

**Please cite the Published Version**

Castile, Sue, Stewart, Angela and Kagan, Carolyn (2004) Participation: are some more equal than others? In: UK Community Psychology Conference 2004, 14th October 2004 - 16th October 2004, Exeter, United Kingdom. (Unpublished)

**Version:** Accepted Version

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**Additional Information:** Paper presented to UK Community Psychology Conference, October 2004, Exeter. This paper was subsequently revised and published as a peer-reviewed journal article in Clinical Psychology Forum, Issue 153, September 2005, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.53841/bpscpf.2005.1.153.30>

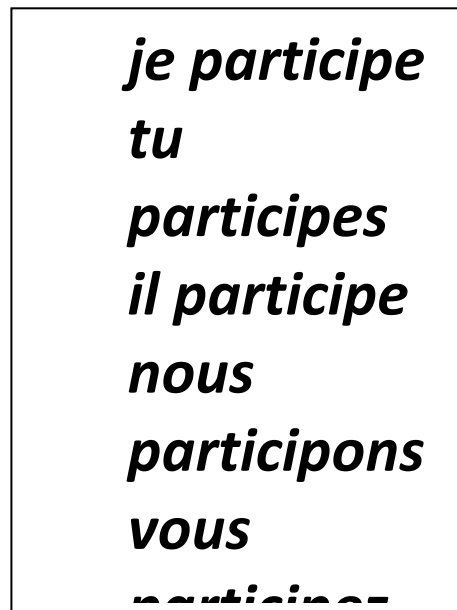
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**Participation: Are some more equal than others?**  
**Sue Castile, Carolyn Kagan and Angela Stewart**  
**Paper presented to UK Community Psychology Conference,**  
**Exeter. October 2004.**

**Introduction**

In the European Community Psychology Conference in Bergen, 2000 we left our discussion of participation and local community activism with the 1968 student protest poster:



Clearly this implies that those other than participants are likely to profit from their participation. It also reminds us that participation is a political activity suffused with tensions and ambiguities (Todd & Taylor, 2004). In this paper we would like to discuss this notion further, by looking at the context of participation in the UK, criticisms that have been raised in relation to participatory processes, and ways of understanding some of the psychological issues relating to participation and community psychological praxis. In doing this we will describe some real experiences of participation in and by residents in local communities that highlight both the possibilities and dangers of engaging in participation, and wherein might lie the gains.

**Current Context of participation in the UK**

*Over the past twenty years or so, the commitment to community involvement has moved from the relatively containable policy of consulting the community to ever-widening notions of involving the community as a real or rhetorical accompaniment to almost all government policies for local government. In this process, community involvement ranges from consultation, through a variety of forms of 'empowerment,' to explicit commitments to 'community leadership'. (Wainwright, 2001)*

Partnership is, then a central theme of government policy, and there is increasing commitment to community-led partnerships. However as (Burns & Taylor, 2000) point out, there is a

*considerable gap between rhetoric and reality. Even now communities and their representatives often feel marginalised - on the edges of power.*

The reasons they suggest for this include:

- *The rules of the game are set from above;*
- *The cultures and structures of public sector partners are not compatible with effective community involvement;*
- *Communities themselves do not have the organisational capacity and resources for effective involvement.*

From a liberal, progressive community development perspective Burns and Taylor (2000:2) suggest that one reason communities remain marginalised is that partners do not value participation. Consequently they remind us of the arguments for community participation:

- *Community definitions of need, problems and solutions are different from those put forward by service planners and providers.*
- *Community knowledge is an important resource and widens the pool of experience and expertise that regeneration and renewal strategies can draw on.*
- *Community participation gives local residents the opportunity to develop skills and networks that they need to address social exclusion.*
- *Active participation of local residents is essential to improved democratic and service accountability.*
- *Central Government requires community participation in regeneration and neighbourhood renewal strategies.*

They, and Wainwright (2003) are optimistic that some of the lessons are being learnt from the past in contemporary regeneration programmes, including New Deal for Communities, Single regeneration Budget schemes and strategies embedded in the national Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal (SEU, 2000). They see, and support the need for community capacity building as a key indicator of effective participation. Others are more sceptical.

Diamond (2004) considers the ways in which the top down exhortations to participate lead to needs for capacity building being defined by those external to the locality who have labelled a particular neighbourhood as lacking capacity (whilst taking little account of invisible capacity, networks groups and economic activity). In this process, he suggests:

*The needs of individuals and communities are re-defined in the interests of welfare and policy professionals. The power relationships are set and not open to negotiation or change. In part this is because*

*professional agencies are resistant to change and can contain changes to their status and power. It is also because 'change' that affects all parties is not an option. (p.183)*

This view is supported by Mosse (2001) who suggests that participatory processes in development projects rarely result in professionals acquiring new perspectives!.

Diamond presents a convincing case for seeing community capacity building as emphasising the individual as a means of affecting change, with the consequent danger that individual needs will be promoted above those of the wider community. He notes that

*while training and education initiatives may increase the employability of individuals or the opening up of choices to individuals who have been failed by the system, these do not of themselves change people's positioning on a power hierarchy (2004, p.183/4).*

The consequences of this individual emphasis is illustrated by (McCulloch, 1997). In fairness, Burns and Taylor (2000) do also include criteria for developing the capacity of partner organisations to support community participation. However, we would suggest that little progress, in reality, has been made on this front.

From a more critical perspective, Fraser and Lepofsky (2004) note that contemporary exhortations to participate arise from neo-liberalist policies that, in parallel with the decline of Nation-state level welfare policies, emphasise the increased role of civil society. They argue that the forms of partnership and community participation that we see in countries like the UK exclude political (or power) issues, and there is a lack of acknowledgement of the power differentials between different stakeholders.

They, too recognise that community capacity building is a central plank of community building practices, along with (requirements for) developing partnerships between residents and actors defined as 'external' sources of political and economic power. In a detailed critical discussion of the current apolitical approach to such partnerships they highlight an important tension. Local or 'internal' knowledge is seen as fixed and stabilised through the articulation of place and identity (indeed internal knowledge is seen as valuable just because it is able to adopt a local and unique and different perspective). Expert knowledge, however, transcends historical and geographical boundaries and is treated as having a '*universal sense of what is best for any place*' (p.7) It is also endowed very often with scientific neutrality. As such, it is often privileged, thus subordinating the views of local people to those of the 'experts' (Lahiri-Dutt, 2004).

The bulk of the critical work on participation, both as a social goal and a method of working, comes from writings about social development practice. We are not going to delve into this here, except to say that it is relevant to all

of our thinking about participation in the UK. Key critical issues that frame our understanding are discussed in Cooke and Kothari (2001) and include:

- The need to understand and find ways of further understanding diversity and heterogeneity in any community (Godfrey & Obika, 2004)
- Ways of working with the (inevitable) complexity of community difference (Gujit & Kaul Shah, 1998)
- The possible incorporation - and immunisation- of those who participate into the official agendas (Quaghebeur, Masschelein, & Nguyen, 2004)
- Power and empowerment (Crawley, 1998; Nelson & Wright, 1995)

## **What is participation like?**

*Sue's Story: A long term battle with the authorities to take local issues seriously*

*Angela's Story: A bottom up participation project that hooks in the authorities*

Active participation is exhausting. Not all those who are willing to participate in community activities are 'resource strong' themselves and have different degrees of resilience. Community leaders find themselves not only liaising with and being positioned alongside professionals, they often have to give hours of emotional support to others in the group. The pressures are considerable and unrelenting. They have no supervision (despite working in complex human systems often with people with extensive personal difficulties). They have no colleagues to share the load when the going gets tough, no working hours, time off or holidays; no development activities built into the role. And they do not get paid.

Despite the media coverage of local people destroying the lives of others through anti-social behaviour, so-called yobbish behaviour, crime and vandalism, in the UK many of the battles community activists have are with authorities and agencies. As, increasingly agencies co-opt and harness the efforts of local people to identify problems, collect 'evidence' and take action they are frequently perceived to be agents of those agencies.

*Sue and friend walking down the street and people who pass hiss "grass"; Angela walking with the environmental officer and pointing out all the problems and he asking her to phone the one stop shop he manages to report it. 'Do you think I have nothing to do but sit on the telephone all day doing your job for you?'*

Friendships can be lost amidst misunderstandings about who says what to whom. We know about the effects of emotional labour, hassles, stress and burnout for highly paid executives - whole heaps of psychological resources have gone into finding this out and providing assistance services. Far less is known about the emotional labour hassles, stress and burnout in community participation. Psychology could have some legitimacy here.

## What is participation?

Most will be familiar with the now famous 'ladder of participation' of Arnstein (1969). Looking at participation from the point of view of these inviting participation she identifies eight levels of participation ranging from those processes that are not really participation through degrees of tokenism to degrees of citizen power see Figure 1).

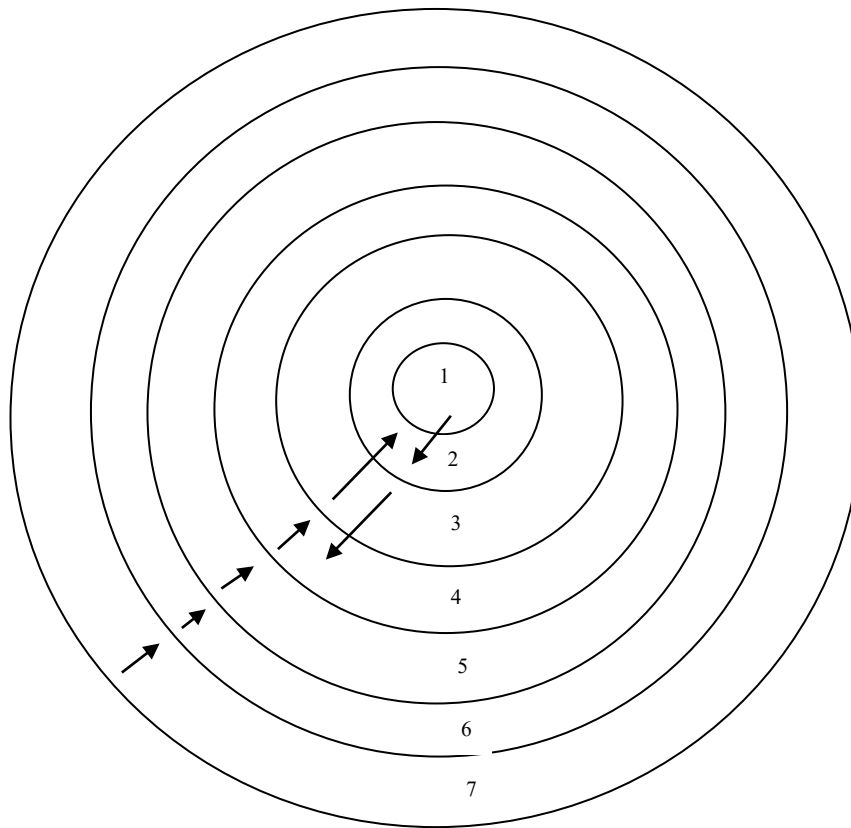
**Figure 1: Arnstein's (1969) Ladder of Participation**

8	Citizen control	6-8: degrees of citizen power
7	Delegated power	
6	Partnership	
5	Placation	3-6: degrees of tokenism
4	Consultation	
3	Informing	
2	Therapy	1-2: non-participation
1	Manipulation	

Implicit in the ladder of participation is a position to attain wherein citizens have control which was not one of the goals of participation listed by Burns and Taylor, above. We will return to this later as it is an important point underpinning many of the contradictions and paradoxes inherent in the concept of participation.

(Montero, 2004), writing from a Latin American community psychological perspective discusses participation from the perspective of those who are participating. She conceptualises participation as a process closely connected to the concept of 'commitment'. Rather than a linear ladder metaphor of higher and lower forms of participation, Montero conceptualises a dynamic system of concentric circles with the nucleus of maximum participation and commitment at the centre. The circles radiate through different levels of participation-commitment to the outer layer of positive friendly curiosity with no commitment (see Figure 2).

**Figure 2: Levels of participation and commitment in the community (Montero 2004)**



1. *Nucleus of maximum participation and commitment*
2. *Frequent participation and high commitment*
3. *Specific participation, medium commitment*
4. *Sporadic participation, low commitment*
5. *New and tentative participation, low commitment (e.g. financial donation, support material)*
6. *Tangential participation, unclear (e.g. approval, agreement)*
7. *Positive, friendly curiosity. No commitment.*

↑ *Promotion of centripetal movement towards greater participation*

↘ *Rotation of first levels*

Thus, for Montero participation is a dynamic system wherein individuals or groups can move in and out. Part of the task of trying to gain participation is to enable movement from the outer to the inner levels, and to a further task is to support those at the inner levels so that they are able to retain their levels of commitment. The dynamic nature of participation has been noted by Randell (2004), who says:

*Participation is, by its nature, a dynamic activity. Within any given participation space the activity has a certain dynamic, a certain*

*combination of stasis, movement, stability, disorder and order. Aggregates coalesce and disintegrate, groups form temporarily and then dissipate, people move through the space joining and leaving groups seemingly at random. (p. 145)*

Whilst we agree that participation is a dynamic activity, we do not fully agree with the random nature of joining and leaving groups. In community participation, our experience is, that whilst there is a chance element sometimes to people joining a group, this becomes purposeful once commitment is increased.

How then, can we look at the various forms of community participation in the UK? We may be talking about participation, engagement, involvement, consultation, all of which are enshrined in policy and professional practice ranging from community led (sic) regeneration initiatives, to primary health partnerships and involvement strategies, to best value consultations and so on.

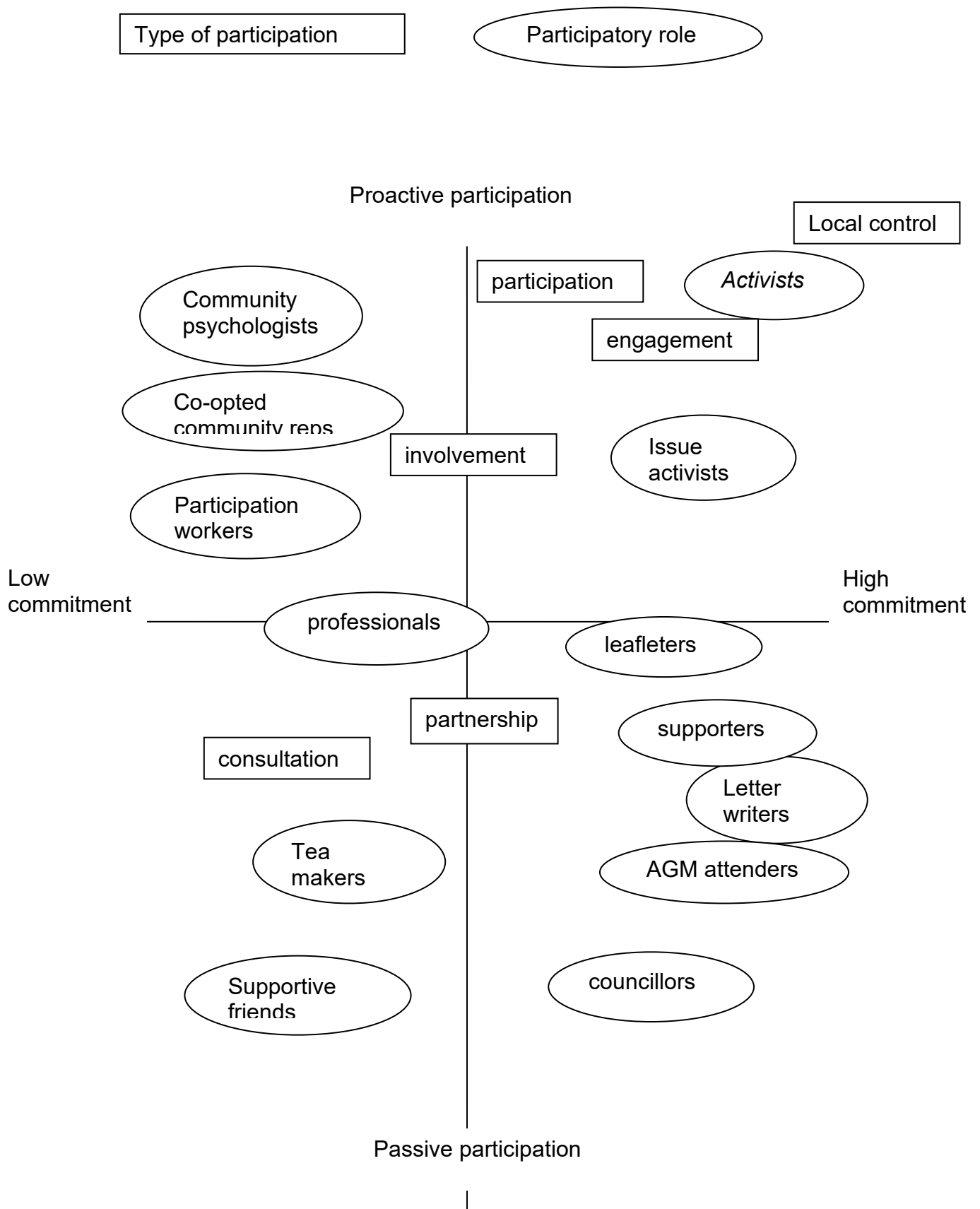
We have found it useful to map different activities on the two dimensions of participation (proactive and passive) and commitment (high to low). This can be represented as in Figure 3. Here, we can position the types of participation required by policy (similar to Arnstein's steps) as well as participation roles in practice (similar to Montero's positions in the participation space).

Community activists, who identify their own needs and set their own agendas, and often find their own strategies for achieving change are in the proactive participation, high commitment quadrant. Community members and representatives who work in partnership with agencies on policy agendas can also be situated in this quadrant, whereas those self-appointed community representatives who get co-opted into processes with agendas set by professionals could be situated in the proactive participation, low commitment quadrant. Professionals who are committed to working on community issues but who work weekdays only and go home at night can also be placed in this quadrant. This mapping of participation and commitment can be useful for exploring movement over time.

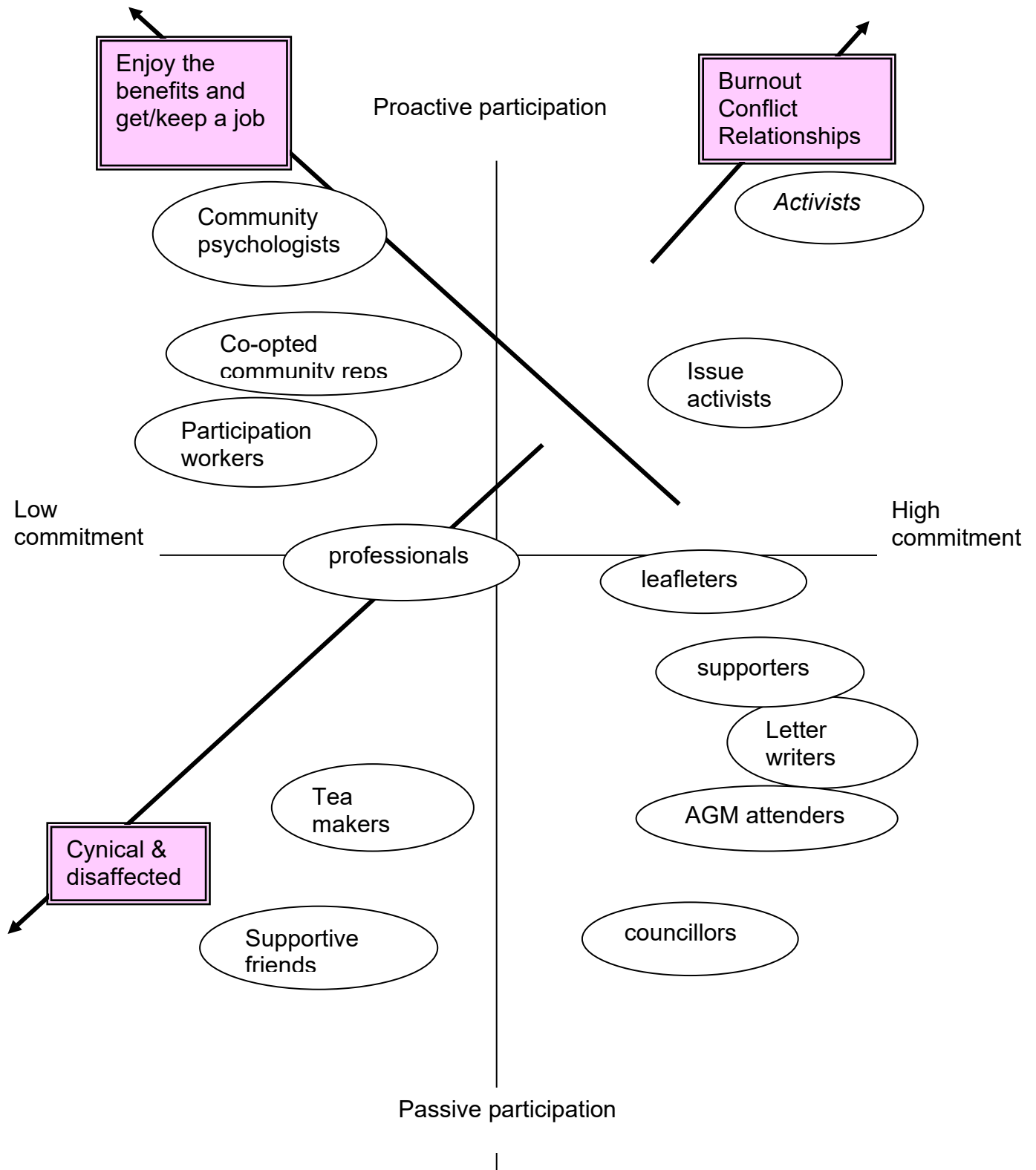
Figure 4 5 illustrates both how participation/commitment can be enhanced and also what happens i



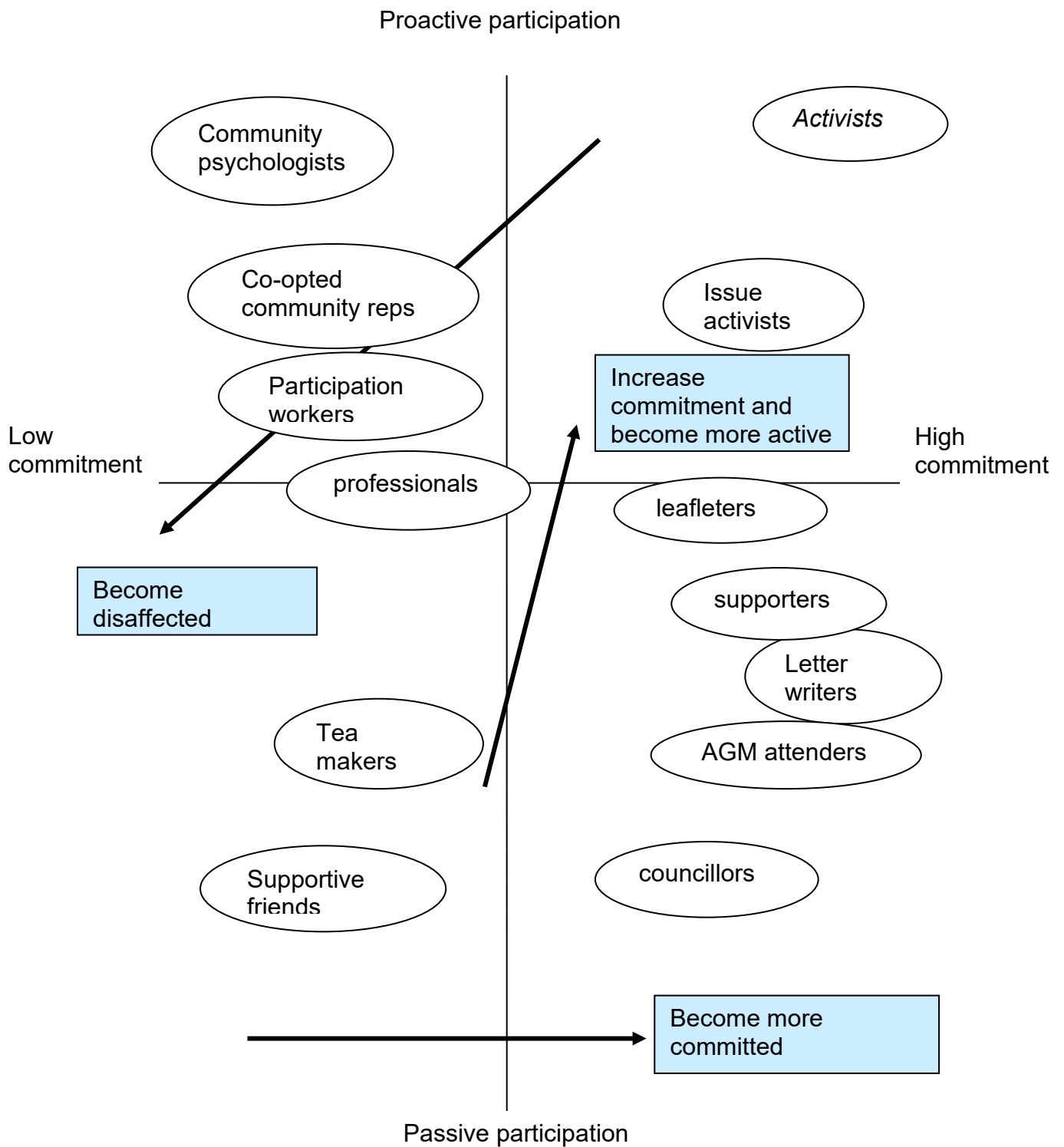
**Figure 3: Mapping participation and commitment.**



**Figure 4: Consequences of different degrees of participation and commitment over time**



**Figure 5: With support for enhancing participation**



## Implications for community psychology

We have been looking at community participation as a process. There are lots of imperatives at the moment for (poor) people to participate in civil life (do wealthier people have to in the same way?). participation is both a social goal and social process. Both, as we have seen are subject to various critiques. In these neo-liberal times 'participation ' has been co-opted by Governments as a politically attractive slogan with the potential to pass the economic costs to the poor (Rahnema, 1993).

We talk of another kind of participation in community psychology, that is, participatory action research. With its roots in social development processes (most closely related to participatory rural appraisal and participatory poverty appraisal (see for example (Chambers, 1997, 1998) and participatory action research (PAR)stemming from Latin America (see for example (Fals-Borda, 1988; Fals-Borda & Rahman, 1991). PAR has as its primary goal, not those articulated by (Burns & Taylor, 2000) above, but rather, as (Rahman, 1991) puts it:

*The basic ideology of PAR is that a self conscious people, those who are currently poor and oppressed, will progressively transform their environment by their own praxis. In this process others may play a catalytic and supportive role but will not dominate. (p. 13)*

This may be the top step of Arnstein's ladder, citizen control, but is a long way from the participation processes we mostly see in the UK. With self - regulation and self control as a possible goal for participation, what then might our role as community psychologists be? Merely to document the process, to walk alongside as a form of accompaniment (Edge, Kagan, & Stewart, 2004)?

Fraser and Lepofsky (2004:10/11) suggest some ways in which those positioned in terms of role and definition as 'experts' in the participatory process can use their position to pursue the goals of resident-driven initiatives to improve the quality of life of those living poverty. These responsibilities include:

- *Questioning definitions of expert and resident*
- *Legitimising alternative forms of collective action by neighbourhood residents that might otherwise fall outside of the community - building model (e.r. situations whereby 'experts' are not always intermediaries through which residents must act)*
- *Using research methods that give voice to residents concerns (particularly as such concerns might conflict with each other and initiative goals*
- *Pursuing techniques that identify and utilise forms of knowledge that are hybrids between 'expert' and 'local'*
- *Documenting the process of the initiatives to understand when practices are operating progressively to ameliorate poverty and when they are not.*

They suggest that these activities can

*Contribute to situating community-building experts more deeply as part of the community they help build, and therefore increase the responsibility and obligation they feel towards the community, whilst increasing the trust residents have towards 'external' stakeholders (p.11)*

This still sounds a professional-oriented purpose, albeit one that might shift well meaning professionals like community psychologists towards the high commitment quadrant in our mapping diagram. However we should not lose sight of the fact, that if participation is important at all, it is not to enable better delivery of social policies designed and executed by others.

(Lahiri-Dutt, 2004) sums up the goal of participation:

*The primary goal of participation is to give proper responsibility to people for, and control over their lives.*

We would do well to remember that even if we manage to support and contribute to this kind of participation also envisaged within PAR, we will still encounter decisions and dilemmas, not least those to do with the boundaries of our decision making (Kagan, Caton, Amin, & Choudry, 2004).

*Taking participants seriously, giving them a voice, is never completely neutral, but always indicates boundaries - designed by the participatory process - delimiting and determining the voice that can be uttered. (Quaghebeur et al., 2004)*

Thinking of the boundaries of participation opens up another community psychological process which is useful in this context, namely, that of boundary critique (BC). Whilst the theory of BC is used widely in critical systems thinking (Midgley, 2000; Midgley & Ochoas-Arias, 2004), it is relatively new to community psychology. The work of Churchman (1970) and more especially that of Ulrich (Ulrich, 1983; 2003) reminds us that we make decisions about any intervention including participation. These decisions are, in essence ethical decisions. They are also social or personal constructs, defining the limits of knowledge relevant to any particular analysis. For Ulrich, boundary judgements and value judgements are intimately linked.

*The facts we observe, and the way we evaluate them, depend on how we bound the system of concern. Different value judgements can make us change boundary judgements, which in turn makes the facts look different. Knowledge of new facts can equally make us change boundary judgements, which in turn makes previous evaluations look different, etc. (Ulrich, 2000).*

He developed a set of 12 questions (Ulrich, 1983) which can be used heuristically to question and bring to the surface surfacing the value

judgements that underpin boundary decisions. One of Ulrich's core ideas is that of 'legitimacy' - who is making what decision and who ought to be. Within any intervention, Ulrich (2000) distinguishes between different settings of BC.

1. Self -reflective boundary questioning requires us to ask *What are my boundary judgements?*.
2. Dialogical boundary questioning requires us to ask *Can we agree on our boundary judgements?*
3. Controversial boundary questioning requires us to ask *Don't you claim too much?*

We suggest that in thinking and involving participation in community psychological work, we should ask ourselves - and others - these questions throughout the intervention. Then we might be able to see just how participation benefits some more than others and that other some are more equal than others in the process of participation. Even if we cannot see this, we should be able to clarify the ethical and value judgements underpinning the decisions we make about who should participate, when and why.

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