Participatory, or participatory action research (hereafter PA) is a broad approach to research that treats human participants as collaborators rather than subjects. Often employed in projects concerned with policy and practice or service delivery, PA also aims to demystify the research process and enable non-professionals subsequently to do their own research.

Many argue that PA research is inherently ethical, because this type of work involves placing a high degree of responsibility on the research participants, and demands continuous reflexivity about, and sensitivity to, emergent ethical issues as the programme of research unfolds. Within PA work research participants are considered less as subjects and more as research partners. At the core of the PA method are principles of democracy and humanity within research, involving:

- respect for persons participating in the research;
- a duty of care to vulnerable participants;
- an effort to limit risk and maximise participants’ collective and individual benefits;
- opportunities for self-representation;
- ongoing responsiveness to the needs of the research partners;
- frequent review by those who are involved in the research;
- continuous reflection about potential ethical dilemmas by the academic researcher; and
- reciprocity.

Researchers involved in PA work should, therefore, strive to be socially responsive, compassionate and reflexive, at all stages of the research process.

**Ethical accountability**

Because PA research unfolds as the result of negotiation with research partners, in response to the problems and needs of those partners, ethical arrangements ideally should develop iteratively and interactively, potentially through phased review. Phased review involves seeking ethical approval as each stage of the research unfolds. However, this is not always practical: the delay of getting approval at each stage may jeopardise the project, and some funding agencies and institutional research ethics procedures do not accept staged review (although the University of Sheffield does).

It may be possible to outline the principles of consensus and agreement and suggest a timeline when discussions will occur. Interactive ethical frameworks involve encouraging full and frank discussion, negotiation, and consent with the research group from the start with regard to the aims of the research, the potential benefits and risks to all research partners (including the academic researcher), the commitments (emotion, time, money) required by research partners, outputs, consent, anonymity, confidentiality, and data access and storage to bring the research to a fruitful conclusion.

**Action and publication**

For academic researchers and funding bodies, a key output of the research process is publication; other research partners, however, may give academic publication a low priority and instead want to focus on problem resolution or the creation of a new programme, for
example. Sometimes academic partners may also wish to motivate some form of political or social action that is potentially not wanted by members of the research community. Within PA work it is important to respond to the needs of the group through negotiation. This may involve sharing publication attribution with research participants, as co-authors, or reaching a consensus about action.

The key is not to promise joint publication or action in advance but, rather, to negotiate it through dialogue with the community of research participants as a whole. Consensus building and dialogue also have the benefits of enabling research partners to express and assess their own perspectives, and enhance their knowledge base so that they can promote and initiate independent action. Finally, the role of the academic researcher within the process of dialogue should also be negotiated with, and within, the group and may involve the academic researcher acting as a proposer of recommendations or as simply as a facilitator of discussion. A key element of output involves providing a way for participants to feel empowered by their participation and that they have the skills to take the work forward if they should desire to do so.

**Informed consent**

Obtaining informed consent is a central element of social research. However, PA work poses particular problems with respect to informed consent. First, PA work is similar to ethnographic research in that the academic researcher often becomes immersed in the community where the research is being undertaken. Thus the boundaries between research and everyday life can become blurred. In these circumstances informed consent in detail is not always possible.

Second, because PA research unfolds in a negotiated way, it is difficult to communicate to participants in advance what they are going to experience and, hence, what they are consenting to (or for how long). This is why it may be more appropriate to do a form of staged consent or negotiated consent, in which research partners, after a period of dialogue and negotiation, agree to a set of rules around participation that all research partners will adhere to within that particular phase of the research. It may be appropriate at this point to provide an accounting of this consensus agreement in the form of group minutes rather than individual consent forms.

Within consensus-building meetings the researcher should always be aware of, and aim to address, inequalities within the group, and to provide opportunities for the less powerful to express their opinions and have them heard. At all times partners should understand that they can withdraw from the research. Throughout the research programme care should be taken to ensure that participants do not have unrealistic expectations regarding the outcomes of the research process. Finally, it may be more appropriate to get signed consent forms from the participants in relation to particular outputs, where data referring specifically to them is presented.

**Anonymity and confidentiality**

As with informed consent, guaranteeing anonymity and confidentiality is not always possible in PA work. This is partly due to the group nature of the work. Because of the ways that PA work must sometimes be negotiated among group members, others within the group will be aware of exactly who is participating in any particular instance; it is a very public form of research in some respects. Furthermore, because PA work often involves public action it may be beneficial to the group to publish its work within the public domain (e.g. via press releases or as co-authors on reports and publications that arise out of the research). As a result confidentiality may be situational, and must be negotiated from situation to situation.
Further issues arise when some participants waive confidentiality and desire attribution, while others desire confidentiality. This may be particularly difficult if those who wish to remain anonymous can be identified through the attribution of others. Care must be taken to respect the privacy and needs of all participants; again, negotiation and consensus-building which mitigates the objections is likely to be the best way forward (although neither easy nor quick).

Finally, it is important that the academic researcher raise issues around confidentiality and anonymity in consensus-building discussions early in the research programme, and that all research partners adhere to what is agreed. It is no good if only the academic researcher maintains these agreed standards, while others who are involved do not.

**Data storage and access**

In 'traditional' research data are held by the researcher and kept secure. This may not be the most appropriate or most equitable way to proceed in PA work. Data ownership and storage - both during the research process and after the project has reached its conclusion - should be discussed and agreed by the group in a consensual manner. Again, it may be necessary to do this in a staged way.