflexivity, including a section in the discussion chapter (p. 135). Throughout the process, I kept a researcher journal, including a memo for each interview and analytical memos to explain my decisions in the analysis process. A sixth criterion is evidence of validity or credibility. Validity may be assessed along an interpretivist perspective, recognising that there are multiple ways of understanding social life and
reality. This research, by interviewing diverse participants across income, seeks to include multiple experiences of participation of people living on low income, thus generating a more fulsome understanding of factors surrounding participation. Participants had the opportunity to review their interviews and summary stories, and three did ask to review them, with no changes requested. The advisory committee has been presented with the findings, and the findings have subsequently been presented in three places external to this thesis process. The seventh and final criterion, verification or reliability of qualitative research, can be assessed as part of a process negotiated between me as a researcher and the readers of this thesis, where I am responsible for reporting information in a way that readers can discern patterns identified and verify the data, its analysis and interpretation. The thesis approval process through the guidance of a supervisor and committee, including the defense, helps to ensure that this standard is met.
CHAPTER FOUR: RESEARCH FINDINGS

Interviews with both “poor” and “non-poor” participants in poverty reduction initiatives explored participants’ beliefs about and experiences of six factors expected to influence participation, based on literature or experience of the advisory group of people living on low income. An additional three factors, not anticipated at the outset of the research, were added by participants in the interviews.

One of the key considerations in designing this research was the possibility that different perspectives between “poor” and “non-poor” people about what makes “poor” people’s participation more meaningful and successful contributed to the low participation of “poor” people in multi-sectoral poverty reduction initiatives. Therefore, the findings below are reported with a comment on differences, if any, between perspectives of “poor” and “non-poor” on each factor. In brief, I found some differences between “poor” and “non-poor” research participants. “Poor” participants were more likely than “non-poor” people to characterise financial compensation as influencing the participation of “poor” people and to be concerned about the language used to describe “poor” people. Most commonly, “non-poor” participants expected “poor” participants to represent all “poor” people, though they did not expect “non-poor” participants to represent all members of their group(s). “Non-poor” participants were also more likely than “poor” people to feel it was important for “poor” participants to identify as “poor”.

Pseudonyms are used throughout the text to help readers identify the distinctions between “poor” and “non-poor”, and to reduce somewhat the repetitive, perhaps annoying, but purposive use of quotation marks. These quotation marks were used to emphasize the false construction of the two groups, though they were often conceived
as homogenous entities. Participants within poverty reduction initiatives frequently discussed their opposite group as if all “poor” or “non-poor” people thought and acted similarly. It is particularly “poor” people who have been falsely conceived of as a community (Fox Piven and Cloward, 1977, Cruikshank 1999), with the other people seen simply as not belonging to that community, despite similar variations in income, demographics and perspectives. “Poor” participants were given pseudonyms beginning with the letter “P” such as Peter and Phyllis and “non-poor” participants had pseudonyms beginning with the letter “N” such as Nadia and Natasha.

**Types of participation: “You start excluding people when you say, we can only do this, we can only do that”**

Participants discussed many types of participation of “poor” people. These included more traditional forms, such as sitting on committees, participating in focus groups or surveys, membership in poor people’s groups and communications processes such as public speaking, media and workshop delivery. Participants also mentioned less traditional forms such as service delivery and creating art. A central message was that a range of options for participation must be offered in order to engage a diverse group of participants, both “poor” and “non-poor”.

**Committees: making decisions**

Sitting on a committee is a common type of participation within social movements, including poverty reduction initiatives. Decisions are often made by committees and so the power to direct an initiative is seen to reside at these tables. This is true of most initiatives, but it need not be so. While there are ways to make committees more inclusive for people living on low income, participants noted that
committees will not work for everyone. Within poverty reduction initiatives, these decision making committees tend to be multi-sectoral. The role of committees in “poor” people’s groups is discussed separately below.

Participants held different opinions about the value of sitting on committees as a means for “poor” people to participate in poverty reduction initiatives, despite the fact that over half of participants’ primary experience of “poor” people’s participation was through committees. One factor was the level of discussion at committees. Nadine and Pamela both felt that “poor” people’s participation was most useful at committees which work at a high policy level, where discussions are less specific to tactics and campaigns. Peter said, conversely, that participation at a high policy level was not useful, but that “poor” people’s participation should be most prioritized in committees responsible for developing specific programs for “poor” people, where input on the details is important. Natasha challenged the tendency of poverty reduction initiatives’ to provide participatory opportunities through committees as the best type of participation, saying “sometimes the right people aren’t at the table because they don’t like tables and you need to create some other way for them to participate”.

Several “poor” and “non-poor” participants noted the importance of inviting “poor” people to participate at committees with a purpose related to their interests and skills. Nadia said, “I think there is a need for a certain level of capability and education and just feeling comfortable in that situation so I am not sure whether we will ever have clients on the board.” She also expressed concern about “poor” people’s reliability in attendance and the need to keep certain discussions confidential from other clients. Nadine asked of her work on a steering committee “Am I here to give advice of my perspective as an expert in my field, or am I here to have a learning experience”? She felt that the participation of “poor” people moved the focus away from the agenda. It is interesting to
consider the many purposes of meetings within poverty reduction initiatives, which might include both learning opportunities for participants and work on projects such as program development or policy analysis. However, clearly not all participants saw the function of individual learning as part of their purpose in participation.

**Poor people’s groups: creating support**

Several “poor” and “non-poor” participants talked about the importance of groups composed only of people with experience living on low income. They noted that “poor” people’s groups supported “poor” people to participate more broadly in multi-sectoral groups as it boosted confidence, provided a space for connection with people with a similar background, gave a separate, protective space for story telling and provided some support in learning communication methods and styles within meetings. As a type of participation itself, “poor” people primarily described a group composed only of “poor” people as a place of emotional support, rather than as a place where they had power, or influence or could set direction for the initiative. Nicholas and Nelly noted that having this kind of space fosters personal story sharing, which, once “poor” people have been able to do, enables them to stay on agenda in other multi-sectoral settings as they feel they have been heard elsewhere. However, as with all types of participation, this will not be everyone’s preference. Patience noted that she felt that her participation was most useful at multi-sectoral groups, rather than in “poor” people’s groups, as there she was able to teach people about the realities of living on low income. So while she believed that membership in a group only for people living on low income was an important support for participation in other ways, it was not a sufficient participatory outlet in itself.

One example of a project controlled by “poor” people was spoken of by several participants. This was a series of experiential workshops, always facilitated by people
who had had experience living on low income, which walked participants through the realities of an aspect of living on low income. The scenarios for the exercises were developed from focus groups and stories shared by people living on low income in this community. Where possible, the facilitator had some connection with the issue as well, so for example a story about challenges “poor” parents experience would be facilitated by a “poor” parent. The facilitators were close enough to the issue that they could bring up specific points in the discussion, and if they chose, share personal examples. However, they were not asked to share extensive details of their own story in a public way. Pamela talked about the training for these facilitators as leadership development, noting that leaders come in all forms, and that “you have to have leaders for the people they are leading”. This type of participation was cited by several “non-poor” participants as very influential on their perspectives about “poor” people and their understanding about the realities of living in poverty.

Two “non-poor” participants had divergent perspectives about the importance of supporting “poor” people’s groups to have more control within poverty reduction initiatives. Speaking of an event organized almost exclusively by “poor” people, Natasha described it as the best event she had participated in, noting that while things were different than she would have done them, it was wonderful to see people using their power and creativity, and that she learned a lot at the event. Nathan described the same event as being in an overfull room, in a run down community centre, with too long speeches. Clearly, no form of participation will work for everyone. These different experiences of the same event, however, may be due to different understandings of the purposes of participation of the “poor”, discussed as a separate factor further in this section.
Focus groups or surveys: providing consultation

If poverty reduction initiatives choose to do so, their direction can be substantially informed through consultations such as focus groups or surveys. Several “non-poor” participants gave positive examples of “poor” people’s participation through focus groups. In one project, these groups were designed to set direction for the initiative and from day one, “poor” people were involved, even to the extent of identifying the topics for the focus groups. Nora said she learned a great deal from listening to a focus group, “it reminds you of what is happening because you don’t see it in your daily life...from my perspective it was very good just to listen”. This willingness to take up the input provided in focus groups is not always present: Nicholas criticized this type of participation “where all the poor and disenfranchised are brought into a community meeting for their input and we never do anything with that”. Similarly, Nadia, who sits on a decision making committee, noted that her committee has not reviewed advice from a series of advisory groups made up of “poor” people when making its decisions.

Fewer participants discussed surveys as forms of participation, though Patience noted that surveys, if used, must be made available in multiple formats. She told an example of a survey which was primarily filled out online as exclusionary. Nora suggested that surveys may be more useful when seeking to gather data from large numbers. Yet written surveys can exclude people with low literacy.

Public speaking and media work: educating about the realities of poverty

The role of “poor” participants as educators of “non-poor” participants came up frequently, and the most common type of participation to fulfil this role was public speaking. Public speaking was spoken of positively by both “poor” and “non-poor” participants, as long as it was provided as one opportunity for participation, rather than
the central way. Pandora, who loves public speaking, said “I was just blown away that people were just asking me to talk about something that I was completely ashamed about, and that they just thought I was amazing”. However, Nathan noted that public speaking where longer, personal stories of poverty are shared does not always achieve its purpose of inspiring and educating “non-poor” people. He spoke about one such speech that “was very much a from the heart experience” and added, however, that “it just didn’t connect with people at my table”.

Similar perspectives were expressed about asking “poor” people to participate in media interviews. Some “non-poor” participants noted concern about exploitation or “poverty pornography”, while “poor” participants emphasized the need for choice. Pandora, who had done media work and had decided not to do so any longer, simply said “I’m not going to be a poster child for this anymore. I don’t want to continue to be seen this way”.

Two “non-poor” women talked about the importance of external or public sharing of stories of “poor” people whose lives are now more stable as sending the message that people can change. “They’re coming to a positive stage and just to get some recognition of that, and that they’re working across boundaries that we wouldn’t expect to see crossed”, Nadia said. Nathan talked about this type of story sharing as promoting a focus on individual change as the solution for poverty, rather than a focus on change in the broader system. This was a danger for poverty reduction initiatives which wanted to keep the message on the need for broader change, and did not intend to reinforce perspectives that “poor” people were responsible for their position and able to change themselves in order to reduce their own poverty. However, Nadia’s experience was that this type of recognition may have been positive for some “poor” participants.
There may be benefit in this type of participation, both for initiatives to inspire further change and for the individuals whose stories are being shared. Yet media work or public speaking is not a preferred participatory option for everyone, and “poor” participants must feel able to refuse this work.

Conferences: making connections and learning

Participants talked about the importance of flexibility for “poor” people to be present and engage with some anonymity within large conferences. Nathan talked about an event where he was later informed there was a “poor” person in every small group, but that many of these people chose not to identify themselves. Pandora described other “poor” people’s attendance at a similar event, saying, “They just got to participate with people not knowing who they were or where they were from and the feedback was [that] it was very interesting”. She said one thing “poor” participants had enjoyed was the opportunity to get into events or venues and to connect with “influential, senior people”.

As the events and venues may be invitation only, there needs to be explicit work to ensure invitations are sent to “poor” people. Nathan further suggested that this be an aspect of event planning, so that volunteers work to ensure that the event is welcoming for a diverse group of people. He told a story about an event at which he had been responsible for hosting a potential donor, introducing her to people, reviewing the program, and generally making her comfortable. No one had been doing that for a “poor” person facilitating a workshop, though he was equally new to the initiative.

Creating art: gaining insight and sharing messages

Many of the positive examples of “poor” people’s participation included participation through art. Nelly enthused about several examples where theatre was used as a research tool to engage in analysis about poverty, describing how theatre
games gave “poor” participants insight into their struggle. “Poor” people who participated in art projects also spoke of the attraction of the arts. Polly said she first connected to a project because it was using art to share a message. She felt marginalized people were more likely to be interested in art because it is an equaliser; education and income are not required to be a great artists. She noted that many artists, like Baudelaire, who told stories of poverty were looked down on in their time. Paula said she participated in an art project, not for socialization or increased income, though these things occurred, but because she was an artist, and it was a chance to make art. She talked about art’s ability to get messages across without saying anything, which makes it accessible to people who are illiterate, and how art makes it possible to talk about difficult things like mental illness. Peggy talked about how even when she had blocks caused by trauma which prevented her from talking or reading, she could write poetry or draw. “When I couldn’t write, I could draw” she said.

Polly, Peggy and Paula were all attracted to their initiatives by the art projects but they subsequently became more deeply involved, and all three took leadership roles in their projects and helped to educate “non-poor” people about some of the realities of poverty. Peggy continued her involvement in other, non-art forms of participation, but the others have not. Peter told me that his first connection with his poverty reduction initiative was through discussion of a potential art project. The art project did not materialise, a decision in which Peter participated, but he found other places to participate within the initiative. Art is a hook, a draw, a tool and a unique method of participation.
Paid work: gaining experience, status and income

Several research participants enthusiastically recommended hiring “poor” people to enable their participation. This echoed Jannit Rabinovitch, a community developer, who once said to me that she advocated not paying participants an honorarium for their input, but instead hiring them as advisors. This strategy of hiring people with experience of the issue being studied is also increasingly common in participatory action research. However, research participants who talked about “poor” people’s participation did not only mean hiring advisors, they also suggested giving someone a job cleaning the bathroom, fixing the photocopier, giving peer support. They maintained that the most successful way to have “poor” people impact service delivery was to have them deliver some of the services. This arrangement changed mind sets and blurred lines between givers and receivers. It also brought “poor” people into staff lines of communication, so they felt more able to provide input about policies and practices, input which went up the chain of communication to the formal decision makers.

Both “poor” and “non-poor” participants who had experienced this form of participation universally praised it. Natalie gave an example of a project participant who had been living on the street, who volunteered to answer phones. Staff soon honoured her dedication and time by paying her, “which was just incredible to her, that we were going to pay her when she was happy to do it”. The same woman then helped the project invaluably by promoting it to other people living on the street, resulting in many more “poor” people coming to focus groups than otherwise would have. Trust was established for new participants because at least one staff person involved in the project was a person who had “been there and done that” and new participants did not feel judged by.
Nicholas explained that people move up in wages and responsibility from small tasks to more substantial work, and often later become full time staff. This process helps boost people’s self worth, he said, and then they “take more ownership and in fact leadership, after a while...and they are really able to comment on what we are doing and what we are not doing”. Nadia confirmed that she has frequent informal conversations with staff about issues surrounding services, providing information she values and uses. This process requires a culture of openness where people feel their input is listened to. “Poor” participants who had been hired by an initiative echoed these comments. Peggy shared a story about being asked to hand address and deliver invitations to a community conference because staff had noticed how nice her printing was. She said, “they had no doubt I could do it...Now they’ve asked me to do it again this year”. She further said, “At [agency name] my input is valued, my opinion is valued. It's so different from the way you are being treated out there”. Patrick told me with pride of being given a job cleaning an office once a month, saying a staff person “figured I was responsible and reliable enough”. Polly mentioned in passing that the organization she works for, which works with sex workers, often hires past sex workers, because “it really gives you a seal...sort of very truthful to our character, by having the army made up of people who’ve been out there”. Pia was paid by her employer to participate in a committee, bringing forward the perspective of someone who has been working at lower wage jobs, and had recently transitioned out of poverty.

Rather than identifying one type of participation which worked best for everyone, research participants discussed many types which worked. The many types of participation of “poor” people discussed by research participants indicates the great need for initiatives to offer a range of ways to get involved without coercion or preconception of what participation will look like.
Compensation: “Without the child care money I obviously couldn’t attend any of these things.”

Compensation for participation included covering costs for participation such as transportation or child care, honoraria and food. Compensation was seen as an important factor by both “poor” and “non-poor” people. “Poor” people, however, tended to put a much higher emphasis on its importance, with almost all “poor” research participants discussing it. Only “non-poor” people thought compensation might constrain participation, though everyone thought payment of compensation was a good idea. Compensation supported participation, was an incentive for participation and was an indication of the value placed on participation. Yet the helpfulness of compensation was limited by inconsistent practices of payment within poverty reductions initiatives, by budget constraints and by government regulations. Several examples of participation involved very minimal compensation, sometimes only food. Nonetheless every example of participation of the poor described in the interviews included some aspect of compensation. As a result, compensation appeared to be a key factor to support participation of the “poor”, though not all “non-poor” research participants recognised it as such.

Both “poor” and “non-poor” research participants discussed costs related to participation, such as transportation and child care. A few “non-poor” research participants noted that this form of compensation was important in reducing barriers to participation. These participants all had at some point played a direct role in reimbursing costs. Those “non-poor” people all placed great importance on compensation as a factor in participation. All of them maintained that money must be budgeted to pay costs associated with compensation in order to create participatory opportunities. This was echoed by several “poor” participants. Pandora said that if she had been required to
spend any money in order to participate, when she first was invited to do so, she would not have participated. However, on reflection and after having attended the event, she stated “the cost of getting to an event was worth it to me for what I might get out of it”. Patience said in a matter of fact way, “without the child care money I obviously couldn’t attend any of these things”. Pamela said she would still find a way to participate, but knowing she would consistently have her costs covered made a big difference. Pandora and Pia both noted that parking costs were a cost of participation that were often ignored. Pia described her frustration that meetings were held in places with inadequate parking. This was not as great a concern for “non-poor” participants, who could better risk parking tickets than could “poor” participants. Pandora described the sometimes inconsistent understanding by “non-poor” people of “poor” people’s ability to cover such costs, and told a story of a gift of a hotel stay as a thank you for her participation. Overnight parking costs were not covered in the gift, and the organizers initially refused to cover this cost when it was raised. Several “poor” people mentioned times at which people were uncomfortable having to ask for compensation, or receiving it. Pandora said, “it is very shaming to have to say I actually do need it”. She recommended that bursaries for things like transportation be offered to everyone, which would allow people who walked or had bus passes or had higher incomes to choose to return it. This idea was connected to the issue of labelling “poor” people, which is discussed later as a factor which can constrain participation.

Honoraria were described by some research participants as an incentive that helped people to participate and by others as compensation for lost income due to time off from traditional jobs, binning or panhandling. Honoraria also indicated value was placed on the participation of the “poor”. Only “non-poor” people discussed honoraria as an incentive to participate. Nessa talked about her belief that stipends encourage more
“poor” people to come, but may also encourage them to say what they think the “non-poor” want them to say. Nelly described her surprise and unhappiness that some people going through intake interviews to participate in an initiative told her that they were “doing this for the money”. Both “non-poor” and “poor” people talked about honoraria as compensation for earnings lost due to participation. Natalie said it is necessary to keep in mind that,

if people are coming to our forum to chat about what's important to them, they're not out on the streets panhandling or collecting bottles or whatever it is that they do to earn a little extra money.

Similarly, Pia, who had participated in the poverty reduction initiative on paid time by her employer, said that despite her interest in the initiative, she would not have been able to participate had her employer not paid her time. Many “poor” and “non-poor” people talked about paying “poor” participants honoraria as an indication of the value placed on their time. Nora said honoraria were a recognition that “their time is just as valuable...the impact of $5 or $10 or $20 depending on what the budget is, that tells them that they're valued”. Peter said, “that's the way the world goes around. If you’re valued, you get paid money”. However, Nessa cautioned that paying honoraria can lead to corruption and power struggles as “poor” people want to receive the honoraria, and so may jockey for participation opportunities.

Several “poor” and “non-poor” people talked about the importance of compensation as a way of helping to stabilize “poor” people to enable their participation. Natalie described payment of food costs, transportation costs and honoraria as helping people who are less stable to participate, saying,
it’s the ones who are on the street day in day out with no particularly grounded place to be who are the ones who participate the least because they are in survival mode, you need food, you need breakfast, you need lunch, you need supper, you need to panhandle, or collect your bottles for cigarettes or whatever you need during the day.

Nadine suggested addressing “poor” people’s immediate needs might remove some of their stress and worry and that this would “go a long way towards setting it up so that someone can be pretty present to communicate”. Peggy talked about seeing other “poor” participants in a project hoard the food they were given to share, because they had so little and it meant so much to them. Paula and Patrick expressed scepticism that most people in survival mode would participate, regardless of compensation. This perspective is reinforced by the note that almost all examples of participation described in interviews were of people in relatively stable situations, not of people in survival mode. However, a few examples did describe people in survival mode and while these included a range of participatory opportunities all had compensation as a key support.

Many “poor” and “non-poor” people talked about the importance of food as a part of participation. Food was seen not just as an incentive, but as contributing to the group outcomes. Peter talked about the community building that happens over a shared meal. Peggy talked about how “food makes for a relaxed atmosphere that helps your creativity”.

A unique perspective on the role of compensation was raised by Nora, who saw it as a way of helping to reduce expectations of “poor” participants around the immediate impact of their participation. These participants might otherwise expect significant change to happen quickly as a result of their input. She said,
if you have this initial expectation that you’re going to get served lunch or going to have $25 or whatever, and that’s why they do it with market research, is just to say, that’s it. Because you might not have a new product for two years.

There were other challenges related to compensation. Both “poor” and “non-poor” people talked about the importance of consistent compensation policies and practices, telling stories of times when compensation has been missed, or changed over time due to budget constraints. Phyllis noted how important it is to be clear about budget limitations for compensation, including how many subsidies and honoraria are available. Additionally, several “non-poor” people commented on the difficulties presented in providing equal compensation because government legislation did not allow some participants to receive compensation. People receiving basic income assistance are not able to legally keep any honoraria or earnings, whereas people on disability benefits can keep up to $500 a month. Nicholas described creative ways of thanking people for their work by agreeing to pay for portions of rent or for tangible products the person is saving towards such as boots or a DVD player.

Labelling “poor” participants: “Living on low income” is better than “poor”, but no term removes the shame

The act of labelling “poor” participants as “poor” and the choice of language used in a poverty reduction initiative to describe poverty were initially considered as separate factors, but are reported here together as they are so closely interrelated. All participants agreed that it was important for “poor” people to be involved in some way in poverty reduction work. Most said it was not enough to remove income barriers to participation and then hope or assume that people living on low income had become involved,
because the input of “poor” people was needed in order for a poverty reduction initiative to be successful. Yet this need for participation of the “poor” required that someone, somewhere within the initiative, knew that “poor” people were involved. At some point, a definition of “poor” people must have been determined, and even if only privately within an initiative, a label must have been applied.

Participants discussed both private labelling within an initiative and public labelling. Private labelling within an initiative sometimes occurred when people were asked to self-identify as living on low income in order to request or accept a bursary or honoraria intended only for people living on low income. Private labelling also occurred when someone was invited by the initiative to participate because of their income status, or when participants were labelled as “poor” for evaluation purposes in monitoring the participation of the “poor”. In contrast, public labelling occurred when a person identified someone living on low income in a public space, including at committees, at public events, or in the media. For example, a speaker may have been introduced as someone who could tell what it was like to live in poverty, because she has been homeless for three years.

Language

Whatever term participants preferred, the language used to describe poverty, even internally, was extremely important to many participants. One of the initiatives many participants were involved with used a deliberately chosen term for the people who receive services from them; they are called “family”. Participants talked about the importance of using this term instead of “clients” or “community members”. Said Phyllis, “This is somebody that you have the opportunity to invest in and have them invest back
in you and you impact each other’s life, just like a family would”. Peggy acknowledged her scepticism when she first encountered the term, but said

I felt I belonged. The feeling of not being called clients, but being called family. At first I figured it was a bunch of shit, but they do it. They put it in practice. Two people died and I really mourned them.

“Poor” and “non-poor” participants reported the language of family shifts the way people interact, making them more likely to volunteer or to support others informally, and making staff better service providers.

Private labelling using terms such as “poor” may still cause shame. Pandora talked about the shame she experienced at the beginning of her participation, and still experienced, though to a lesser extent, because her identity shifted to the label of being in poverty. She said “we never thought we were in poverty, you are just doing what you need to do and sometimes it’s a struggle”. She felt that this shame was internal, it was her issue, she said. She thought her shame increased when she herself fell into stereotypes about people with disabilities, thinking that people with disabilities were “poor” and lived on welfare. Though she thought “living on low income” was better than “poor”, no term removed the shame. Peter spoke out strongly about the use of euphemisms, and said he preferred and self-identified with the term “poor”, because it was honest. There was no consensus on an appropriate blanket term for poverty which fit for all participants. However, being asked to identify with the concept of poverty was for some participants very difficult, because of the stigma of poverty. There were many negative stereotypes surrounding “poor” people which participants did not wish to associate with, even in their own minds. People living on low income held those
stereotypes about other people living on low income, even if they saw that they themselves do not fit them.

Because many people who live on low incomes did not see themselves as “poor”, inviting the participation of “poor” people would have excluded people who chose not to use that label. Polly talked about seeing a poster asking for people to participate in a project for the “waged poor”. She was not sure if she qualified because she had a job and so did not see herself as poor, regardless of her low income. The term “waged poor” had been chosen with care by the organizers, seeking to avoid the term “working poor” which implies that poor people are not engaged in paid work, do not work or are lazy. Polly thought the poster might exclude her. Those who made the poster had tried to be specific about the desire to connect with “poor” people in the labour force, but to resist poor bashing language. Polly decided to include herself, despite being unsure if the term applied to her. Later, Polly found that other participants in the project had different understandings of what the label “poor” meant:

so they came in thinking that if they had food stamps...that was the only poverty you could experience. They didn’t know about hocking all your stuff to the pawn shop and getting it back on payday, or using Money Mart again and again and again.

Thus others might have chosen to include or exclude themselves based on their understanding of the word “poor”.

Nelly indicated that many participants in a project she was involved in told her that they were not living in dire poverty. They did not say this for fear of shame, she thought, but in recognition that there were other poorer people struggling more than they were. She speculated that possibly these participants “had some hope for change, that
they don’t feel like they’re stuck”. Thus they did not identify themselves as “poor”, as the label “poor” might feel permanent.

Nicholas noted that sometimes the support provided to help people participate in poverty reduction initiatives, such as helping people stabilise their lives, might mean they no longer identify as being in poverty, or that possibly they move out of poverty. He gave the specific example of a man who was homeless and had no time or ability to participate, as he was in survival mode. But once he was supported to find a place to stay, he had the freedom and stability to engage in initiatives to help others find housing. Was this man’s participation still wanted by poverty reduction initiatives seeking to engage the “homeless”, asked Nicholas?

Several participants suggested including people with past experience of being “poor”. A few “poor” people noted the experience cannot be too far in the past, or people’s stories will not relate to current realities. Several “non-poor” people noted the strength of having success stories of people who have moved out of poverty. Nathan cautioned that there must also be participants who are still living on low income, to keep initiatives “real”. Nadia said that public recognition of a positive stage that a “poor” person has come to is important so as to give people self-esteem, “that they’re working across boundaries that we wouldn’t necessarily expect to see crossed”. Pandora said that though she is still living in poverty, the language her project uses to describe the participation of “poor” people suggests that their experience could be in the past. The project describes people who “have had experience living on low income”. She said, “I can see the difference in people’s eyes, because...she was there, but now she’s not”. She said that until she is completely out of poverty and truly removed from it she will not be able to speak of her experience without shame. The language used to label may
impact how a participant experiences internalized feelings of stigma due to being labelled “poor”.

Private labelling

Labelling “poor” participants has been a contentious issue for poverty reduction initiatives. As discussed in the compensation section, Natasha noted that organizations may have felt unable to offer honoraria or compensation for volunteer expenses to everyone who participated, for fear that more people would have taken the compensation than needed it. Poverty reduction initiatives may not have sufficient funding to compensate all participants, and so could only compensate “poor” participants. Thus, she said, initiatives require a label and definition for those who qualified for the support. Nathan acknowledged that labels were required if poverty reduction initiatives sought to document the participation of the “poor” for evaluation purposes. If poverty reduction initiatives required explicit participation of “poor” people, it followed that someone within that initiative must know whether “poor” people (whatever their definition is) were involved.

Public labelling

Discomfort with asking people to publicly identify with some label of “poor” was primarily expressed by “non-poor” people, though even amongst this group there were differences of opinion about the value of public labelling. Nathan commented that the participation of “poor” people works and feels better when they are not asked to publicly identify, or be labelled as the token “poor” persons, but instead are integrated into a group in which they could choose to share their stories if they wish. Nadine talked about her organization’s concern about putting forward “the pornography of poverty” by asking people to share personal, heart wrenching stories of poverty. Both Nadine and Nathan
expressed concern as to the effect on participants of sharing their personal stories, although both acknowledged that the stories put a human face on poverty. However, Nelly said it was important both that people living on low income in poverty reduction initiatives publicly identified as “poor”, and that they communicated “that this is [their] reality and that [they] are no less a person because of it”.

Very few participants shared the same example of participation. One exception was a story of public labelling. In this instance, several “poor” people were profiled prominently in a media story. Subsequently they reported they were unhappy with the profile they had received and said they had been approached by many strangers to discuss their stories. Natasha, who had helped to organize this media coverage, remained extremely unhappy with these approaches, even years later. She said “that it is the kind of thing I would wake up at three in the morning and feel crappy about”. Pandora, one of the women interviewed, said that she learned that she did not wish to share this level of detail publicly, and decided never to do so again. Yet she still described that experience of being interviewed as “fun”. Pia, who was also interviewed, said the profile was fine and that she would do it again. She felt that she had protected herself and her family because she had taken the time to prepare and had written out what she wanted to say. “You want to share your experiences, but not share your whole life” she said, and then concluded “You don’t want to feel shame, you want to feel pride. But people can take it however they want to”. It was interesting that the “non-poor” person who was not directly involved was still concerned that she had put people into a vulnerable situation but that the “poor” participants, who had experienced the unwelcome attention, were not now concerned about it.
Several “poor” participants understood that publicly identifying as “poor” was part of their role within their initiative. However, Peter noted that in the past he would not have been comfortable with this public identification, saying,

“there was a time when I would not have liked to have been identified, but now I see it as part of my role. That because I’m fairly articulate, and if I speak as a person on disability, it lends credibility then to anyone who’s on disability."

“Poor” participants’ willingness to publicly identify as “poor” may change over time, as Peter’s did, or vary person to person.

Support and preparation for public speaking provided to “poor” participants increased their comfort with such speaking. Several “poor” and “non-poor” participants discussed the support that was necessary for people to publicly identify and to speak about their experiences. Some “non-poor” people who provided this support said that their approach was to create the opportunities to speak, but not to push people. Instead they suggested normalising feelings of “poor” participants who felt uncertain or shy by saying “what can I do to make you more comfortable, to want to do this, and if you don’t want to do it, trust me that’s okay, it’s fine”. Many “poor” and “non-poor” participants reported a need for support when they prepared to speak publicly about their experiences. This support included defining the boundaries of what they would share. They also noted that women required different support than men. Women needed to be told “you have the ability to do this, you are bright, you are strong” whereas the men were ready to speak after a quick check in. Peggy spoke of her nervousness about speaking in public, but said that the fact the staff’s belief in her made her believe in herself. Neither of the “poor” men interviewed about public speaking or story sharing expressed any concern or need for support. This lent some support to the idea that
genders hold different comfort levels with publicly sharing personal stories, though it needs further investigation.

The research participants had mixed feelings as to how to respectfully ask people to externally identify as “poor”. Both “poor” and “non-poor” participants agreed that overall this is a useful and important part of the role “poor” people can play in poverty reduction initiatives. Further, they agreed that opportunities should be created to discuss what label should be applied to “poor” people and the possible negative impacts of different labels. Opportunities should be created which give profile to, and demonstrate the leadership, of people living on low income.

From these conversations, it appeared that labelling “poor” participants was necessary for poverty reduction initiatives for whom the participation of “poor” people was important for financial accountability, evaluation or story sharing purposes. But there was no need for this labelling to be public. The language used privately and publicly to describe “poor” people mattered, but there was not consensus on one appropriate term. Some “poor” participants chose to use their own terms. Pandora preferred “living on low income”, which she saw as more inclusive and less shaming, while Peter preferred the word “poor”, which he felt was clearer.

Opening spaces to support diverse perspectives: “All group members are on the same level and made to feel like we’re equal”

Many “poor” and “non-poor” research participants saw the creation of an open, respectful culture within poverty reduction initiatives as a key factor in support of the participation of the “poor”. The onus was on “non-poor” participants to create and maintain this culture. Some divergent perspectives were expressed as to who was
responsible to increase the participation of “poor” people in poverty reduction initiatives. Pamela noted that an open culture, in which all participants felt respected and valued, may have been especially important to encourage participation in multi-sectoral venues such as committees and conferences.

Some “non-poor” research participants felt that instead of restructuring poverty reduction initiatives to support participation, initiatives should have worked one on one with “poor” people to encourage their participation. These research participants believed that “poor” people sometimes decided to get involved whether or not appropriate supports were in place and so a focus on supports was not as useful as one on one encouragement with potential participants. However, most research participants felt that poverty reduction initiatives would benefit from changed or strengthened practices of inclusion. Nathan said:

If you’re going to involve people who’ve experienced the problem, for me as a planner it was a different way of thinking...what are the things you need to do to make that a valuable experience and one that’s safe for the folks who are there.

Nadia described responses by other “non-poor” participants to personal stories of challenges with poverty with respectful dialogue such as “I never thought of that before, well, if we did this, would that have helped you”. Pamela described her participation, by saying, “we all come from one common thing which is respect and curiosity and a sense that everybody within the group has something to teach us”. Other “poor” participants said “my input is valued, my opinion is valued”, and “all group members are on the same level and made to feel like we’re equal”.

Two challenges raised by “poor” participants to the maintenance of this culture of respect were the need for “poor” participants to have space in which to be angry, and
some perceptions of frustration that “poor” participants take time to tell personal stories even though the stories may be outside the meeting’s agenda. Interestingly, “non-poor” interview participants were not concerned about “poor” people’s anger or story telling, although in my experience in poverty reduction initiatives this has been a common concern of “non-poor” people. Natalie said, “sometimes people will rant and rave, let them be angry, sometimes they need a safe space to be angry”. Several “non-poor” research participants echoed her and noted that the worst impact was that an angry “poor” person’s message may not have been well heard by other participants because they were made uncomfortable by anger. The potential for “poor” people to take meeting time to share personal stories was also not a concern for “non-poor” research participants. Nora said, “when poor people attend a community meeting, it is their opportunity to voice an opinion, whether it is on your agenda or not, and organizers should expect that and be okay with that”. Some “non-poor” research participants suggested that ensuring there is space in the initiative for story telling could mitigate the need to tell stories in meetings, as “poor” participants feel heard elsewhere. Further, several “non-poor” participants noted that story sharing was part of relationship building and learning the realities of people’s lives. “Non-poor” participants counselled that conversations and meetings in poverty reduction initiatives with higher participation of “poor” people may not be as methodical or direct as those with lower participation and that all participants had to accept this. “It’s a different kind of listening” said Nathan, who recommended a balance between respect to the speaker and respect to the agenda at hand.

There were other factors that affected the culture of respect for “poor” participants. Both “poor” and “non-poor” participants expressed concern about the abilities of some “poor” people to participate, because of others’ perceptions of their
emotional well-being, education, and ability to express themselves. Some “non-poor” participants told stories of initiatives in which participants were afraid of, or made uncomfortable by, the participation of the “poor”. These instances do not necessarily demonstrate the lack of a culture of respect. Not all “poor” participants will be articulate or emotionally stable. The challenge to a culture of respect may arise if “non-poor” participants expect all, or most, “poor” participants to be emotionally unstable, poorly educated, inarticulate, angry and dangerous.

**Representation: “Don’t make them the Member of Parliament for poor people”**

Poverty reduction initiatives solicited not only the participation of the “poor” but also that of non-profit agencies, businesses, and government organizations. Initiatives understood that these latter groups were diverse but, despite substantial evidence to the contrary, the “poor” were often actively constructed or viewed as a homogenous community (Cruikshank, 1999). Concerns were raised about this attempt to secure representation from the, in fact, heterogeneous poor. Many research participants spoke about expectations of representation as a factor which affected the participation of “poor” people in poverty reduction initiatives. Research participants thought of representation in two ways. First, did a group of “poor” participants reflect the demographics of the broader population of “poor” people. Second, did “poor” participants speak on behalf of all “poor” people and were they accountable in some way to a broader body of “poor” people. “Non-poor” people were concerned about both aspects of representation. “Poor” people, however, spoke of the need to increase the diversity of “poor” participants, but rarely saw their role as a representative of a community of “poor” people. “That could be a really uncomfortable place to be in, to be expected to be representing a very diverse group of people, when really you represent yourself”, said Nessa.
In this thesis the phrase “diversity of the ‘poor’” refers to identities within traditional demographic groups, such as gender, age, ethnicity, or disability and also to less often considered categories, such as income source, health, or housing situation. One of the purposes of participants described of the participation of the “poor” was to enable a poverty reduction initiative to hear many experiences of poverty, but it was noted that an initiative could not expect a broad cross section of experience from a small group of people. For example, a group of people who lived on low income and have never received welfare were not able to speak to the experiences of people on welfare. Even among a more narrow category, such as welfare recipients, there was a considerable diversity of experience. No research participants suggested that quotas be introduced to ensure a broad range of participants.

“Non-poor” people often cited issues of representation in examples where participation of the “poor” had not worked well or felt good. Nessa said,

I think you’re always in danger when you’re choosing someone for their label rather than their basic being, their experience and their wisdom and leadership qualities, rather than who they supposedly represent.

Similarly, Nadine gave an example of a “poor” participant who was invited as a “token poor person, a poster girl for poverty...without a real sense of what does she have to contribute”. Nadine thought that the initiative saw this “poor” woman as a representative of “poor” people. In the interview, Nadine reported that this “poor” woman left the initiative with little explanation and Nadine assumed that the “poor” women’s token participation had been a central cause of her departure. It was interesting that when I later discussed her participation with the “poor” woman herself, she indicated that though she had struggled as to what her contribution could be, she had never felt as though she
was being asked to represent “poor” people. Instead, she had left due to a scheduling conflict. In fact, she was interested in becoming involved again and had been hoping someone would get in touch with her. While “non-poor” people may have expected “poor” participants to represent a community, “poor” participants may have seen themselves as representing only themselves. This example points to the importance of seeking diverse perspectives (“poor” and “non-poor”) to gain a more whole picture of a situation.

Several “non-poor” research participants provided examples in which “poor” people participating in initiatives did not reflect the diversity of people who are “poor”. These “non-poor” people were frustrated that the “poor” people’s participation had been reported by the initiatives as if they had represented the fully diverse group of people who were “poor”. Nicholas said,

I know one researcher who says they talked to prostitutes, well, I know the girl they talked to, she’s out the occasional night, but she’s not a hard core prostitute. Did she talk to the prostitutes? No, she’s talked to one woman who has some experience of prostitution.

It was interesting that this concern of “non-poor” people about representation did not extend to participation by other sectors, such as the business, voluntary or public sector. Nadine spoke of her concerns about “poor” participants representing “poor people”, but then referred to private sector participants as representatives of the business community. Pamela noted that “non-poor” participants were not as diverse as they could be, but said that in a multi-sectoral initiative all participants bring different perspectives. She recommended focusing less on diversity of “poor” participants, and more on diversity of participants overall.
A similar divergence existed with the process through which “poor” participants came to participate. Several “non-poor” people raised concerns about “poor” participants being hand-picked, but expressed no concerns about how “non-poor” participants were recruited. Yet, almost all “non-poor” participants reported their involvement in a poverty reduction initiative came about through a personal referral or request. Similarly, several “poor” participants reported first becoming involved through posters or word of mouth from other “poor” people. Natalie was responsible for finding “poor” people to speak at a conference. She defended the need to personally ask participants, by saying, “I didn’t think anybody would come forward if I didn’t specifically ask”. Nathan said his main concern was with the focus on choosing “poor” participants with success stories, saying it “always felt to me a little phony”.

“Poor” participants talked about the need for increased diversity of “poor” participants in poverty reduction initiatives, though several noted they were impressed at the diversity of “poor” participants active in their initiative, particularly in the areas of age, income source, and health. Pia said it would have been good to have had “more people like me, more young people”. Polly said one of her reasons for participating was that she thought the project might have attracted only older folks, who were more likely to be willing to get up early in the morning. She also wanted to be sure there were some First Nations people participating. Again, several “poor” and “non-poor” people noted that the lives of participants must have been somewhat stable in order that they might have participated. This requirement limits the diversity of “poor” participants.

Both “non-poor” and “poor” participants encouraged abandoning the notion of representation as speaking for others, while continuing to strive to increase diversity. Nelly acknowledged that the project she had organized had not attracted a fully representative group of “poor” people, but also noted that it had not attempted to do so,
since this was not possible. She said it was important to acknowledge these limitations.

Similarly, Pamela said it was impossible to ever fully represent the diversity of any group or culture. Nathan said that he did not expect “poor” participants’ issues to be representative of all “poor” people’s issues, but that he recognised that an issue raised by one person who is homeless raises is likely to be shared by other homeless people. He noted that this was a way in which initiatives learned of emerging concerns for “poor” people, particularly practices that were not yet policies. Nathan further observed that an issue raised by a “poor” participant acquired greater credibility and was more likely to inspire action if it was also identified from other sources by a “non-poor” participant.

Participants suggested several ways to increase the diversity of participants, without focusing on representation. Nessa emphasized the importance of recruiting people based on their personal strengths. Both “poor” and “non-poor” participants advocated inviting people based on their interest and skills, not on their income level. Some felt invitations on this basis would help to reduce stigma and feelings of tokenization for “poor” participants. The challenge for poverty reduction initiatives was to ensure that they had “poor” participants, without explicit recruitment of “poor” people. It was interesting that most “poor” participants believed that their income level was not the reason they had been asked to participate. Their involvement was due to their interest in the issues or methods used by the initiative and they thought that the initiative had welcomed them on that basis, and not because of their income level. In contrast, most “non-poor” people considered that the primary reason that “poor” people had been invited to participate was their poverty, even though these “non-poor” people also noted the diverse skills and contributions of “poor” people. In brief, while the way “poor” and “non-poor” people were primarily identified or invited to participate may have differed, people’s perceptions of how they themselves were invited did not.
Pamela and Natasha both proposed that initiatives should ask non-profit agencies and businesses to be represented by one high level staff and one service recipient or low waged employee at initiative events and groups. Pia, who had participated in a similar model by attending a meeting along with her manager, felt this had worked well initially. But after a change in manager she was no longer comfortable in meetings with the new manager. On one hand, this approach may have worked to increase the numbers and diversity of “poor” participants. On the other hand, it may have reinforced perceptions of choosing success stories, and caused some “poor” participants to feel unable to share frank, less positive input.

A group of “poor” participants, who were all members of a group made up only of people who have had experience living on low income, described their participation in other multi-sectoral groups in the initiative as representing their “poor” person’s group and not “poor” people overall. On this basis they had no concerns about their ability to represent a group, as they could communicate with their group. It may have been that a connection from initiatives to “poor” participants through “poor” people’s groups alleviated expectations of those individuals to represent a broader community. Challenges remained about the diversity of people involved in “poor” people’s groups as these primarily represented people sufficiently stable to participate and excluded many people in crisis, such as those living on the streets. Those whose income was primarily earned through traditional paid employment and thus were less likely to identify themselves as poor, despite low incomes, also likely chose not to participate.

Several “poor” participants suggested that initiatives should have invited participation from broad cross sections of the community. These invitations should have been distributed widely, “both to the Chamber of Commerce and in Laundromats”. This practice would have required offering full compensation to every participant to ensure
that income was not a barrier to participation. Disclosure of income status would likely have come about after relationships had been built and initiatives could then have known how many of their participants were “poor”.

Phyllis noted that in order to recruit diverse participants, initiatives needed diverse staff or volunteers to have engaged them. She cited an example in which First Nations men’s participation was reduced because the only male staff did not have the ethnicity and socio-economic background necessary to have connected with them.

In summary, expectations that “poor” participants represented a community of the “poor” were prevalent among “non-poor” research participants. However, “poor” research participants talked about the importance of increasing diversity in an initiative so it would have had information about a wider set of issues and experiences. It was important to focus on the diversity of participants as a whole, and not simply that of “poor” participants. Other useful strategies that were identified to engage “poor” participants included clear language about the value that all participants brought to initiatives; suggestions to businesses and non-profits to send both a “poor” and “non-poor” participant; participation from representatives of “poor” people’s groups; recruitment of people from a broad cross section of locations and groups; and, use of diverse “non-poor” participants to connect with “poor” participants.

Rationale for participation of the “poor”: “They have the experience and know what they need and what will work.”

Another factor that influenced “poor” people’s participation in poverty reduction initiatives was the beliefs of diverse participants about if, and why, it was important for “poor” people to participate. These beliefs shaped the way “poor” people were invited to
participate. Some research participants felt “poor” people had a right to participate in poverty reduction initiatives and that on principle a poverty reduction initiative should always have had the participation of “poor” people. Other research participants spoke of the participation of the “poor” as an important instrumentalist aspect of poverty reduction initiative design in that the participation of “poor” people made poverty reduction work more effective.

Participants who spoke of the importance of participation of the “poor” on principle were most likely to also be concerned as to how “poor” participants felt about their participation. These “poor” and “non-poor” participants made statements such as Nathan’s, who said, “Respect and inclusiveness, would be, if you asked me what are some of my mottos in life are. I don’t believe in doing to folks. I think you need to ask, and it’s a little pejorative of me to say, well, I’ve decided that you need this”.

Many research participants spoke of the need for participation of “poor” people in terms as an instrumental benefit for the initiative. Some described the knowledge of “poor” people as to what is needed to reduce poverty, making statements such as: “they have the experience and know what they need and what will work”. Nicholas spoke of buying a toy that his child never played with because the child had no input into the choice of toy. He compared this situation to the operation of an initiative to reduce poverty without any input from the poor. “I don’t know how you can really create something without their voice, without their input, without asking them”. Nora described the participation of the “poor” as market research, saying, “you’ve got a product, you want to sell that product, who do you ask...you ask the people who are going to buy it”.

Several “non-poor” participants noted the value both of participants who have experience with poverty (service providers) and those who have experience of living in
poverty ("poor" people). Nadine noted that service providers, who were easier to contact, offered similar information to that which "poor" people gave. Conversely, other participants, especially "poor" people, talked about the unique perspective of people living on low income. "People that have been there can give more than people who have never experienced it" said Peggy. Pia believed "poor" people were more likely to be sensitive to poverty issues, saying "because they have first hand experiences, they can be empathetic. They can express concern around areas they found difficult". Other research participants talked about the negative perceptions "poor" people had of being told what they needed by "non-poor" people. Polly said, “the biggest way to turn off your consumer group is to say we know what’s best for you”. Echoing this, Natalie noted that "poor" people were more likely to be involved in a program if some other "poor" person was involved. She said "poor" people want "someone who has been there and who has done that".

Some research participants described the benefits "poor" participants brought to "non-poor" participants. Pamela noted that once "non-poor" people learn to include "poor" people, they were more open to the inclusion of other excluded groups such as people of colour or Indigenous people. Several "non-poor" participants talked about the benefits of participation to "poor" participants themselves. Nadia said it was important for "poor" people to participate “as it is important for any of us to get involved in causes we believe in”. Nessa spoke of about participation as a way "poor" people can gain self esteem. “People feel like their voices are valued in these anti-poverty initiatives and their experience is valued” said Nelly “and I think that’s really important in terms of being a human being, and your own personal growth and people even being able to move out of poverty".
It was interesting to find that not all poverty reduction participants see “poor” people as credible experts on poverty because of their experience. Three participants talked of conflicted feelings about the explicit participation of people who were “poor”. Peter, who had previously said he saw part of his role as challenging stereotypes about what people with disabilities can do, later said:

When I participate in these different groups, I am accepted as an equal. I’m not labelled as the poor person. In fact, a lot of the people in the groups don’t even know unless I say something. So that lends a certain amount of credibility to the things I do have to say, that they’re not couched in terms of being someone on disability...And so the respect I get from the other group members is very rewarding, and they listen to what I have to say, which means I can contribute in a meaningful way.

He felt that because he was not publicly labelled, his fellow committee members did not know he was “poor” and so respected him. Another participant, Pia, had dramatically improved her situation. Her fellow committee members suggested that, as a result, she had expertise as to how to transition out of poverty. But Pia said “I’m not an expert. I’m just like everybody else. I was just lucky”. Nadine spoke of her discomfort that “poor” people were seen as experts in poverty, even though she had earlier acknowledged they were "unbelievably knowledgeable about poverty, [knowing] it in an intimate, detailed way that nobody else knows it". However, in committee meetings she found it more comfortable to work with service providers, because they spoke to multiple perspectives, while “poor” people tended to focus on their own stories and experiences. She also acknowledged that her time in the initiative had changed her perspective about the role for people living on low income and she now felt that their participation was more important.
The question as to who are the experts on poverty was an ongoing tension within poverty reduction initiatives. Frequently, people with academic and professional standing were seen as experts, but those who had experience of poverty were not. Some “poor” and “non-poor” participants had ingrained ideas that credibility and expertise did not come from experience.

**Degree of influence: “If I hadn’t been there, would it have made any difference?”**

A few of the people interviewed shared examples in which the participation of people living on low income made an easily identifiable difference, such as a policy change. I was aware of other examples of influence in both of the poverty reduction initiatives from which the participant sample was drawn, but these did not emerge in the interviews. I expected evidence that “poor” participants had influenced change, because the literature indicated influence was a central point which made participants feel their participation was meaningful. But, few research participants provided evidence that “poor” people’s input had made a difference, though many believed it had, and most did not seem concerned about this lack of evidence. However, Nicholas strongly critiqued what he called the community meeting approach which is a common method by which “poor” people are asked to participate. He described this approach as “where we call the poor, disenfranchised into a community meeting for their input and we never do anything with that”. Pandora agreed, saying, “people want to know, as I do, that they are making a difference”, reinforcing the belief that having an influence is important to whether or not to participate.

Most of the tangible examples of change were examples in which input from “poor” people had been honoured by “non-poor” people with decision making power.
Nadia described how, in one such example, the input at a community conference of people living on low income changed a decision as to who would be housed in new planned housing. Initially, the housing was only for men. When “poor” women publicly questioned this decision, the policy was revised to house women in proportion to the number of women served by the organization. In another example, Paula proudly reported that the group art project adopted by a group of “poor” women had been her idea and that she had coordinated the other participants. Peter indicated his suggestions for changes in language which defined the target audience for a program had been adopted. Without pointing to a specific example, Natalie indicated that an advisory group of “poor” people had influenced her decisions: “I know there’s things that I didn’t do because my advisory group said, nah, don’t waste your time doing it”.

There was one example provided of a group of “poor” people initiating, designing and implementing a project in which all decisions were made by “poor” people. The group received some support from “non-poor” people, but the “power was really with that group”, said Natasha, who described it as the best example of participation of “poor” people she had seen. However, Nathan described the same event as his example where participation of the “poor” had worked least well. He reported that the agenda went on too long, “non-poor” participants were distracted, the venue was uncomfortable and the event generally did not meet the overall standards of the initiative. If “poor” people had more control, activities may have looked different than if “non-poor” people were in control. Thus, understandings of successful participatory activities differed between “poor” and “non-poor” participants.

Identifying the impact of participation of people living on low income, thus, what the degree of influence was, was easier in projects specifically designed to solicit participation from people living on low income. The amount of control exercised by
“poor” people in these projects varied. Two projects discussed were managed by “non-poor” people, who had set the agendas and facilitated the events, but the end product was based on the input of the “poor” participants. In another example, several pilot projects were designed based on the input of focus groups, in which the decisions about topics for discussion circles and the focus and specific work of pilot projects came from participants living on low income. However, in discussing these projects Natalie and Nicholas noted that other factors influenced the selection of topics to move forward. These factors included the energy and participation of those who showed up for certain groups or which topics would support the participation of women. In another example, all recommendations from a project came from “poor” people but were summarised and analysed by “non-poor” people. But Nicholas maintained that this editing lost the true voice of “the Street” when the information was made palatable for other sources. He said the language of “the Street” is a vulgar language, and that transforming the words “fuck that mental health, they have their heads up their asses” into “they voiced concerns about the mental health system” lost something important.

The voices of “poor” people were not always heard by “non-poor” people with decision making power. Nessa, who shared the responsibility of program development for her organization, was mostly unfamiliar with the findings of a research project exploring the wishes and recommendations of “poor” service recipients at the agency. Yet she later expressed a commitment to the future inclusion of “clients” on the committee. This may have been an example of an ongoing cycle of consultation with “poor” people in which the input of “poor” people was largely ignored by decision makers and which made no substantial impact on the services provided. This example follows Arnstein’s concerns about the ladder of participation, where most participatory opportunities are stuck on the lower rungs. Phyllis said that you should show that you
were listening immediately after you had asked for “poor” people’s input. She said that you should have asked about the food at the first meeting and, if people preferred other food, you should have made the necessary changes by the second meeting. This “gives them a sense of ownership and empowerment, that your input is important and here is proof that you’ve got what you said you wanted”. Nessa said it was important that poverty reduction initiatives had the flexibility to accept an idea from a “poor” participant and that a lack of flexibility significantly constrained the impact made by the participation of “poor” people.

For many people, the impact of participation of people living on low income was attitude transformations they had witnessed or experienced, in which someone gained a deeper understanding of the realities of living in poverty. Pandora described the response of a woman who participated in a communications exercise led by people living on low income about the realities of living on low income. This “non-poor” woman, Pandora said, “stood up and said that she had absolutely no idea what it was like to live in poverty, and that she felt like she lived in a bubble”. Nadine described her own experience after a similar exercise, saying:

   twenty things that for me would not be obstacles...or if they were obstacles I would kind of blow right through with my money and my sense of being supported in the world, are twenty things that could actually stop someone dead in their tracks...and I had just never thought about it before.

Patience described her primary role in the poverty reduction initiative as having gone into the community and telling people “put your head on right, this is how it is”. Because she knew that was her purpose, she felt more productive at multi-sectoral meetings and events. A transformation in attitudes might have been apparent almost immediately and
so may have been more satisfying for “poor” participants than more tangible policy or program changes. These changes would have been slow to come about and challenging to track back to input from one or two people. Also, these attitude transformations sometimes contributed to other changes in which “non-poor” participants became more open to including people with experience of the issue, or became more open to the input of people living on low income.

Few research participants thought it was important to report back to “poor” people examples of how their participation had directly made a difference. Several “poor” and “non-poor” people said this was too hard to do and would have taken time away from other work. Instead research participants said it was important to have regularly given feedback which helped people see that their participation was valued. Patience said she knew her participation was valued when she was talking with a staff person about a meeting to which she had been invited and “she said they really wanted me to be there”. Pamela talked about the importance of tracking and reporting regularly on outcomes for the project overall, but said that as so little work of this kind was ever directly related to one person, it was not reasonable to try to own individual ideas. Nadine, Nadia and Natasha talked about the importance of being clear as to the roles of all participants within a group. This would have helped people evaluate whether they are fulfilling their roles and making an impact. Similarly, Nicholas said that the best way he had found to assess whether people knew their input was making a difference was to talk with them, asking “do you think you’re being listened to here? Do you think you’ve had input into it?”. Nora said that promising participants that their input would make a visible difference was problematic. It should have been made clear to people that their input would not result in immediate action, but rather would be only one important point in a number of different points.
However, Peter talked of his pride when his input was recognised in a newsletter and said “it’s in writing there for people to see, this is what I’ve done and how I’ve made a difference”. Pia said it was important that “poor” people heard examples as to how other “poor” people’s input had made a difference, even if they did not have a specific example as to their input. Pamela noted that it was important to show other people living in poverty that groups of “poor” people could help make broad system change, “creating deep waves of change”. It was worth noting that the importance of knowing that their participation had made a difference may be different for “poor” participants who participated in short term, different events and not as part of an ongoing initiative. For instance, focus groups initiatives usually did not report back to participants after a focus group to tell them how their input made a difference.

In summary, “poor” people had the potential to make a difference in poverty reduction initiatives. However, where this was achieved, participants noted that “non-poor” people were open to hearing the input of “poor” people and that the initiative had the flexibility to accept that input. Participants felt that “poor” people needed to be given more of a clear understanding of their roles and decision making powers. Thus, “poor” people would have had some understanding that other factors might have prevented implementation of their ideas. To encourage further participation, it may be useful to give early evidence to “poor” participants that their input was being heard and was useful. In some instances, the contributions of “poor” people were limited by a filtering process when “non-poor” people controlled the agendas or summarised and analysed the input of “poor” people’s input. In the experiences of participation described, a significant impact of the participation of “poor” people was the transformation of attitudes of “non-poor” people about poverty or “poor” people. These transformed attitudes had the benefit of being immediately evident to “poor” participants, without the need for formal feedback.
loops. Formal feedback loops about the direct difference made by “poor” people’s participation were seen by participants as unrealistic and unnecessary. This was especially so in short term, occasional activities, although “poor” people particularly felt there was a value in reporting some stories which spoke to the overall difference “poor” people have made by their participation. Nicholas summarised the approach he took to assessing whether his further participation was worthwhile: “I think, if I hadn’t been there, would it have made any difference? If none of us had been here, would it have made any difference? If both answers are no, don’t go back to that meeting”.

**Ratio of “poor” to “non-poor” participants: “I would have been more comfortable if there had been more people like me.”**

The ratio of people involved in a project who lived on low income had very little impact on people’s perception of participation. Literature on this point indicted that a higher ratio of “poor” people would have been important in part because of assumptions in the literature about power and decision making structure. Much of the literature assumed a power struggle, with winners and losers. It was necessary to have enough “poor” people to carry a vote, if decisions were being made in mixed income groups and “poor” people had a distinct perspective which “non-poor” people did not share and were not inclined to listen to. However, in the interview data, instead of viewing meetings as a power struggle, interview participants talked about open and respectful groups, in which they felt the input of people living on low income had been heard and valued equally with that of all members at the table. Pamela said she knew her input was valued because “you can see people thinking about what you’re saying, they’re not just waiting for you to be finished so they can get onto the important stuff”. It is important to note this was not
always the response of “non-poor” participants’ to “poor” people’s input in meetings. Several “non-poor” people talked of “poor” people taking meetings away from the agenda with comments or personal concerns. However, they were generally open to such digressions. If groups created and maintained this open culture, there would have been no need for a higher ratio of people living on low income in multi-sectoral committee meetings.

People’s positive examples of participation ranged from one “poor” person to forty “poor” people and no one spoke of the numbers of “poor” people as having been very important in making their participation more or less effective. It was interesting that several “poor” participants had no experience of mixed income participants working together within their initiative. Rather they had only participated in groups of “poor” people, some of which were supported or organized by “non-poor” people, but in which the product was defined by the input of “poor” participants.

It may have been important, depending on meeting format, to have sufficient numbers of “poor” participants to create the opportunity for “non-poor” participants to engage with “poor” participants. However, Pandora noted that a higher ratio of “poor” participants made it possible for them to have connected in a deeper way with more “non-poor” people. Nadine echoed this and gave an example of a small group session she had attended in which a “poor” person had significantly influenced her. She noted that the meeting was structured to ensure a mix of perspectives in each small group. This included the participation of people living on low income, who led part of the group’s agenda.

Several “poor” and “non-poor” participants spoke against general quotas of “poor” participants and noted that these required disclosure of income status by
participants. Nathan said that one of the strengths of his organization is that people living on low income were not identified as such. Neither he, nor others in the organization, knew how many people living on low income were involved, as some chose not to discuss their backgrounds. Peter said there needed to be “just enough” people living on low income and argued that:

we build up this great well intentioned system of doing things, but without grounding it in the people who actually need the help or the change it will effect, it’s top heavy and it’s not as substantial.

However, Peter and Patience said they thought committees should have at least two “poor” people because the lives of people living on low income were less stable and it was more likely that poor people would have to miss meetings. Yet several people living on low income commented that it seemed appropriate to have had no more than two “poor” people on a committee since most other organizations or groups had only one representative on the committee. This led to some interesting discussions about representation, which emerged as a strong theme and is discussed further below. Nessa said that rather than increasing the ratio of participation of people living on low income, initiatives needed to reduce the number of so-called experts that committees brought in, “who don’t know much”.

I expected that a higher percentage of “poor” people participating in a mixed income group would have made “poor” participants more comfortable. Pia, who was the sole “poor” person at a committee, indicated she would have been more comfortable had there been more people like her. “It was frustrating” she said “to be the only person who makes suggestions but does not have the power to do things”. Several “poor” people said that being part of a “poor” persons group made them more comfortable when
participating in mixed income groups. Patience said “whenever you have a group of people together that have the same kind of problem or interest, you are more comfortable in yourself and comfortable around those people. So I think that’s kind of it, that you get the comfort zone kind of where you are, and then you can move off into other things”.

I further expected that higher numbers of “poor” participants would have increased diversity and representation by “poor” people in the wider community. Nicholas challenged this assumption, and noted that in focus groups he had run in the past “if I got 100 people that would be a lucky thing, but it would still be a sparse number for the street”. He felt that even with a high number of participants, the focus group could not have been a representative group, given the number and diversity of people living on the street and given that they were only a subset of people living in poverty. Nora said that different audiences required different numbers of “poor” participants in an initiative. For example, a government audience might insist that a high number of “poor” participants be involved in a project. She said “if you’re coming from a financial perspective, its numbers people want”. However, a smaller number of participants who could have received greater support for their participation might have provided a much deeper and an ongoing level of input. Natalie spoke with pride of supporting a core group of six people on a project steering committee.

Finally, I expected that larger numbers of “poor” participants would have been important to increase power and comfort of “poor” participants, as well as to have improved the diversity of “poor” participants. Instead, much closer attention to the quantity of “poor” people participating might have exacerbated problems in the definition of, and requirement to disclose, low income status. Further, this might have increased expectations of representation. It was important to have a critical mass of participants
living on low income in order to ensure their voices were consistently heard. This may have required two people, or one person and an alternate, on standing committees, as “poor” people’s lives made it harder for them to regularly attend meetings. Additionally, open and respectful mixed income settings, along with optional separate groups for “poor” people to meet together, would have contributed to the comfort of “poor” participants.

Relationships: “People who they trust give them the information and then they can decide whether they want to [participate] or not”

Research participants reported that both pre-existing and new relationships influenced people’s experience of participation. Pre-existing relationships were used to connect with potential “poor” participants. New relationships that developed during the course of poverty reduction initiatives, within and across income groups, were characterised as bonuses of participation.

Several “poor” participants reported that their pre-existing relationships positively influenced their participation. Patience said that knowing someone “does help, and I think sometimes, some people, it might stop them sometimes from doing something if they didn’t know someone from the group”. Pamela and Paula said that while they were invited to participate by someone they knew, they would have wanted to be part of the initiative had they heard of it in some other way. However, Paula noted that she might not have heard of the initiative had she not been told of it by someone she knew. Similarly, Phyllis talked about the moccasin trail, or word of mouth, by which “poor” participants told other potential “poor” participants about the initiative. She said “People who they trust give them the information and then they can decide whether they want to [participate] or not”.
Several “poor” and “non-poor” research participants said the relationships between “non-poor” people and potential “poor” participants helped initiatives engage new poor participants. Peggy, Paula and Patrick said they had decided to join an initiative in response to an invitation from a staff person who had provided them with important services and had treated them with respect. “It was the first place I found where people were not making false promises”, said Peggy, who then concluded: “When you get that kind of help you can’t give enough back”. Similarly, Pamela spoke of being honoured by an invitation to participate from a “non-poor” person who knew her. She felt the invitation was a testament to her relationship with that person and showed she was respected. Nelly found that positive relationships between service providers and recipients enabled her to reach out to potential “poor” participants. “What turned out to be really successful was [agency staff name] getting more information from me about who we were looking for and then making personal contact with people”, she said, “I was an outsider coming in”. It was important to note that one unintentional impact of inviting people with whom prior relationships exist may have been to concentrate participation to a limited group of “poor” people, who one “non-poor” participant called, “the usual suspects”. This point was discussed earlier in the section on representation. Natalie said that pre-existing cross relationships had made it possible for her to offer opportunities for participation to “poor” people in a way that was not exploitative or pushy. This point was echoed by Pamela, who indicated that her relationships with “non-poor” people made it possible for her to try new things because she knew she was supported, “Those trustful relationships where if you ask me to do something that I’m a little bit nervous about, I go, well, if she thinks I can do it, I know she’s going to be there to catch me if I fall”.

Many “poor” people spoke of the way participating in groups composed exclusively of people living on low income had helped them to form new relationships.
Peggy said, “I let my guard down. I began to form bonds with people, with women I felt safe with. I couldn’t do that before that project”. Paula said that while she was not looking for socialization, this was a bonus of participation. Patience noted that it was important for people facilitating projects to have recognised the relationships that were built within the project. The facilitators should have communicated to other participants about the well being of people who have missed meetings. Participants could have been worried about those who have missed a meeting.

Phyllis described the importance of cross income relationships that allowed “poor” participants to say whether or not supports were working. Pamela described her disappointment that she had not been able to establish new relationships that continued outside meetings of that group with “non-poor” people involved in the same multi-sectoral group. “Non-poor” people talked about creating respectful space and listening to “poor” people within meetings and events, but never spoke of having established relationships with “poor” participants which extended beyond the initiative. Yet, Nadine said poverty reduction work was all about building relationships and that personal connections with people living on low income allowed relationships to develop. She thought people often simply gave money to poverty reduction work instead of participating and connecting because a donation was easier. Cross income relationships, Nadine said, may have challenged stereotypes and made people more accessible to each other.

Even in groups or initiatives that participants described as having a strong open culture of respect, there remained some power dynamics and perceptions which hindered cross-income relationship development. Nora discussed her frustration when attending an event at which “poor” participants gave each other peer advice that she
thought was incorrect. Nora felt that she and the other service providers present had more expertise in that situation, but that their expertise was not being used.

Building one cross-income relationship may not have resulted in more cross-income relationships. Nadia told a story of making a strong connection with a homeless man and said it set her on a path of work on poverty issues. But she characterised a later experience connecting with people in poverty simply as “it was interesting to get their perspective”. Nadine said, “even with all I know, I’m still in the mode of thinking, I’m up here and they’re down there...And it’s not because I want to think that way, its because that’s my habit of mind for years”. Patience said, “in my system, you guys are kind of a bit higher than us. So to feel like we’re all on the same level and to be made to feel like we’re equal is really nice”. Both Nadine and Patience spoke of how their perceptions were shifting because of their participation within a poverty reduction initiative which emphasised the value of participation of the “poor”.

Several strategies were discussed to support building relationships, including small group work, listening and making space for story telling, and sharing food. Several “poor” and “non-poor” people noted that making a personal connection was easier when people were in small groups. Nadine noted that steering committees were not structured to encourage relationship development. However, she felt that changes to the structure and operation of a steering committee might have discouraged participation by the business community, among others. If fostering relationship development was to be a priority, initiatives may need to organise their activities with this in mind.

Nessa spoke of the importance of listening rather than talking when connecting with “poor” people. Similarly, Phyllis spoke of the need to chit chat with “poor” people after trust had been established. Phyllis thought it was necessary to spend time building
rapport and relationship before raising her initiative and agenda. She noted that in her experience this was especially important to “poor” men. Nicholas, Nelly and Phyllis talked about the importance of having allowed “poor” people space to tell their stories within meetings as one part of relationship building and not as an aspect of research. Nora commented that “poor” people were entitled to use the opportunity of community meetings to voice their opinions, even if that moves the meeting off the agenda, because they did not often have that opportunity. Nelly noted her experience that creating space for story telling had enabled “poor” participants to later focus on the agenda and move through work quickly. Making space for the participation of “poor” people in this way might have been an essential part of relationship building and have made “poor” people feel better about participation.

The sharing of food was frequently raised as a way of building relationships, above and beyond its importance as an incentive to participate and as support to stabilise “poor” participants. Peter said, “there’s something about having a meal together which is very inclusive. It makes a warm kind of meeting”. Peggy said “food can make for a more relaxed atmosphere”. This was echoed by several “non-poor” people, including Nessa who said, “food is a community builder”. Another “non-poor” person said she learned from First Nations elders to teach children when they’re eating because “they’re taking in food and they’ll take in knowledge at the same time”. Food was an important part of the creation of a learning space, so ensuring that food is available at meetings might have been a very useful way of developing cross-income relationships.

Perceptions about pre-existing relationships with current “poor” or “non-poor” participants may have been helpful in recruiting new “poor” participants. However, when recruitment was based largely on pre-existing relationships the same small group of “poor” people was frequently asked to participate. Pre-existing cross-income
relationships may have also supported ongoing participation, and helped “poor” participants feel supported rather than exploited as they took on new aspects of participation. New relationships among “poor” participants were seen as bonuses of participation, but were not a substantial incentive for participation. Support and recognition of these relationships could have been beneficial. New cross-income relationships were harder to create, given power dynamics between income levels. But they were both possible and important within poverty reduction initiatives that were committed to open cultures of respect. Strategies which supported building cross-income relationships included opportunities to meet in multi-sectoral small groups, listening and making space for story telling and sharing food.
CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION

This thesis study takes up the issue of participation of “poor” people in poverty reduction initiatives and people’s experiences and perceptions of factors that influence that participation. In this discussion chapter I begin by summarising the findings on the factors surrounding participation and then move into using two approaches to discuss the importance of participation and to debate the significance of the various factors. Next I present six surprises and unexpected findings: understandings and expectations of representation, the importance of open culture, the influence of rationale for participation, limits to inclusion, expectations of empathy, and ending with the role of evaluation. Finally, I report how my understanding of participation changed.

According to the literature and interviews, nine factors were taken up to explore the participation of the “poor” in poverty reduction initiatives. The first factor is types of participation. Research participants discussed many types of participation which worked for them. Instead of prioritising one or two types of participation, participants indicated that initiatives needed to offer a range of ways for “poor” participants to get involved. Compensation is the second factor and was named as a support for the participation of the “poor”, an incentive for participation and as an indication of the value placed on their participation. Yet the influence of compensation on participation was limited by inconsistent practices of providing compensation within poverty reductions initiatives, by budget constraints and by government regulations which limited receipt of compensation. The third factor was labelling of “poor” participants, which while research participants noted may sometimes be necessary for poverty reduction initiatives, these labels need not be used publicly and that “poor” participants should have participatory opportunities that do not require labels. Although the language used to describe “poor”
people mattered, it was unlikely that consensus could be found on what the appropriate term would be or when a label was required.

An open, respectful culture within poverty reduction initiatives, the fourth factor, was discussed by many “poor” and “non-poor” participants as a key factor in supporting the participation of “poor” people. The onus was on “non-poor” participants to create and maintain this space. Representation, the fifth factor, was raised by “non-poor” participants concerned about “poor” participants’ ability to represent all “poor” people. Yet “poor” participants did not see their role as representatives of a community of “poor” people. However, “poor” participants did talk about the importance of increasing diversity of “poor” participants in order to have a greater chance of having a diverse set of issues and knowledge shared. The sixth factor, rationales held about why it was important for “poor” people to participate, shaped the way “poor” people were invited to participate. Some participants felt “poor” people had a right to participate in poverty reduction initiatives and that on principle a poverty reduction initiative should always have “poor” people participating. Others spoke of the participation of the “poor” as an instrument that made poverty reduction work more effective.

The seventh factor was whether participation of “poor” people did influence change in poverty reduction initiatives. A significant impact of the participation of “poor” people was the transformation of attitudes of “non-poor” people about poverty or “poor” people. However, when influence was felt, poverty reduction initiatives were open to hearing the input of the “poor” and flexible to make change as a result of this input. Participants felt formal feedback loops about the direct difference made by “poor” people’s participation may be unrealistic and unnecessary. Ratio of “poor” participants, the eighth factor, was not as important to increase power and comfort of “poor” participants as expected. Instead, much closer attention to the quantity of “poor” people
participating might have exacerbated problems in the definition of, and requirement to disclose, low income status. It was important to have a critical mass of participants living on low income in order to ensure their voices were consistently heard. Additionally, some participants felt that open and respectful mixed income settings, along with optional separate groups for “poor” people to meet together, would have contributed to the comfort of “poor” participants. Participants noted that the final factor, relationships, were most important if they pre-existed participation in the initiative. Pre-existing relationships with current “poor” or “non-poor” participants may have been helpful in recruiting new “poor” participants. However, when recruitment was based largely on pre-existing relationships the same small group of “poor” people was frequently asked to participate. Pre-existing cross-income relationships may have also supported ongoing participation, and helped “poor” participants feel supported rather than exploited as they took on new aspects of participation. New relationships among “poor” participants were seen as bonuses of participation, but were not a substantial incentive for participation.

As I examined the findings of this research, I conducted two different analyses of these factors. One approach was a comparison of the principled versus the instrumental rationale held for the participation of the “poor and used this rationale as a lens through which I viewed the other factors. The second approach matched people and their environments when discussing and organizing factors which surround participation of the “poor”. My intent in developing these two analyses was to find some practical way(s) of organizing the factors for poverty reduction initiatives. I note that a central message of the research has been that each factor is of varying importance for individual potential “poor” participants and that poverty reduction initiatives must be flexible in the range of supports they provide in order to engage “poor” participants. However, poverty reduction initiatives, in practice, will likely need to have some sense of which factors they will
emphasise when determining staffing, workplans and budgets. Each factor, in practice, has a related cost. Most poverty reduction initiatives, like most social services, work with very tight budgets. As a result, it may not be possible for a poverty reduction initiative to fully resource each factor. How then, might a poverty reduction initiative know which factors are most important to support participation of the “poor” in its work, in order to budget? While this research does not present a cost-benefit analysis, it does present a deeper understanding of the factors which surround participation, sufficient to start conversations in poverty reduction initiatives to assist in making these decisions. These approaches attempt to make sense of the factors, given a poverty reduction initiative’s theoretical underpinnings (rationale for participation) or practical focus (person: environment fit).

Rationale for participation

The literature surrounding participation in poverty reduction initiatives identifies two central purposes for the participation of the “poor”. Participation is understood either as a means to an end (an instrumentalist strategy to reduce costs and improve project outcomes) or as an end in itself (the principle that people had the right to participate). These different understandings of the purposes of participation result in different structures of participatory opportunities (Greene-Roesel and Hinton, 1998). My findings show that these categories are not mutually exclusive and that some participants held both instrumentalist and principled rationales for participation.

Instrumentalist arguments in the literature in favour of participatory approaches cite benefits such as increased effectiveness of program design informed by different knowledge production and a highlighting of certain aspects of poverty (Bennett and
Roberts, 2004, Wharf and McKenzie, 2004, Hoddinott, Adato, Besley, and Haddad, 2001). Additionally, through participation individuals may gain skill development, new networks, and power in defining their experiences (Bennett and Roberts, 2004). The assumption that greater degrees of participation produced more effective projects and greater empowerment for participants has not been proven through studies which explicitly examine the impact of participation (Greene-Roesel and Hinton, 1998). Certain outcomes of participatory poverty reduction initiatives may have been desired by some “poor” members of the community, but this does not mean these outcomes were desired by all “poor” members of the community, nor by the initiatives, nor by their funders (Hoddinott, Adato, Besley, and Haddad, 2001). Despite this, instrumentalist arguments are primarily put forward by powerholders within multiple poverty reduction initiatives who seek additional participation of the “poor”. As participation of the “poor” increases, so too does understanding of the realities of poverty by “non-poor” people. But is it the job of the “poor” to educate the “non-poor”, particularly if this is seen by the “non-poor” as a central benefit of participation by the “poor”? Cruikshank asks “what are the problems to which democratic participation is posed as the solution?” (Cruikshank, 1999, p. 3).

In contrast, a principled perspective posits that marginalized people have a right to be present in discussions which concern them. This sentiment is echoed in slogans such as “nothing about us, without us” (Yeo and Moore, 2003, p. 571). Implied in this perspective may be the notion that good citizens want to participate in these formal structures. Therefore, if the “poor” do not participate once barriers are removed they are not good citizens, because good citizens want to participate. One could then ask, is the will to empower “poor” people to participate a further imposition of the dominant group’s definition of citizenship (Cruikshank, 1999)? A principled perspective does not suggest
that all “poor” people should participate or want to participate in poverty reduction work, but rather that they have the right to do so. While Dahl states in his principle of affected interests that “everyone who is affected by the decision of a government should have a right to participate in that government” (cited in Wharf and Mackenzie, 2004, p. 97), he qualifies this with three criteria: personal choice, competence and economy. Individuals have the choice of participation or opting out (personal choice). Not all individuals are able to participate in situations that require advanced skill or knowledge (competence). In situations that affect a large number of people, not all are able to participate directly, so some form of representation is needed (economy) (Wharf and McKenzie, 2004). Proponents of participation might critique these criteria as justifications for limiting attempts to make participation accessible. Yet one could also mediate these points by creating a range of participatory opportunities which accommodated different interests and abilities and had some lower cost options.

Though the literature presents these rationales as two streams, many initiatives and individuals may hold both rationales at the same time. They are not necessarily mutually exclusive perspectives, but rather can be integrated: oppressed people have the right to participate in their own liberation and this participation can improve the liberatory work. Freire’s liberatory education takes up the notion that oppressed people could participate in the transformation of their societies. He sees oppressed people as thinking, knowing and developing people. Human beings, he says, constantly developed their critical thinking skills and he believes that they are organizing themselves to collectively change the world for the better. Freire argues that it was praxis, the dynamic relationship between reflection and action - that allows for transformational change (Conway, 2004, p.74). Liberatory education combines the instrumentalist and
empowerment arguments: the participation of oppressed but empowered people brings about transformational change.

My last interview question asked if research participants believe it is important for people living on low income to be involved in poverty reduction work, and why or why not. Research participants described different participatory experiences, depending on their rationale for participation. Participants who spoke of the importance of participation of the “poor” on principle were most likely to also be concerned about how “poor” participants felt about their participation. Those holding this rationale for participation discussed participation with a focus on the “poor” people participating. Participants who held an instrumentalist perspective were more likely to be concerned about how the participation of the “poor” benefited the poverty reduction initiative. It was interesting that all “poor” participants expressed an instrumentalist perspective, though some also used a principled rationale.

Nothing about us, without us: the principled rationale for participation

Research participants with a principled perspective spoke of participation as a right, and something that should be a central tenet of poverty reduction initiatives. Nathan, a research participant with a principled perspective said, “I don’t believe in doing to folks”. This comment echoed rationales expressed by some researchers of citizen participation that people have a right to participate in planning, implementing and evaluating programs that affect them directly (Sawyer, 1995, Schmidt and Rifkin, 1996).

The principled concern about how “poor” participants feel about participation means that initiatives need to be flexible and to be responsive to individual participants’ requirements. Adoption of the principled rationale as a lens prioritises certain factors
surrounding participation of the “poor”. Relationships and an open culture were important factors in supporting participation for participants holding a principled perspective. These participants noted that relationships developed or strengthened through participation were important as they kept conversation channels open to discuss other needed supports for participation. An open culture, in which all participants felt their input was valued and respected, also was important for participants with a principled rationale. Therefore, I believe that poverty reduction initiatives which adopt the principled approach should create a wide range of opportunities for participation in order to accommodate the varying ways people living on low income may choose to participate.

Other factors that affected participation could be viewed through a principled lens as to how they made “poor” participants feel about their participation. Thus, it is not the degree of influence a participant had on an initiative that was important, but rather if the participant was made aware of the extent of their influence. Similarly, the ratio of “poor” participants to “non-poor” participants was important as it contributed to the ability of “poor” participants to develop relationships with other participants. Participants with a principled rationale discussed compensation not just as an enabler of participation by covering costs for participation, but also as demonstrating the value placed on “poor” people’s participation. Representation, or the diversity of participants, was seen as an important tool to assess how well the poverty reduction initiative had allowed a wide range of “poor” people to exercise their right to participate.

Someone holding a principled perspective would be concerned about how participation feels and thus is likely to be more aware that factors influencing participation are subjectively important for each participant. For example, compensation may be essential for one participant but only useful for another. This subjective element highlights the importance of relationships between staff and “poor” participants which
could ensure that the other necessary factors were in place so that each individual feels good about their participation. Pandora spoke about this, saying “it’s through getting to know people that we could say, oh [name] has this experience. I wonder how comfortable she would be talking about that”. There is not any one combination of supports that would ensure participation of all “poor” people in all aspects of an initiative. Rather, flexibility is needed to engage people in the ways which work for them and overcome their particular barriers. However, two tips from working class activists as to how to build cross class alliances may hold true in most if not all poverty reduction initiatives that hold a principled rationale. The first is, “put relationships first” and the second is “talk less and listen more” (Leondar-Wright, 2005, p. 132).

Further, a principled perspective supports an evaluation model such as that Vanderplaat proposes, which centres evaluations of success around the relevance of a program to the participants. This evaluation model seeks to determine the extent to which the initiative affects the lifeworld of the participants (Vanderplaat, 1997). This evaluation model would not only examine simple participatory outputs such as “six poor people participated”, or, even more simply, “poor people were part of the initiative”. This limited understanding of participation would not fulfill the intent of the principled rationale, but might be used by those who co-opt participatory language but do not espouse its true sentiments. Rather, use of this model would involve evaluating how the poverty reduction initiative’s activities reflect the needs and concerns of its “poor” participants and how they feel about their participation.
It’s like market research: the instrumentalist rationale for participation

An instrumentalist rationale is concerned with how well participation of the “poor” improves participatory outputs and program outcomes. A strict instrumentalist might not care about how participation feels for participants, but only whether the initiative is improved. Instrumentalists note the specialized knowledge held by people who have experienced poverty and wish to tap into this knowledge to improve programs and policies.

When viewed through an instrumentalist lens factors surrounding participation are viewed differently. Opportunities which provide “poor” participants with a degree of influence on the initiative are prioritized. Representation is also an important factor as it becomes important to engage people with experience of the issues being addressed. For example, discussions about welfare reform require representation from someone on welfare rather than from the working poor, even if their income levels are similar. A principled rationale might lead to the argument that the working poor person has a right to participate and note the connection between wages and a strong social safety net. Pandora, similarly, suggested that a volunteer’s experience of poverty, even if unrelated to the specific topic at hand, might be helpful as “he understands what it’s like to having those shaming factors, and is open to, you know, seeing people equally”. However, an instrumentalist rationale would lead to the opposite argument that a working poor person may have no greater knowledge of welfare issues than potential non-poor participants, and thus would not seek their participation. Nessa described her frustration with a similar example where a “poor” person was invited to participate just because she was poor, and not because her skill set or knowledge matched the needs of the committee.

Other factors that affect participation can be viewed through an instrumentalist lens to see how they enable participatory opportunities for people with relevant
experience who might influence the direction of an initiative. An instrumentalist approach brings a certain evaluative perspective, which tests how well the intervention addressed the problem (Vanderplaat, 1997). Thus, an instrumentalist perspective might be more likely to lead to a cost benefit analysis of each factor that assesses which factors are most successful at engaging “poor” people in ways that benefited the initiative. Research participants who held an instrumentalist rationale were more likely to talk about factors objectively, as though some factors might have been universally important. Even relationships were spoken of by these research participants as a means of engaging “poor” participants, not as having been valuable in and of themselves.

Despite the instrumentalist focus on the benefit to the initiative, it also considers the benefit to “poor” participants, but in a different way than the principled rationale. One such instrumentalist consideration is the belief that people would be better able to move out of poverty if they were directly involved in developing the programs which helped this transition. This consideration implies that all “poor” people need to participate in order to have gained this benefit.

**Person Environment fit models**

The second analysis of the factors surrounding participation examines the fit between the person and the environment. The person environment fit theory is based on two assumptions. The assumptions are, first "that human behaviour is a function of the person and the environment and second, that the person and the environment need to be compatible" (van Vianen, 2001, p. 1). The person environment fit has been used in labour market analysis to predict commitment to an organization, job performance and satisfaction (Chan, 2005; Livingstone, 1997; Halbesleben and Wheeler, 2008). It has also been used to predict success of social service programs, such as community
integration for people with psychiatric disabilities (Gulcur, Tsemberis, Stefanic and Greenwood, 2007; Chinman, Weingarten, Stayner and Davidson, 2001) or to match youths with conduct disorders with correctional programs (Timko, Moos and Finney, 2000). Studies of person environment fit in a social service context note that differential treatment could address “participants’ isolation, demoralization, poor quality of life and inability to maintain tenure in the community as well as the gaps in the service system” (Chinman, Weingarten, Stayner and Davidson, 2001, p. 226). Person environment fit models have also been used to determine appropriate teaching styles for individual student needs (Hunt and Gow, 2003).

It is possible to intervene to improve fit. A labour market study suggests that employee assistance programs that helped employees deal with off the job issues may have led to greater fit and subsequently reduced turnover. For example, employees who were unable to focus on work or to work the number of hours required by their employers might have had greater concentration and available hours if their off the job concerns had been addressed (Halbesleben and Wheeler, 2008). This same approach could be applied to interventions that assist “poor” volunteers to participate, thus meeting the needs of a poverty reduction initiative.

A strong person-environment fit reduces differences in job satisfaction and turnover between demographic groups, such as between men and women or between racialized groups (Lyons & O’Brien, 2006). Similarly, a strong person-environment fit might mediate differences in volunteer satisfaction between “poor” and “non-poor” participants and support greater participation of the “poor”. However, fit is not always positive. A fit between all participants might have negative effects as it could result in groupthink processes in which all or most participants think the same way. Similarly, misfits can have positive effects as they bring innovative ideas to a group (Chan, 2005).

There are two versions of person environment fit: supply-value fit and demand-
ability fit. Supply-value fit is a person’s evaluation of his or her environment based on his or her personal values. It focuses on meeting one’s own needs. Supply-value fit exists when the motives or needs of the person, such as needs to achieve power or gain income, are matched by supplies in the environment, such as money, supportive people and the opportunity to achieve. Demand-ability fit, in contrast, is the extent to which a person’s abilities meet the needs of the organization. This approach emphasizes a person’s knowledge and skills and evaluates how well he or she could succeed in the organization. Demand-ability fit focuses on meeting the needs of others (Livingstone, 1997). Thus, poverty reduction initiatives could consider the needs of a specific demographic group or groups of “poor” people that it wishes to participate (supply-value fit), or they could consider their needs to address the issue they are focused on (demand-ability fit). The varying needs of people or the environment within an initiative leads to prioritization of certain factors which influence participation of the “poor”. Livingstone states that an examination of person environment fit should include both supply-value and demand-ability fit. She notes that “examining only one version of fit may omit essential information about the individual organizational exchange process” (Livingstone, 1997, p.3).

Supply-value fit: Start with the person

Person environment fit researchers depend on the classification of persons and organizations in categories. However, little is known about which characteristics of persons and environment are necessary to establish fit. Thus, persons and environments have to be compatible on the characteristics which people subjectively valued as important (Halbesleben and Wheeler, 2008). Here lies the challenge with the person environment fit and this research. In order to use person-environment fit, one needs to assume some common characteristics between people of a particular group,
for example that certain factors would be experienced similarly by all or most people of
that group. Yet this research has found that there were many nuances to the way most
factors were experienced, these factors were subjective. Instead of presenting factors
as ones which will be important to people in particular groups, I present factors which
members of poverty reduction initiatives should consider offering, planning and
budgeting around and listening for. This gives a starting place for poverty reduction
initiatives, but does not posit a finalized list of supports, which, if provided, will ensure
participation of a particular group of “poor” people.

Poverty is not a homogeneous experience but rather there are diverse
experiences and levels of poverty. Therefore, once a poverty reduction initiative
determines which experiences and levels of poverty it wants to address, it can equally
seek participants who have those experiences. These different groups each have
different motives or needs, thus what is supplied by the organization, the factors which
support participation, must fit their particular needs. As stated above, it will not be
possible to fit all needs of all people with that experience, but poverty reduction initiatives
can begin by planning for and offering particular supports, while being clear that other
supports are possible, given individual's needs.

From the examples of participation of “poor” people in poverty reduction
initiatives which were given in the interviews, three categories of experiences of poverty
were developed: survival mode, disability benefits and low wages or temporary
unemployment. These categories are not mutually exclusive as some people may have
experience in all three. The interviews found that, although the two initiatives from which
participants were drawn worked with different populations of “poor” people, the groups of
“poor” people participating in these initiatives were almost the same. These “poor”
participants were usually people who were in fairly stable situations, in the mid range of
low incomes and had time to contribute to the initiative. Interview participants suggested
that people in more stable situations, such as those with low wages or temporary
unemployment, were less likely to identify with words such as “poor”. Thus, they have
had lower rates of participation in poverty reduction initiatives. Conversely, most people
in less stable situations (survival mode), such as those who received basic social
assistance or those with income from binning or illegal activities, were too deep in crisis
to have had time to participate. Therefore, poverty reduction initiatives most in need of
new strategies of engagement are those which seek the participation of “poor” people
who are in more, or less stable situations than the traditional participants.

Survival mode

This category includes crisis or in very unstable situations. Examples of are crisis
are homelessness and severe mental health or addiction problems. An example of a
very unstable situation is living on basic income assistance, which provides so little
income ($610 / month) that a great deal of energy is required for survival. Important
factors for initiatives to consider when they seek to engage people in the survival mode
category are compensation, open culture and relationships.

When discussing experiences of participation of people in survival mode,
compensation was often raised as an incentive to participate. Thus, poverty reduction
initiatives may wish to focus some attention on their compensation practices if seeking to
engage people in survival mode. Poverty reduction initiatives may run an ethical risk of
having people participate solely for compensation. Additional complications to
compensation may be imposed by external policies. For example, people who receive
basic income assistance are legally not able to receive honoraria without having the
same amount deducted from their income assistance cheque. Survival mode situations
are most likely to need immediate solutions, such as finding a home or sustainable
income source. Thus poverty reduction initiatives should be clear about whether these solutions are possible through participation.

Perhaps because survival mode experiences are such a deep level of poverty, participants with these experiences were most likely to identify with the word “poor” and to have been unconcerned about labelling. People in this category described experiencing high levels of stigma about their situation and may have been accustomed to disrespectful treatment. Thus poverty reduction initiatives should prioritise respectful listening and the flexibility to make space for survival mode issues and voices in order to support the participation of people with these experiences. Despite the provision of an open respectful culture, people in survival mode may still need space in which to be angry. Referrals by trusted front line service providers or peers were discussed as a successful approach to engage people in this category. Research participants noted that most people in survival mode may feel unable to participate, but that those who feel able and willing to participate are likely to be extroverted and used to being lone voices in multi-sectoral spaces. Thus poverty reduction initiatives may not have to be as concerned about the ratio of “poor” to “non-poor” participants.

Of all people with experience living on low income, I believe those in survival mode may be the most over-researched and underserved. Given the challenges of surviving for people in this category, their experiences make them least likely to have been able to participate in regular committee meetings. Several research participants noted that people in this category may be more interested in one time participation options or in participation options linked to service reception. Thus poverty reduction initiatives should consider offering some participatory options along these lines. Because of the nature of their participation, people in survival mode may have been more resigned to slow outcomes which were not easily attributable to individual input. They
reported being repeatedly asked for their input on issues, only to see that no change resulted from their input. Therefore poverty reduction initiatives should consider developing feedback loops that relay any positive impact of their participation to the participants. Yet due to their unstable living situations, one participant noted maintaining contact with people in survival mode was difficult.

Disability benefits

This experience of poverty provides more income and time than survival mode. People with this experience are also systemically supported by the current welfare regulations to volunteer or work part time, and thus are more available to participate in formal poverty reduction initiatives.

As they had more time, people who received disability benefits were more available for daytime and regularly scheduled meetings. They were more interested in formal volunteering positions, both because of their greater time flexibility and because they were legally able to keep honoraria or wages from part time work. However, poverty reduction initiatives should consider offering additional support with transportation to and from volunteering activities because public transit may not be possible for some people with physical or mental disabilities.

Most people in this category identified first with a disability label and second with their income level. They were concerned about the language used to describe income level within a poverty reduction initiative. Thus poverty reduction initiatives seeking to support participation for those with this experience should consider not using an income related label such as “poor”.

Disability rights movements champion the idea of “doing with not for” and so people with disabilities are more likely to see the importance of “poor” people’s involvement in poverty reduction initiatives. In fact, this group makes up a substantial
number of the “poor” participants in poverty reduction initiatives. Participants noted they were often asked to appear as representatives of all people in poverty, despite their disparate experiences from other “poor” people. This high level of participation occurs despite the stereotypes about mental illness and poverty which hinder participation of people with disabilities and which need to be countered by an open, respectful culture.

Perhaps because they had already participated in process-heavy initiatives, research participants with disabilities reported being open to slow outcomes which were not easily attributable to personal input. Additionally, as this experience of poverty can be isolating, poverty reduction initiatives seeking to focus on this experience may wish to prioritise space for relationship building. Research participants with this experience noted participating partly as a social activity and were interested in developing relationships.

Low Wages and Temporary Unemployment

This category includes those low wage jobs and receiving employment assistance or short or seasonal unemployment. This experience often brings relatively higher incomes and more stable living situations than those in the other categories, but less time. Important factors for initiatives to consider when seeking to engage people in this category are labelling, type of involvement and ratio of poor to non poor people involved.

Low wage jobs and temporary unemployment mean people are likely to have less time to participate in poverty reduction initiatives than people in the other categories. Therefore, poverty reduction initiatives need to provide a variety of times in which people could participate and to talk with potential participants as to which times work best for them. Weekday committee meetings could be a challenge for “poor” participants with traditional work hours. Shift work makes it difficult for waged poor to
commit to any regular meeting time. If participation requires participants to miss work, initiatives should consider compensation for lost wages. Meetings outside of traditional daycare hours are likely to require additional child care compensation for those with young children. However, while covering costs was important to enable participation, an honorarium was least likely to be an incentive for participation. This experience of poverty requires creative and varied options for participation, with particular consideration paid to the time required.

People with this experience were most likely to not identify with the word “poor”. Therefore when poverty reduction initiatives try to engage people in this category, they should use other words, such as “working entry level jobs” or “living on low income”. Research participants in this category noted they were often asked to tell good news stories, which required them to share past deeper levels of poverty, or to tell current stories of their hidden poverty. Both of these requests were described as disincentives to participate. As waged poor people are most likely to consider poverty labels shaming, initiatives seeking to attract waged poor participants should try to reduce the need to label “poor” participants, either, privately or publically.

Examples of waged poor participants noted that people with this experience were likely to be uncertain about the value of their contributions and their roles, especially if they were the only participants who were then working in low wage jobs. Some reported wanting to know that their participation made a difference because of the effort they expended to participate. As a result, poverty reduction initiatives should plan to offer positive reinforcement about the value of people’s participation. As the experience of low wages and temporary unemployment is often seen as separate from other experiences of poverty, people with this experience may be more likely to want a higher ratio of peers, who they consider to be other people with similar working and living situations.
Intersectional considerations: gender and racialized identities

When examining factors which influenced participation within a class or income framework, there are additional considerations of gender and racialized identities. Women, people of colour and indigenous people are more likely to have experienced poverty, although there are also many “poor” white men. As various identities blend within each individual person, participation may be more influenced by an aspect of identity that is not directly linked with income but is linked to race, class, health, children, etc.

I sought information about gender and racialization by ensuring my sample included both women and men and some indigenous people. The first question in the interview schedule, “Can you begin by telling me about anything which impacts your participation in a poverty reduction initiative”, invited participants to discuss these issues, or other issues that were important to them. Disability and the care of young children were common issues raised. Only a small number of participants discussed gender issues and even fewer mentioned racialization, although issues involving gender and racialization arose in some interviews during discussion of other issues. More direct questions on the structural barriers experienced by different genders and races might have elicited a greater response.

Participants suggested that there could have been different strategies used to engage women than those used to engage men. Natalie noted that women were sometimes less certain of themselves, and needed more encouragement to take public leadership. Her comments were echoed by Peggy, Phyllis and Pamela. This implied that relationships may have been more important for women than for men. Patience
discussed how important compensation for child care was to her participation. Although Patience did not link this need for child care to her gender, women were much more likely to have primary responsibility for child care. Thus, compensation for child care may have influenced the participation of women more than that of men. Phyllis noted that men were more interested in telling their stories and needed space for this. She also stressed the importance of having male staff to engage men, particularly in group discussions. Similarly, Paula and Peggy reported a need for gender segregated space in order to participate. This was echoed by Nicholas, who spoke of the positive impact on women’s participation in his initiative that resulted from providing a space only for women. Peter noted that there were many more women participating in his initiative than men, but that he did not know why this was so.

There were far fewer comments related to race or culture than to those related to gender. Phyllis reported that a participant of Aboriginal descent was much better able to communicate with other Indigenous potential participants. Pia noted that she wanted more participants “like her”. One woman chose to participate because she thought that the initiative would not have engaged many other Indigenous people and because she thought that this voice was important in a discussion on poverty. Phyllis, Nessa and Pandora noted cultural differences which affected the participation of Indigenous people in initiatives, such as sitting in circles, meals with meetings and eye contact.

While gender and racialization are not discussed in detail in this research, this does not mean that they do not play a substantial role in influencing participation of the “poor” in poverty reduction initiatives. It may be that the questions simply did not sufficiently elicit discussion on these topics. Alternately, it may be that the sampling method, which selected from current participants in poverty reduction initiatives, limited the participation of men and of Indigenous people because they had lower participation.
rates. An initiative that wants to follow a model in which it considers what group or
groups of people it wishes to engage might include gender and racialized groups as
important locations. Thus different factors might emerge as important supports and
constraints for participation, or nuances of the factors identified in this research might
surface.

**Demand-ability fit: Start with the environment**

The specific issue that an initiative seeks to address can affect which
participatory opportunities are most appropriate to offer in order to encourage the
participation of the “poor”. Who is the initiative seeking to influence in order to effect
change? What strategies will be most successful to convince them? How can
participation of the “poor” support these strategies?

For example, an initiative that works to influence the provincial government on
welfare policies, has a choice of strategies to do so. The initiative’s focus on welfare
policies suggests that past or present welfare recipients should be engaged as
participants. Consideration of the needs of the potential participants, such as those
detailed in the previous supply-value fit section would assist an initiative to do this. But
the initiative also has to pay attention to its own structure, which is the environment in
which the welfare recipients are being asked to participate. If the initiative seeks to lobby
the provincial government through a broad scale communications campaign,
participatory opportunities may be focused on public speaking and story sharing. This
means that participants must be willing to be labelled as “poor”. Participation might also
include committee work to develop policies. The model in this example begins with a
consideration of the needs of the initiative so that it can meet its goal and then structure
participatory opportunities to meet these needs. Nora reported using a similar approach
when deciding what participatory opportunities were appropriate. She said testimonials or personal stories were more effective in some cases, but in others where people were concerned about numbers surveys might be more appropriate. “It’s really looking at who you’re trying to sell this to, in some sense. Are testimonials going to work, is it just the basic research, and what do people want to hear, what do you want to get out of it”.

Supply-value fit and demand-ability fit are not mutually exclusive. They can be used together, matching the needs of the initiative to the needs of the people being engaged. One simply begins in a different place. Each approach does not support a list of determined factors, but rather provides a way to consider and reflect on which factors to plan and offer up front and which factors participating members might listen for in discussions with potential participants. I suggest to poverty reduction initiatives that as well as planning and budgeting for the factors which fit with the supply or demand approach they identify, that they should also set aside some flexible funding to support the needs which will come forward if, along with the supports offered, they present an open culture, willing to be flexible to meet individual participants’ needs as they are able.

**Surprises and Ahas!**

There were six significant but unexpected discoveries through the course of this research. I think of these discoveries as surprises and aha moments, in which an answer suddenly became clear, even if the question was not asked. Three such discoveries were unexpected factors which shaped participatory opportunities. These were representation, open culture and rationale for participation. The other three discoveries were challenges to my own assumptions about participation and involved limits to inclusion, expectations of empathy, and the role of evaluation.
I set out to explore six factors which influenced participation of the “poor” and three more were added by research participants during the interviews. These were representation, open culture, and rationale for participation of the “poor”. These were not new concepts within participatory literature, yet I had not included them when selecting factors. Given the importance of these three new factors to the findings, I returned to the literature to search for mention of these three factors. All three are discussed, but not as key factors which influenced participation of “poor” people. Further research is needed to better understand whether initiatives should create new forms of participation in response to these factors.

**Representation and diversity: speaking for others**

Representation is discussed in participatory literature, but not as a factor which influenced participation. Instead, representation is dealt with as a critique of participatory processes which include a small group of people selected undemocratically with no accountability requirements for whom they spoke. There is evidence that the “poor” are not one group, but are a widely heterogeneous number of people with diverse beliefs, needs and desires. Despite this, they are frequently identified by outsiders as a group, though have no consciousness or identity as such (Cruikshank, 1999, Young, 1990). My research findings suggest that the pressure on “poor” participants to represent all “poor” people could be a barrier to participation, as noted by several “poor” participants. An important distinction is that “poor” participants who belonged to a “poor” people’s group felt comfortable representing that group. “Non-poor” participants were also asked to represent different “non-poor” groups, such as an employer expected to speak for all other business owners. Yet “non-poor” participants’ critiqued “poor” participants as being unable to represent all “poor” people. The concern of “non-poor” participants that “poor” participants are not accountable to a broader community of the “poor” may result in “non-
poor” people not seeking the participation of the “poor”. In addition, “poor” people may not volunteer as they do not feel themselves to be representative.

Different from the function of representing is the idea that participants should be representative of the general population and perhaps particularly of those whose interests are bound up in an initiative's activities, such as “poor” people with poverty reduction initiatives. Should initiatives ensure some diversity within “poor” participants, a more representative group? Initiatives tend to limit participatory opportunities to a small number of voices and expect those voices to share one opinion. This push to speak with one voice further marginalises those with differing opinions, whose needs may not have been prioritised or considered. For example, literature shows that women are the majority of the world’s poor, are less likely to be literate, hold leadership positions and have had the confidence or cultural acceptability to speak out. “Male dominated NGOs, trade unions or professional associations are unlikely to prioritise the gender interests of poor women. Instead, it is likely that speaking with a single voice would mean subordinating women’s gender interests to men’s (Christian Aid, p.11, 2001). Poverty reduction initiatives must be aware that while participation of the “poor” may have improved the outcomes of their projects, making them more effective, these outcomes may not have been those desired by all members of the community (Hoddinott, Adato, Besley, and Haddad, 2001). While “poor” participants cannot represent all “poor” people and initiatives cannot include all voices of the “poor”, initiatives need to remember the diversity of voices of “poor” people.

Open Culture: making welcoming spaces

The importance of an open culture as a support for participation receives greater attention in literature addressing participation of women, people of colour and people with disabilities than of people living on low income. These studies note the negative
effects of chilly climates, overt or hidden racism, sexism, or ableism, or alternately the positive effects of open cultures, welcoming spaces, finding common ground, and respect in encouraging diverse voices and enabling coalition work (Mizrahi & Rosenthal, 2001; HIVOS, 2002; Classen et al., 2008, DeTurk, 2006). Of particular note are the findings of a review of participation in a multi-stakeholder poverty reduction initiative. This initiative sought to build bridges between groups who shared concerns about flaws in Canada’s income security system for adults, but had different views about how these flaws should be addressed. The review of participation in this initiative discusses key findings from the multi-stakeholder process: how the diverse voices came together, how and why the process worked well, how the participants worked towards consensus even though they often disagreed initially and what enabled them to achieve a common vision and propose recommendations about income security and related social policy change. One of the study’s six key findings is that it is important for all participants to feel respected; 100% of the study’s respondents agreed that the initiative made participants feel valued and respected. Respondents described what respect meant to them:

Respect means listen to me, appreciate my comments, don’t criticize or tell me that I’m wrong, don’t put people down.

Respect is listening, giving the floor to others,…people get when they’re being shut down…no one voice is greater than another and is equally accepted.

(Lettner, 2008, p.20)

Lettner also found a strong correlation between the strength of the facilitators and committee chairs (as assessed by participants) and the participants feeling that they were respected. This correlation points to the need for poverty reduction initiatives to consider facilitation skills as they select people for comparable roles.
Feldman and Khademian posit that there is an important staff role in the creation of a community of participation. In order to foster a space that creates solutions rather than disagreements, all participants may need to be helped to see the relevance of different perspectives in the discussion. The relational work needed to do this, creating connections and empathy between people in order to legitimize perspectives, is essential to the ability of a group to work effectively together. Yet this work often goes unnoticed (Feldman and Khademian, 2007).

**We want to be inclusive, but we don’t mean everyone**

I made a surprise discovery that changed my expectations of the inclusion of people living on low income in poverty reduction initiatives. I began this research with the belief that all people living on low income had the right to be included in poverty reduction initiatives. Yet I knew from my own experience that there were participants, including people living on low income, who were extremely hard to work with, who were continually disruptive and who were disrespectful of all other participants. I struggled with my own reluctance to invite such people to participate in various projects I was part of, even when I knew they were interested. I was ashamed of this and felt it was classist. I suspended my expectations of respectful participation for people who had experience of poverty, as if this experience exempted them from such expectations. Stout (2002) and Leondar-Wright (2005) present reports from people with experience living on low income criticizing the tendency of middle class activists in cross class alliances to suspend expectations of respectful participation. However, both acknowledge the need to make space for anger, different ways of communicating and varying working styles. After reflection on what inclusion means to me, I see that while there is a need for acceptance of behaviours or characteristics of “poor” participants, which may be caused
or exacerbated by their poverty, this does not extend to acceptance of unreasonable behaviour which may be caused by my feelings of guilt or my assumptions of the low worth of participants based solely on their low income. As one member of my thesis committee said, within all income groups, there are people who are just “jerks” and extremely hard to work with. It is unfair to all “poor” participants to attribute these unacceptable behaviours to their poverty. It is, however, reasonable that initiatives provide some accommodation for frustration, low literacy, mental illness, or addiction, especially if an initiative is seeking the participation of people living in crisis. It is unreasonable and exclusionary for poverty reduction initiatives to want “poor” people to be present, but to expect they would never interrupt, smell bad or be angry. However, allowing ongoing disruptive participation from some “poor” participants may lead to greater participation from the “poor” but may also cause other “poor” participants to quit because they find the disruptive behaviour unacceptable. Finding a balance between full participation and expectations for respectful and functional working styles is difficult. The response to this challenge likely affects how participants in poverty reduction initiatives encourage participation of the “poor”.

**Expectations of “poor” people to be empathetic**

Another unexpected finding was the difference between the expectation of empathy between people living on low income and the reality. Interview participants often described a benefit of participation of the “poor” as an expectation that “poor” people would have empathy for other “poor” people. Since the “poor” would know what it is like to be poor it was expected they would bring compassion into the initiative. Despite this, many “poor” people interviewed described some other “poor” participants disparagingly and suggested that the participation of these people would be less useful than their own. These “poor” participants spoke of the tendency of other “poor”
participants to focus on personal issues, to be angry and to ramble. This lack of empathy echoed what Bullock reports from a study comparing attitudes of middle class and welfare recipients about welfare. Welfare recipients were more likely than middle-class respondents to believe welfare recipients were dishonest and idle (Bullock, 2006).

Neysmith, Bezanson and O’Connell note that “few linear strands tie ‘experience’ to a corresponding ‘worldview’” (Neysmith, Bezanson and O’Connell, 2005, p.171). So while “poor” participants may be expected to be empathetic, they are no more likely to fulfil this role than any “non-poor” participant and may, in fact, be less likely to do so. Perhaps this discrepancy between expectations and realities is another explanation why poverty reduction initiatives have less participation of the “poor” than desired. When “poor” people participate, but do not behave as consistently compassionate individuals towards all “poor” people, as their stereotype requires, other participants may decide the participation of the “poor” is less valuable.

Asking the right evaluation questions

Participation of the “poor” requires a commitment of resources from organizations often working on very tight budgets. Interview participants discussed the importance of compensating “poor” people for time and volunteer costs and of dedicating staff resources to support participation of the “poor”. However, the tangible benefits to poverty reduction initiatives of the participation of the “poor” has not been documented or proved to the satisfaction of many within these initiatives. Those who approach the question of dedication of resources to participation of the “poor” through an instrumentalist lens base their decision on the expected increased efficiency or effectiveness of the poverty reduction initiative. As a result they may seek to measure bang for buck, to prove that participation of the poor is improving efficiency or effectiveness. But it is difficult to prove or quantify the impact of this participation under traditional evaluation frameworks and
funding participation of the “poor” became a lower priority than other expenses. A new
evaluation framework which starts with a principled approach would perhaps better
assess a poverty reduction initiative’s success at encouraging participation of the “poor”.

One such evaluation framework may be the emancipator evaluation framework
Vanderplaat challenges organizations to use. This framework does not ask how well the
intervention has addressed the identified problem, but instead examines whether the
program was appropriate in light of what was known about poverty. Rather than
examining how well the program users had fared under the program, one looks at how
responsive the program had been to the real needs of the program users. Program
users or participants “come to act as critical informants, or expert witnesses to the
process rather than as bearers of the indicators (e.g. behaviours and attitudes) by which
the effectiveness of a program is judged” (Vanderplaat, 1997, p.153). This form of
evaluation moves the emphasis away from a determination of how participation affected
program policies or practices (instrumentalist) to a determination of how policies
promoted participation and responded to the interests of people living on low income
(principled).

An emancipation evaluation framework might respond to the concerns from
participants in this thesis research as to the difficulty of documenting the outcomes of
participation in a linear fashion - that is, Fred came to a meeting, thus welfare rates
increased. While participants critiqued linear evaluation models being able to capture the
impact of their participation, some participants did want evidence that their participation
made a difference. The findings about labelling also point to the need to reconsider the
way participation outputs were tracked, as a record of “poor” participants requires
labelling participants as “poor”. Instead, perhaps poverty reduction initiatives might
report on what they have done to create participatory opportunities. This would reverse
the gaze by changing the approach to participation of the “poor” from a simple count of
the number of “poor” participants to an evaluation of the actions of the poverty reduction
initiative in encouraging the participation of the “poor”. For example, a report that there
were three “poor” participants at a meeting might indicate that the meeting was held in a
physically accessible building, near a bus stop with regular service, that three
transportation honoraria and one child care bursary were distributed. Emancipatory
evaluation processes might further capture how all participants felt about the meeting
and their contributions.

A Reflexive Moment: How the research process mirrored the research topic

At the outset, I had lofty goals as to participation in my research. I initially
considered participatory action research methodologies but rejected these in favour of
one I felt was more achievable within the scope of a master’s thesis. This was the first
step in an increasingly non-participatory piece of research. The non-participatory nature
of this research was mockingly ironic, given the research topic. I found that many of the
factors I was considering were also important in encouraging the participation of people
living on low income in my own research. I also saw my own research quickly reflecting
many of the critiques I had previously made of poverty reduction initiatives.

It is not uncommon for research processes to reflect the situations of their
research subjects. For example, the Commission on Poverty, Participation and Power
examined why people experiencing poverty did not influence decision making and policy.
Over the course of the commission, many of the conflicts which occurred between the
grassroots and public life commissioners echoed the challenges under discussion (Kelly,
2004).

I had initially envisioned members of my thesis advisory committee participating
actively in the research, ideally in paid positions as co-investigators. As I was unable to
secure sufficient funding for this, I reduced the participatory role to members of an advisory group. I compensated for their help through an in-kind swap of my time. I intended this group to meet several times through the research and particularly contribute actively in the analysis. But my thesis advisory committee met only twice, and played no role in the analysis. My research and writing had already taken significantly longer than I had expected. I had two children through the course of my research and writing, and the participatory nature of the work became a lower priority than the need to complete the work.

As I began to sample participants, I had to fight my desire to make the sample representative of the population of people living on low income in the community in which the research was located. A qualitative sample is concerned with variation in demographics such as race and gender when they are “deemed analytically important and where the failure to sample for such variation would impede understanding or invalidate findings” (Sandelowski, 1995, p. 181). Thus I remain unhappy about the low numbers of indigenous people and men who participated in the research, both groups I had deemed analytically important. However, there was sufficient diversity on key concepts to foster rich, transparent data. Theoretical saturation was reached.

When recruiting people for this research, I considered as one aspect of participant criteria whether people had provided direction to an initiative. This was not limited only to people who sat on committees, or had long term involvement, but also included people who attended focus groups, completed surveys or participated in shaping short term projects. The intent was to exclude people who participated in initiatives only by receiving services or by providing services, services separate from decision making, such as giving out sandwiches or copying leaflets. I assumed that participation was more important or meaningful if participants would had the possibility of changing the initiative (Arnstein, 1969). What this assumption missed was any
consideration of the power that the person who hands out the sandwiches has over the way the recipient feels about getting a sandwich. The recipient can be affected by the giver’s smile or their willingness to bend the rules to give out two sandwiches if someone is hungry. These workers change the initiative by the way they deliver services. While participants in this research spoke to the benefits of participation through paid work, some of these benefits would occur from volunteer positions as well. Participation itself is a form of initiative and direction, especially if voluntarily selected (Reitsma-Street, Maczewski and Neysmith, 2000).

Pre-existing relationships played an important role in getting people to participate in my research. Several “poor” participants told me explicitly that they talked with me only because an intermediary with whom they had a relationship referred me, or because they knew me from other work. Most but not all of the potential participants I approached were able to be interviewed. It was not hard to find people who were interested and able to participate. Just over half of my participants were “poor”, which was my intended ratio for interviews.

Though acutely aware of the importance of compensating interview participants for their costs and their time, I was only able to do so because of a privileged financial position. While I was not able to compensate members of my advisory group in cash, I did secure enough money for honoraria, food, child care and transportation for “poor” participants. This, coupled with my desire to interview approximately half “poor” participants and half “non-poor”, required me to categorise and label interview participants. Because I compensated only “poor” participants, “poor” participants had to know what label I had given them. One participant I had categorised as “poor” re-categorised herself as “non-poor”. Two “poor” participants, who knew that I was paying the honoraria from my own pocket, refused some or all of the honoraria and asked me to pass it on to someone in greater need.
Though advisory group members held the balance of power in the advisory group (three "poor": one "non poor" i.e. me) I maintained sufficient power to decide when the advisory group met and to propose what their agenda was. This demonstrated that the ratio of participants was less important than where the power lay. The advisory group members did affect the research, even with a small number of meetings, as they added a factor to the list of those being researched. I believe that the advisory group created an open culture in which all participants felt their input was valued and respected. Most of the other discussion, however, focused on the workings of the advisory group and on decision making processes, none of which were used as the group met so rarely. The advisory group would have been happy to be more active and to meet more often. Their lower participation was due to my inability or reluctance to find time to set meetings.

It was interesting that my own research on participation of “poor” people mirrored the experiences of poverty reduction initiatives. My thesis raised the question as to why participation of the “poor” in poverty reduction initiatives was lower than desired. When I turn that question back on myself and wondered why participation in my research was lower than desired, I note the following reasons. While I had many people participate in interviews, this level of participation is limited. The primary constraint for higher levels of participation was a lack of resources. I lacked the financial resources to create jobs for my advisory group members. I also lacked the time, or perhaps the willingness, to make the time in my tight schedule, to make participation a high priority. Responsibility for this rested both with me and with the lack of supports for student research. Perhaps if I had set myself a methodology that involved higher levels of participation, I would have made participation a priority. I could have refused to proceed with the research without the funds necessary to support adequate levels of participation. I could have delayed the research until I was able to dedicate more time to it. I gave birth to two children through the research and writing process and was being a primary income earner. I could point
to the challenges in finding funding for honoraria in student led research and to the low priority research funding bodies gave to support greater degrees of participation. I have read critiques requiring organizations to include people living on low income because the resulting participation would be token. However, I agree instead with a participant in the Annie E. Casey Foundation Empowerment Zone project who said:

I think the resident involvement mandate was the best thing about the Empowerment Zone. It may have been difficult, it may have complicated the Zone process, but it actually forced local government to listen to people in their communities who were not their voters, not their contributors, but the little guy in the distressed community. Their motivation may have been: ‘We want the $100 million, so we’ll listen to these people if we have to.’ But that was brilliant, because without that incentive, it would not have happened. (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2002, p. 25).

My master’s program, with a heavy emphasis on practice, still requires a thesis component rather than a project. Perhaps this study would have been better suited to a project in which more time could have been allocated to the work and less to the writing.

Though my research process mirrored many of the constraints faced by poverty reduction initiatives, I do not suggest that factors other than resources are unimportant to the support of participation of people living on low income. For example, it is likely that without pre-existing relationships or a reputation for maintaining an open and respectful culture, I would have found participants harder to secure.

It is my intent to create an easy to use product to support participation of people living on low income following the completion of my thesis. My advisory group has expressed interest in leading the production of this tool, either by a workshop or a guidebook or both. I hope that I am able to apply what I have learned through this research project to support greater participation in this next stage of the work.
How my understanding of participation changed

The central message I learned from this research is my changed understanding of participation. Literature on participation critiques the vague definitions of participation as any number of activities could be labelled participatory, including many that had limited influence and were token involvement. Yet poverty reduction initiatives need to offer a range of participatory options in order to meet the diverse ways participants want to participate. My findings indicate that even limited participatory opportunities may have value to the initiative and to the participants.

The key points are that a sufficient range of opportunities are provided to accommodate the interests and abilities of a diverse range of participants. Even with this range of options, I also see that initiatives can exclude some people, or can focus on engaging others, without the loss of participatory principles. Limitations based on reasonable and appropriate standards of respectful behaviour are useful. A search for participants which is based on their specific experience of poverty or their personal characteristics could lead to identification of skills and knowledge without the external application of a constructed group label. Torjman says, “A sense of identity is the result of both who you are and what you do – the type and extent of contribution to the community or society” (Torjman, 2007, p. 170). She envisions these many types of contributions or participation along a continuum of actions, from personal and individualized expression to formal, structured activities (Torjman, 2007).
CHAPTER SIX: WHAT NEXT FOR POVERTY REDUCTION INITIATIVES?

What lessons, then, can be drawn from the information gathered through this research by poverty reduction initiatives that seek to increase the participation of “poor” people? This research may contribute a cataloguing and deeper understanding of the factors to increase participation. By exploring more deeply a few experiences of participation of “poor” people, it may also assist poverty reduction initiatives to learn how factors which surround participation can be taken into account in their efforts to increase participation. The importance of each factor to any particular poverty reduction initiative would depend on the focus of that particular initiative. The following recommendations for poverty reduction initiatives flow from the research findings:

1. Clarify participation goals and expectations
2. Dedicate sufficient resources to participation
3. Debate when to use “poor” labels
4. Invite new forms of participation
5. Design participatory opportunities to attract relevant groups
6. Adopt a participation checklist

1. Clarify participation goals and expectations

A central message throughout the findings was the importance of poverty reduction initiatives being flexible in the participatory opportunities and supports for participation they provide. The question remains of who decides what participatory opportunities and supports for participation are offered. It may be a shared responsibility between poverty reduction initiatives and potential participants to ensure that the supports needed by each individual participant are known and provided. But I believe
that the onus is on poverty reduction initiatives to begin by offering supports, with a clear statement that if additional supports are needed, these will be provided if possible.

So who decides? Here I follow both the principled and instrumentalist rationale for participation. First, all people with experience living on low income have the right to participate in poverty reduction work. I now limit my own belief in this principled rationale with the condition that people living on low income, as all other participants, are expected to be respectful of others working with them. All participants are free to disagree, to have moments of anger and frustration, to speak in the style of language which feels natural to them and to take time for personal stories. But respectful working practices do not include consistently blocking others ideas, ongoing aggression and unconstructive criticism. Second, though all people living on low income have the right to participate in poverty reduction work, if their participation is being sought because it is instrumentally important to this work, the responsibility lies with poverty reduction initiatives to seek this participation. When participation of people living on low income is sought, it is reasonable to focus on securing participation of people with experience relevant to the issue. This focus does not preclude participation of someone without direct relevant experience, such as a working poor person interested in improving welfare policy. What supports the participants need and how they participate needs to be a shared determination of participants and poverty reduction initiatives. Poverty reduction initiatives offer a range of supports and a range of participatory opportunities, with a statement that other supports and opportunities may be available if needed. Participants choose which supports they need and ask for others if not offered. As Natalie found, poverty reduction initiatives may need to directly invite participants to take up specific opportunities. She said, “I didn’t think anybody would come forward if I didn’t specifically ask”. Poverty reduction initiatives may not have the resources to meet all
requests for supports to participation. However, repeated unmet requests will negatively affect participation.

Many research participants spoke of the importance of being clear with all participants, “poor” and “non-poor”, as to why they were being invited to participate. These research participants opposed invitations based on income status alone, suggesting instead that invitations should be linked to interest and experience. This would reduce feelings of tokenism. I suggest then to poverty reduction initiatives that seek to engage more people with experience living on low income that these initiatives consider at the outset:

- **Who** they want to participate (what experiences i.e. social assistance recipients);
- **Why** they want them to participate; and,
- **What** poverty reduction initiatives expect participants to do.

I believe that honest and thorough answers to these questions will draw out the information needed to respectfully support “poor” people’s participation. Clarity about the participants’ expected role(s) will also help to avoid token participation.

For example, an organization working to promote welfare reform, would want to have people who had some experience with the welfare system, including current or recent welfare recipients. Thus, a welfare recipient who is invited to participate would not be identified as poor but rather seen as someone with important knowledge of the issue under consideration. While this might be more difficult for groups with a less direct focus, or those who work at a broader policy level, for many organizations this might work very well.

It feels unrealistic to recommend that groups frankly and openly discuss the extent to which they wish to be inclusive, but my own experience speaks to the usefulness of such a discussion. In the months following my research I began to apply
many of the findings to my work. One group with which I was connected with sought participation from people living in crisis. Some new participants came with substance use addictions. Some original members of the group were frank about their discomfort with the addition of members with substance use addictions. Discussions about this discomfort, which still continue, have clarified expectations for all participants as well as challenged assumptions about behaviours linked to substance use. Some of the questions that were discussed included the following: Instead of substance users, could we include people who worked with substance users? Could we include people who were recovered? Need we fear sudden violence, verbal or physical? What could someone who was high contribute? Framing our discussion around who the group wanted to participate, why the group wanted these people and what the group expected participants to do helped us move through these questions. The group was also able to set some clear ground rules about participation which set aside assumptions about behaviour linked with substance use and instead focused on what the group felt was reasonable behaviour to require of participants. These ground rules excluded some participants, but the group felt these rules accommodated their participation goals.

2. Dedicate sufficient resources to participation

Enabling participation is expensive. Compensation for costs of volunteering, honoraria and food as incentives and staff time for support and outreach all require money which initiatives find difficult to dedicate in resource scarce times. All “poor” research participants noted the importance of compensation as a support for participation. Dedicating sufficient resources would likely have much greater success in attracting participation from people with experience living on low income. It may be easier to set low participation goals at the outset and, once they are achieved, to set higher goals. Yet not enabling participation also has a cost. Instrumentalists believe
participation of people living on low income makes poverty reduction initiatives more efficient (Bennett and Roberts, 2004, Wharf and McKenzie, 2004, Hoddinott, Adato, Besley, and Haddad, 2001). Enabling participation of the “poor” increases the number of people working to reduce poverty, at a time when formal volunteer participation is dropping (Putnam, 2000) and resources to the voluntary sector are being cut (Reitsma-Street, 2002). Reitsma-Street wrote of funding cuts and subsequent layoffs in the voluntary sector “For every hour of paid work eliminated, two to three hours of volunteer work evaporate” (Reitsma-Street, 2002). I suggest to poverty reduction initiatives that as well as planning and budgeting for specific participatory supports which seem relevant to their initiative that they should also set aside some flexible funding. This will enable them to support the needs which will come forward if, along with the supports offered, they present an open culture, willing to be flexible to meet individual participants’ needs as they are able. Finally, I suggest to poverty reduction initiatives that they should champion their compensation practices, offering them universally to any potential participant. This not only helps to ensure that everyone who needs the support is able to access it but also promotes the practice to other groups.

3. Debate when to use “poor” labels

Most poverty reduction initiatives will determine a definition of “poor” people and apply a label to some participants, as it is important that they demonstrate that the “poor” are participating. Prior to establishing this label and beginning to count “poor” participants, poverty reduction initiatives would do well to remove income barriers by covering costs for participation. Initiatives could report to funders on their inputs, which are the efforts they put into removing income barriers and engaging people living on low income rather than tracking and reporting on the outputs, which are the number of “poor” people involved. This may help poverty reduction initiatives to move away from token
participation and to focus on their own strategies and responsibility to create open spaces for cross income participation.

Poverty reduction initiatives must resist pornography of the “poor” that can result from asking “poor” participants to publicly share either good or bad news stories of their lives. The public notices these stories and it can be valuable for poverty reduction initiatives to be able to show that “poor” people are participating. But public statements of their experiences should be offered as an option, not as the central way for “poor” people to participate.

When choosing the terms to describe “poor” participants, initiatives should consider longer but more acceptable phrases such as “have had experience living on low income”. These phrases attract a broader number of participants by enabling people who are not currently living on low income but have recent experience of poverty to participate. Such phrases also allow participants to maintain privacy as to when they lived on low income. If participants are asked to identify publicly with their experience of poverty after a full debate of the necessity of this, poverty reduction initiatives should consider using the term “expert” to describe “poor” participants.

Poverty reduction initiatives should also consider re-casting “poor” participants as experts, based on their experience and intimate knowledge of some aspects of poverty. Yet to see people with experience of poverty as experts does not preclude the need for other participants with experience with poverty such as service providers, who bring another, also valuable perspective.
4. Invite participation in different ways

Research participants made recommendations as to how to reach potential participants and as to what they were invited to do. Poverty reduction initiatives are often composed of several groups working in partnership. Meetings of poverty reduction initiatives are therefore made up of representatives from each of these partner groups. In order to achieve a wide range of perspectives at the table, each partner group could ensure that their representatives come from different positions within that group. For example, a partner group could send a board member, a staff member and a service recipient. It might be difficult for some service recipients to sit at a table with someone in a position of power over them, but even so they would be able to offer many constructive comments. Achieving such a mixture of representatives depends upon previously established relationships within each partner group and is not fully under the control of the initiative. It will be important as the number of perspectives at a table grows to ensure that all members have a willingness to engage in a shared vision.

This paper discussed the issue of whether “poor” people represent the “poor”. While “poor” participants did not feel they represented all those who lived in poverty, those “poor” participants who were part of a “poor” people’s groups felt they were able to represent that group and were accountable to it. But it is not realistic or, I think, desirable to create a number of “poor” people’s groups only in order to provide an accountability structure for “poor” participants. The “poor” people’s groups would not themselves be representatives of all people living on low income, or accountable to this broader population. An example of how difficult it is for a poor group to represent all those who live on low income occurred in an Ontario city. The transit authority planned to issue bus passes to all those living on low income. A “poor” people’s group objected because the plan would require “poor” people to be labelled. But a few years later, another “poor” people’s group asked for such a bus pass (Cabaj, personal
communication, 2005). Poverty reduction initiatives and their “non-poor” participants must leave expectations of representation aside when seeking participation of the “poor”, and allow people to represent themselves, as they do “non-poor” participants.

Several research participants spoke very positively of creating jobs as a way of engaging participants living on low income. They distinguished jobs from volunteer positions with honoraria. A policy of hiring participants requires some flexibility, as some potential participants, such as social assistance recipients, are not able to earn money. However, as an overall approach it has several strengths which include: demonstrating that the initiative values the participants’ input and provides them with a label other than “poor” person to explain their participation. It also brings participants more deeply into the initiative as part of service delivery and ideally helps move participants along the pathway out of poverty. It is a more resource intensive model, but I have come to believe this is likely to be one of the most successful approaches to engaging people with experience living on low income.

Perhaps the idea that participation in boards is the best way to influence and hold power has discouraged other types of participation. One research participant described the influence staff people involved in front line service delivery had on the initiative. He noted that board decisions are based on staff recommendations and are implemented by staff and so staff have great power. This power will vary depending on the culture of any organization. But I end this research with a very different expectation and understanding as to how to enable participation that makes a difference and where power lies than I began this research. Instead of favouring committee participation, I now believe that not all decision making happens at committee meetings and that an initiative can and should be structured with an open culture which values input from all participants and ensures that decision making happens in a variety of locations and types of participation. While
barriers to participating on committees should be removed, there are many other locations for participation which can also be effective and should not be ignored. When discussing this with Dr. Marge Reitsma-Street some time ago, she posited that rather than envisaging a ladder of participation, we should envision a scaffold of participation and recognise the key support role played by each part. Thus, participants can choose to stay on ground levels, witnessing and helping, or move to other levels as they wish.

5. Design participatory opportunities to attract relevant groups

Poverty reduction initiatives should recognise that poverty is not experienced homogeneously, but that there are diverse experiences and levels of poverty. Poverty reduction initiatives should determine what experiences or levels of poverty it wants to address and, based on this determination, from what groups it desires participation. For example, this research developed three categories of people living on low income based on the interviews: people in survival mode, people receiving disability benefits and waged poor or temporarily unemployed. These categories were not mutually exclusive as some people may have had experience in all three. However, each category had certain factors which were more important to support participation. Poverty reduction initiatives can combine this supply-value fit model to determine a fit between participants (persons) and initiatives (environment) with a demand-ability fit. Used together, these two models can match the needs of the initiative to the needs of the people being engaged.
6. Adopt a Participation Checklist

Each factor to increase participation discussed in this research will be important to some individual potential participants and less important to others. There is no clear consensus that some factors are important at all times, or that any one or two factors alone will be sufficient to increase participation of all “poor” people. Poverty reduction initiatives may want to consider using a checklist of all of the factors. As they begin to seek participation of more “poor” people, each factor can be discussed. While limited resources or organizational culture may preclude addressing all the factors, the simple act of considering each one may help to move the organization towards being more inclusive as these factors become integrated into planning and working styles. This checklist will be reviewed by my thesis advisory group, who will have the final say on the questions after having time to debate the thesis findings.

*Types of involvement:*

- What participation options are available e.g. committee member, focus group, survey / written input, public speaking, service delivery?
- Are there options which require a smaller time commitment? Are there options which allow for one time participation and others for ongoing participation?

*Compensation*

- Is there a budget for transportation (bus, mileage, parking) and child care?
- Are there wages or honoraria for participation?
- Will healthy food be provided, either snacks or a meal?
- Are all of these items advertised to all potential participants?
Labelling

- Are participants asked to identify their income level or experience, either privately to receive compensation or publicly through story telling or media work? If so, is this necessary?
- Are participants asked to use the word “poor”, or any similar word, to describe themselves? Is there a discussion about how and why people are identified as “poor”?
- Are participation options provided that allow people to avoid being labelled, such as a participatory opportunity with no income barriers such as sliding scale entry fees?

Open Culture

- Do all participants feel their participation is equally valued, regardless of their income?
- Are people with experience living on low income given equal opportunity to take leadership?

Expectation of Representation

- Who, if anyone, are “poor” participants expected to represent?

Making a difference

- Is the initiative open to a change in direction based on the input of participants with experience living on low income?
- What decision-making power, if any, do participants living on low income have?

Ratio of poor and non poor

- Are there enough people with experience living on low income participating to make their participation comfortable and for their voices to be heard?
Relationships

- Do staff have time to develop relationships with volunteers?
- Do participants have opportunities to develop relationships with each other?

Conclusion

I entered this research to better understand how diverse participants in poverty reduction initiatives experience the supports and constraints for participation of people living on low income in poverty reduction initiatives. I hoped to shape my own future practice in anti-poverty work and to provide useful information for poverty reduction initiatives.

Some of my research findings have strengthened my earlier conceptions about participation, such as my belief in the importance of compensation, of using respectful language and reducing labels where possible. Other factors were less important than I thought they would be, such as the ratio of poor to non poor and the explicit demonstration of the influence someone’s direct participation had on an initiative. As well as a deeper understanding of factors affecting participation I now have a greater understanding of the diverse opportunities for participation and the importance of clarifying expectations of participation at the outset of engagement. Many of the lessons I learned I feel will also be useful for poverty reduction initiatives, and I commit to work with my thesis advisory committee to develop a useful way of sharing these findings.

I believe participation of people living on low income in poverty reduction initiatives is important and possible, but is not a panacea for social change. I now have a deeper understanding of how to support such participation, and of cautions and constraints surrounding participatory processes.
With this understanding, I hope to work with others to more effectively to reduce poverty.

As Jannit Rabinovitch wrote:

*Social change that works from the centre out, engaging those most affected,*

*leads to change that is more relevant, more likely to make a difference in people’s lives, and more likely to be sustained* (Rabinovitch, 2005).
REFERENCES


*Cultural Youth Services Review* 22(8), 651-678.


organizational study of volunteers in community resource centres for children.


APPENDIX 1

Interview guide

1. I want to begin by asking you to tell me a little about yourself, and particularly anything which might impact your involvement in poverty reduction initiatives.

2. Tell me about your involvement in [Initiative 1 / Initiative 2].

Prompts:

How did you begin to get involved?

What kinds of activities have you been part of? What roles have you played?

What supported your involvement? What didn’t?

3. Tell me in some detail about a time where you saw people living on low income participating in [Initiative 1 / Initiative 2] and it worked well and felt good.

Prompts:

How were people living on low income involved?

How many people living on low income were involved?

What was the result of the involvement of people living on low income?

How were those involved informed of the impact of their participation?

Did people participating have prior relationships with each other? Did participation involve forming new relationships or strengthening old ones?

Was any compensation given to people living on low income for costs related to their participation?

Were people living on low income asked to publicly identify as “poor” (including in meetings)?
4. Tell me in some detail about a time where you saw people living on low income participating in [Initiative 1 / Initiative 2] and it did not work well or feel good.

Prompts:

How were people living on low income involved?

How many people living on low income were involved?

What was the result of the involvement of people living on low income?

How were those involved informed of the impact of their participation?

Did people participating have prior relationships with each other? Did participation involve forming new relationships or strengthening old ones?

Was any compensation given to people living on low income for costs related to their participation?

Were people living on low income asked to publicly identify as “poor” (including in meetings)?

5. Do you believe it is important for people living on low income to be involved in poverty reduction work? Why or why not?
## APPENDIX 2

### Table 2

**Participant Demographics by Participant**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Income</th>
<th>Income source</th>
<th>Parent</th>
<th>Aboriginal</th>
<th>Gender</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pandora</td>
<td>&quot;Poor&quot;</td>
<td>PPMB* / PWD** + Paid employment</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Woman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nadine</td>
<td>&quot;Non-poor&quot;</td>
<td>Paid employment</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Woman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pamela</td>
<td>&quot;Poor&quot;</td>
<td>PPMB / PWD + Volunteer ***</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Woman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Natalie</td>
<td>&quot;Non-poor&quot;</td>
<td>Paid employment</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Woman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nathan</td>
<td>&quot;Non-poor&quot;</td>
<td>Retired</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Man</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nora</td>
<td>&quot;Non-poor&quot;</td>
<td>Paid employment</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Woman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nessa</td>
<td>&quot;Non-poor&quot;</td>
<td>Retired</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Woman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peggy</td>
<td>&quot;Poor&quot;</td>
<td>PPMB</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Woman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Patrick</td>
<td>&quot;Poor&quot;</td>
<td>PPMB / PWD + Paid employment</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Man</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paula</td>
<td>&quot;Poor&quot;</td>
<td>PPMB / PWD + Paid employment</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Woman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nadia</td>
<td>&quot;Non-poor&quot;</td>
<td>PPMB / PWD + Paid employment</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Woman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Natasha</td>
<td>&quot;Non-poor&quot;</td>
<td>Paid employment</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Woman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peter</td>
<td>&quot;Poor&quot;</td>
<td>PPMB / PWD + Volunteer ***</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Man</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Patience</td>
<td>&quot;Poor&quot;</td>
<td>Paid employment</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Woman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nicholas</td>
<td>&quot;Non-poor&quot;</td>
<td>Paid employment</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Man</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nelly</td>
<td>&quot;Non-poor&quot;</td>
<td>Paid employment</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Woman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phyllis</td>
<td>&quot;Poor&quot;</td>
<td>Paid employment</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Woman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Polly</td>
<td>&quot;Poor&quot;</td>
<td>Paid employment</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Woman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pia</td>
<td>&quot;Poor&quot;</td>
<td>Paid employment</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Woman</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* PPMB = Provincial income assistance category, People with Persistent Multiple Barriers to employment
** PWD = Provincial income assistance category, People with Disabilities
*** Volunteer = receives volunteer honoraria from BC government