The experience of participatory research: Perceptions of oncology employees participating in a workplace study

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Abstract

Participatory research, a concept developed in the Third World, has been increasingly applied to community and health research in developed countries. However, little is known about attitudes to the participatory process in the context of workplace research, especially that carried out in health care settings. In this qualitative study, employees participating in a quality of work-life (QWL) project at a Canadian cancer centre were asked about their perceptions of the participatory research process. Using a phenomenological approach, the author interviewed 12 employees. The following themes emerged from the analysis of interview data: 1) The role of management and senior management was viewed as being important but employees were uncomfortable with the presence of management at meetings; 2) The desired composition of the committee was more complex than ensuring representation from workers and there may have been a natural process by which this composition was attained; 3) Participatory research without action was unacceptable; and 4) Full participation in all aspects of the project was difficult to achieve. These findings have important implications because they challenge some existing notions in the literature about participatory research. Recommendations regarding trust issues, membership recruitment, and the role of members in the participatory process are outlined.

Keywords

participatory research; qualitative research; attitudes; quality of work-life; oncology employees

1. Background

1.1 Participatory research

There is some evidence that workers' participation in workplace interventions has a positive effect on their quality of work life (Coch & French, 1948; Kompier & Cooper, 1999; Kompier et al., 1998; Kompier et al., 2000). The term 'participatory research' encompasses a variety of approaches including Participatory Research, Participatory Action Research, Development Leadership, Rapid Assessment Procedures, and Rapid Ethnographic Assessment (Cornwall & Jewkes, 1995). The concept of participatory research was

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developed in the Third World (Hall, 1981), however, it has been increasingly applied to health research in developed countries (Cornwall et al., 1995). According to Cornwall and Jewkes (1995), “participatory research is about respecting and understanding the people with and for whom researchers work. It is about developing a realization that local people are knowledgeable and that they, together with researchers, can work towards analyses, and solutions” (p. 1674). In occupational health, it is important to involve workers’ knowledge in the research process because workers possess valuable information about their jobs, their working conditions, and their health (Mergler, 1987). It can also be argued that persons as autonomous beings have a moral right to participate in the research decision-making that claims to generate knowledge about them (Heron, 1996).

Few studies have examined employees’ attitudes to the participatory research process in the context of a quality of work-life (QWL) study; to the author’s knowledge, no studies have examined this process in a health care setting using qualitative methods.

1.2 Context

This research was conducted in a Canadian cancer centre. The centre is a large (approximately 450 employees) ambulatory cancer treatment centre that serves over 2.3 million people in Ontario. Approximately, 7,000 new patients are referred to the centre each year with approximately 500 patients seen each day for consultations, radiation and chemotherapy treatments, and follow-up visits. In Canada, health insurance coverage is universal and there are no financial barriers to seeking treatment for cancer.

A QWL Project at the centre was initiated by the president of the organization based on anecdotal evidence of low morale and high burnout at the centre. The president approached several pharmaceutical companies to solicit funding for the project and received funding for a four-year period. The project fit within the pharmaceutical company’s mandate that included research on patient satisfaction and community health in general. With the exception of funding the project, the company had no involvement in the project.

A project coordinator (also steering committee chair) was hired and employees were asked to volunteer to join the project’s steering committee. Representatives from main employee groups (e.g. physicians, nurses, radiation therapists, administration, physicists, pharmacists) and unions were especially recruited. The steering committee also included an occupational health scientist and a methodological consultant (author) from the local university who both emphasized the importance of participatory research in workplace studies. The steering committee developed a working agenda to address quality of work-life issues. The committee’s first action was to administer a survey to employees at the centre to gather baseline data on important issues that they believed to be related to employees’ quality of work-life. Through collaboration between the steering committee and the employees they represented, perceived problem areas in the workplace were identified and articulated as constructs that could be measured. A retreat day was organized to educate the committee about survey methodology and to allow them to select the tools they wanted to include in the survey.

The QWL Project has been promoted in the cancer centre over the last two years and has visible support from the president, senior management, and the unions. In addition to the survey, there have been department-specific initiatives to interpret and address the survey results. The committee has formally adopted a description of its composition and developed Terms of Reference for the Project.

The Terms of Reference for the QWL Project at the cancer centre states that “The composition of the committee is designed to be representative of the employees at the centre” and that “Members collaborate to make decisions about the project”. Resolution of conflict on decisions is achieved by a majority vote. Although not formally stated in the Terms of Reference, the project was intended to be participatory and has proceeded similarly to Hall’s (1981) concept of participatory research. According to Hall, characteristics of the participatory process include:

1. The problem originates in the community or workplace itself;
2. The ultimate goal of the research is fundamental structural transformation and the improvement of the lives of those involved. The beneficiaries are the workers or people concerned.
3. Participatory research involves the people in the workplace or the community in the control of the entire process of the research.
4. Focus of participatory research is on work with a wide range of exploited or oppressed groups e.g. labour
5. Central to participatory research is its role of strengthening the awareness in people of their own abilities and resources
6. The term “researcher” can refer to both the community or workplace persons involved as well as those with specialized training
7. Although those with specialized knowledge/training often come from outside the situation, they are committed participants and learners in a process that leads to militancy rather than detachment.

The purpose of this study was to explore perceptions of the participatory research process from the perspective of employees who were members of the QWL Project steering committee.

2. Methods

Ethical approval was obtained for this study by the Research Ethics Board of the local university and by the Protocol Review Committee of the cancer centre. The study of perceptions lends itself to the phenomenological tradition (Schwandt, 2001; Sokolowski, 2000). Phenomenology, a qualitative perspective and methodology, aims to study ordinary experiences of phenomena in everyday life from the perspective of the person(s) experiencing them (Schwandt, 2001).

2.1 Sampling

Eligible participants were the 15 members of the QWL steering committee at the time the present study was introduced to them. All members were invited by e-mail to participate in the study.

2.2 Data Collection

Data were collected from committee members through 1-hour face-to-face semi-structured interviews conducted over a 7-month period. Interviews were arranged and conducted by the author. Participants were given the option of meeting at the workplace, at home, or at another location that was convenient for them.

When participants arrived at the interview, they were asked to sign the consent form which explained the purpose of the study, the right of the participant to withdraw from the study at any time, the anticipated length of the interview, the fact that the interview was being audio-taped, and an assurance of confidentiality. It was also clarified that the study was not part of the QWL Project at the centre. The information in the consent form was reviewed prior to turning on the tape recorder. This allowed for some social conversation aimed at creating a relaxed atmosphere for the participant. During the interviews, participants were asked to talk about the 'team approach' to the project and how they felt about this approach. ('Team approach' was the term used to introduce committee members to the concept of participatory research when they joined the QWL Project.).

In order to describe the study samples, the sex of the participant was noted and four demographic questions were asked at the end of the interview: participants were asked to identify their main activity at the centre, the training they needed for this job, their date of birth, and how many years they had worked at the centre. Permission was then requested to contact participants at a later date so that they could review the transcript of their interview.

2.2.1 Data Verification—The interviews were audiotaped and transcribed verbatim into Microsoft Word. As recommended by Kvale (1996), the transcripts were verified against the tapes and sent to the participants for another level of verification. Participants were given a few weeks to respond with comments and/or corrections. The transcripts were then downloaded into NVivo (1999). This qualitative software program has flexible features that help organize, code, and retrieve data.

2.2.2 Data Analysis—Analysis of the data began after the first interview and was an iterative process. An editing style approach to coding was applied to the data (Crabtree & Miller, 1992). Themes and codes were identified immediately and then revised as more interviews were conducted. The data were analyzed according to Giorgi's (1975; 1989; 1997) phenomenological procedures. After reading the transcripts in their entirety, they were re-read and segregated into manageable units referred to as "meaning units". Redundancies were eliminated and a coding template to organize the meaning units was developed. These units were grouped into themes.

3. Results

Of the 15 committee members, 12 members consented to participate in this study. This sample size was consistent with recommendations for phenomenological studies (Creswell, 1998; Morse, 1994; Polkinghorne, 1989). The three remaining members did not respond to three e-mails each that invited them to participate. Two of these members had attended very few committee meetings. All participants chose to be interviewed at work. A variety of employee groups were represented in the interviews, however, the job titles of participants are not reported for confidentiality reasons. The majority (n=9) of participants were female and the mean age of the sample was 42 years. Participants had worked at the centre from 1 to 33 years and all had achieved at least a high school education. Five participants responded with comments after reading their transcripts. The comments were minor and resulted in a few spelling and/or grammatical corrections.

Four central themes emerged (see Table 1) and are reflected in the quotations of 8 of the 12 participants. It is acknowledged that these themes are not mutually exclusive.

3.1 The role of management on the committee was an issue

Committee members expressed discomfort with the presence of management at committee meetings. The majority of steering committee members felt that management and senior management should be represented on the committee, however, they were not sure who those representatives should be and how many of them should be on the committee. To date, none of the management representatives has been an immediate supervisor of other members on the committee; however, there was perceived intimidation based on the power that these individuals had at the centre. As two members stated:

“...at times I thought that it [team approach] was driven by just a few members. And sometimes I thought that we were being left on our own to come up with the right direction, but when it didn't go in the right direction, we were quickly refocused by the people that were in charge [management], in order to make it go where they wanted it to”.

“...we all tend to go with [management]. And I'm not sure if it's because we think it is a fabulous idea or because as a whole we just want to defer to [management] for some reason because we are intimidated. But I do find [management] has a lot of pull and maybe it is partly subconscious...and I almost end up agreeing with [management] most of the time and I'm not sure why”.

Despite the perceived intimidation, most committee members were very positive about the influence that management and senior management had on the committee; the competence of managers was never questioned. Interviewees felt that the committee needed such representation in order to have any influence at the centre and they felt that this influence was beneficial to the committee.

3.2 The desired composition of the participatory research team was more complex than ensuring representation from workers

Participants had strong preferences for who should be on the committee and they expressed this theme in relation to several issues: a) the committee required more vocal members; b) members needed to be consistent about attending meetings; c) the committee required more “workers”; and d) there was a transitional phase in which the committee achieved a desired composition.

First, interviewees were concerned about the silent voices on the committee. It was felt that quiet members were not contributing to discussions and decisions about the project. Incidentally, both vocal and quiet members voiced this concern. For example:

“You need people who can stand their ground and not in a challenging or an offensive way but certainly in a respectful way to make sure that their issues and concerns and thoughts are taken in to consideration.”

One member attributed the silent voices on the committee to the culture of the centre:

“I think that’s a culture thing at the cancer centre. Generally, you don’t get people...like secretaries or clerks who will speak up in a meeting at rounds for example, or with physicians or with other people. So I think it is a culture reason why. Certainly not that they don’t have anything to say or that they don’t speak up in their own groups.”

As a potential solution to the problem, one member suggested that:

“I think there needs to be some sort of, if not, interview process, but some sort of up front conversation and dialogue with people who are coming on board to make sure they understand the responsibility that comes with being on the committee. And make sure that they are comfortable with the understanding that sometimes they are going to have thoughts and opinions that will differ from managers, senior managers, executive... And they have to be brave enough to be able to stand there and to express those opinions and if they are not prepared to do that then they are probably wasting their time...”

Second, participants were frustrated that some members consistently did not show up to the committee meetings – this point is discussed in a later theme. Another concern about the composition of the committee was that it did not include enough workers. ‘Workers’ were defined as supportive care staff, people that worked at the appointment desks, and clerical staff. Ironically, a number of the ‘worker’ members were those who did not show up consistently to meetings.

Finally, there appeared to be a transitional process by which the committee developed a desired composition. As two participants said:

“...the dynamics of the group are very interesting. The group’s been very fluid. People have come and gone. And at first, there was an awful lot of very strong personalities and very strong personal agendas coming to the table. And it took a while to chip that crust off the top of the group. And that eventually happened. And

then once that happened, and the group was kind of finalized, and we got down to brass tacks, I thought the group process was excellent. And lots of really interesting knowledge and good expertise from many areas. There were people who knew a lot about research, right down to people who knew next to nothing about research.”

“I think the steering committee, we went through some difficult times at the beginning and I guess I would sum it up by, not everybody was there as a team player and not for their own personal reasons, vendettas, whatever it was. And I think the people who actually didn’t like the way the project was going are no longer on the steering committee. They resigned. And so I see it as a cohesive group that are looking at not just their issues but the whole centre’s.”

3.3 Participatory research without action was not acceptable

The role of the QWL committee was to influence management at the centre to take action; the committee was never given authority to implement changes in the workplace. However, members on the committee did not focus on their influence on management but rather viewed the success of the project as being gauged by whether action or interventions came of the project and the QWL survey:

“From here, do you just wait and every year we just reissue the same survey, and just keep on, you know, generating these results? In which case, people will quickly lose interest in doing it. Because if we’re not going anywhere with it, or doing anything with the results, people are going to become less compliant in getting it done...my fear is, if we don’t sort of show that we are being pro-active about what we learned, people won’t be as quick to do it [the survey] again.”

Participants were split as to whether the committee should be responsible for interventions that followed from the project results. Some participants expressed frustration that the committee didn’t have power to do anything with the results. For example:

“I’m feeling less and less like I like being involved...at the beginning there was sort of the hope that a lot of things could be addressed. And I am starting to believe more and more that the types of problems that were brought up in the data, that there’s not much people can do about them.”

On the other hand, as discussed in the next theme, some participants admitted that they didn’t want to be responsible for action. Those not wanting the responsibility felt that it was management’s job to intervene.

3.4. Full participation in all aspects of the project was difficult to achieve

In theory, the project was supposed to proceed with full participation from all members. However, there were aspects where members did not participate for a number of reasons: a) members did not attend meetings; b) members did not think that they should participate; c) members did not want to participate; and d) it was felt that it was not practical for all members to participate.

During the first two years of the project, the union representative attended two meetings. This member’s lack of attendance was pointed out during most of the interviews and was a

source of frustration for participants. Some participants admitted that it was difficult for them, too, to attend project meetings which typically occurred every 1–2 months and lasted for two hours. For example, the secretaries and the physicians consistently had difficulty arranging their schedules so that they could attend the meetings.

Similarly, those members who were not able to attend the retreat day at the beginning of the Project felt that they were not able to catch up to the rest of the group on knowledge regarding survey methodology. In addition, members who joined the committee after the retreat day felt that their contribution to the development and administration of the survey was minimal.

As mentioned previously, members on the committee inevitably talked about the need for interventions as part of the project. However, not all members felt that it was up to the committee to decide or work on these interventions; this responsibility was viewed as being beyond the scope of the committee. As one participant said:

“I’m not sure how this whole team approach is going to work now, in terms of intervention strategy. I’m not entirely convinced that the team approach is the best way to do it...I think the intervention strategy possibly should come from the top down and then get discussed in a team environment...I guess my initial hope on this was that, was that these results would go back our [president] who’s responsible for guiding the ship that is the cancer centre. Like, that’s his task. He gets paid big bucks in order to do that. That’s his mandate. And that he would come up with what he thought were some large intervention strategies that could be employed...Some people don’t see the big picture...and they don’t think of ramifications of certain decisions. So I’m not convinced that in a team, that the front line workers would come back with the most effective intervention strategy.”

As part of the participatory process, members of the committee were supposed to relay the results of the survey to their own departments. Not everyone wanted to take on, or felt comfortable with, this task, and therefore some members ended up conducting most of the presentations. According to one participant:

“I was supposed to be giving the one to the [department] and I couldn’t, I couldn’t give it and feel comfortable. Because, at that point, I really did not understand what I was doing.”

Finally, participants felt that it wasn’t practical to participate in all areas of the project. They worried that they lacked awareness and education in topics discussed at the meetings. Comments related to this included:

“You know, I think that if we all were on a level playing field, as far as we all had university education and the quality of work life theories and studies, you know, we’d studied this as a student, we could all come to the table reasonably prepared to argue our point. But the majority of us have a limited understanding, and then there are two or three people who have a much more in-depth understanding.”

4. Discussion

The following discussion draws from the literature to address the themes that emerged in the present study. Hall's (1981) criteria for participatory research are then revisited.

Findings from the present study indicated that committee members were not comfortable with the presence of managers on the committee. At the same time, committee members acknowledged that management needed to be represented on the committee. Sustained commitment of top management support is claimed to be a key factor to the success of the participatory process (Israel et al., 1992; Kompier et al., 1999; Kompier et al., 1998). However, Elden and Taylor (1983) stress that the participatory research enterprise must be based on power equalization in which all parties share and control the entire research process. In a workplace, this is difficult to achieve as managers clearly have more power than the "workers". As has been pointed out (Minkler & Pies, 1999), behind the euphemism of participation, the realities of power imbalances often remain. For example, Langan-Fox and colleagues (2002) found that participation in an employee participation program was likely to be affected by organizational seniority. There are no apparent solutions to this dilemma. If workplace studies are to include representatives from all levels in an organization, it is inevitable that members at lower levels of the hierarchy may feel intimidated or uncomfortable about expressing their opinions in the presence of work superiors. It also implies that there will always be trust issues between employees and management in such research. Potentially, this barrier to conducting participatory research might be minimized if there was some process in place to assure committee members that there would be no repercussions for them based on discussions during the meetings. For example, if the Terms of Reference for the project included an item stating that work on the committee could not be used as a basis for evaluating members' performance at their usual job, trust issues might be alleviated.

Apart from the role of management, committee members also expressed concern about the makeup of the committee itself. Members were frustrated about committee members who were quiet and those who consistently did not show up to meetings. Some felt that not enough 'workers' were on the committee. Israel, Schurman, & Hugentobler (1992) support that committee composition can be a major factor in a workplace project's longevity. These researchers found that their own Stress and Wellness committee worked to revise its membership until it was politically appropriate for the organization. It is interesting that members interviewed for the present study noted a transitional process whereby the committee developed a desired composition (the initial composition for the committee had been decided upon by the Chair of the Project).

On the other hand, achieving a desired committee makeup presents its own challenges, whether it occurs through a natural transition, or whether it requires an interview process as implied by some participants. Elden and Taylor (1983) caution that if the group of representatives from the workforce is successful in its research, it could maintain itself and be seen by others as a new source of power in the workplace. They refer to this as 'the junta problem' (p. 6). Minkler and Pies (1999) similarly discuss how training participants can alienate them and make them strangers in the community. A selection process for recruiting

new members to the QWL committee may result in such an elitist profile for the committee. There is presently a waiting list to get on the committee so it is anticipated that recruitment issues and the process of achieving a desired composition will continue to evolve.

The present study found that participatory research without action was not acceptable. This emphasis on action as integral to the participatory process has been documented by others (Elden et al., 1983; Israel et al., 1992). In a sense, this is contradictory to Patton's (1997) experiences with evaluation studies where participants regard the process of research more importantly than the findings of research. Patton argues that "process use", in contrast to "findings use", in participatory research is valuable because the capacity to engage in this type of thinking has more enduring value than a delimited set of findings. The steering committee was very focused on the QWL survey outcomes and the implications of these outcomes for subsequent action. To date, there has been little focus on processes such as how committee members solicit input from the employees they represent, how the committee deals with the turnover of committee members, how findings of the survey are relayed to management, and what strategies should be in place for management to respond and intervene based on survey results. These issues have only begun to be addressed. A focus on survey outcomes and subsequent action may be indicative of the focus typically found in clinical research environments. One could argue that clinical research environments are outcome-focused because of the implications these outcomes have for medical practice. Perhaps, then, it is not surprising that such a value was applied to the QWL Project by participants in the present study.

The frustration of the committee regarding who should be responsible for action is consistent with other occupational researchers (Hugentobler et al., 1992) who have reported a variety of barriers limiting their own project team's success in achieving goals. When Hugentobler and colleagues (1992) interviewed team members, they found that less than one-half of members agreed that the team had the authority to carry out its solutions/recommendations and that the majority thought the team had selected problems that were too large for the group to solve. At the time of the interviews for the present study, little action based on the survey results had been taken and committee members expressed frustration about this; in fact, the process of ensuring that appropriate interventions take place had not yet been discussed at committee meetings. According to Israel, Schurman, and Hugentobler (1992), involvement in the participatory research process "may raise expectations that change will occur and when it is slow to happen, feelings of frustration and lack of control may result" (p. 95). Organizing action is often considered the weakest part of a participatory research project (Stoeker, 1999).

It has been proposed that worker participation is important in the design and evaluation of all stages of the participatory research process such as collection, analysis, and interpretation of data (Elden et al., 1983; Guba & Lincoln, 1989; Heron, 1996; Mergler, 1987; Park, 1993; Zalk, 2001). Based on the results of the present study, this goal is not feasible. The difficulty of attaining full participation by members of the QWL steering committee can be traced back to the project's origin; the initial vision for the project came from one person (the president of the organization) and funding for the project was acquired by this individual. The committee itself made it impossible for participation in all aspects of the project to be

feasible. For example, the committee voted that the QWL survey should be anonymous. Therefore, members were not able to participate in data handling and data analysis of the project because the data were confidential. It has been acknowledged that full participation in participatory research is not always met in practice (Brown, 1983; Elden et al., 1983; Heron, 1996). In fact, the benefits of full participation by workers in all aspects of the research process have been questioned. Israel, Schulz, Parker, and Becker (1998) propose that it might be more valuable to focus on involving members in interpreting and making sense of the data rather than training them in research methodology such as data analysis.

The claim that full participation is not feasible should not be mistaken for Minkler and Pies' (1999) concept of "token participation" where members are heard but their input is discounted or not heeded. The author believes that the opportunity for, and actual, participation in all aspects of the project was not feasible for the QWL steering committee. This is the reality of conducting participatory research in workplace studies. Committee members could not always attend meetings and there were aspects of the project where they did not think they should be involved or they did not want to be involved. As members started to cycle off the committee, new members could not have the same input as original members regarding survey design and methodology. New members may continue to feel a lack of ownership in the project. Lack of ownership perceptions could be addressed by a yearly retreat to discuss project goals, research methodology, and possibly modifications to the survey.

The workplace setting made it difficult for some members to attend project meetings. This may especially be true of health care work environments where it has been shown that having patient responsibilities interferes with members' ability to attend participatory ergonomic team meetings (Bohr, Evanoff, & Wolf, 1997). Perhaps, challenges in attendance could be alleviated by having more than one representative from areas that experience personnel shortages when an employee (e.g. secretaries, physicians) is absent for a couple of hours. Potentially, representation from such areas may increase if membership is shared among several designated employees.

Was the QWL Project participatory research? While the objective of the present study was not to evaluate the project in this regard, a few comments are in order. Returning to Hall's (1981) criteria for participatory research, it appears that 6 of the 7 characteristics of the participatory process were demonstrated in the interviews with study participants: The vision for the project came from the workplace itself with the president responding to anecdotal reports of burnout and poor morale; although no action was promised, the ultimate goal of the project was to improve the quality of work-life of employees both on and off the steering committee; the focus of the QWL Project was on work with all employee groups; the QWL Project has strengthened steering committee members' awareness of their own abilities and resources—steering committee members have taken responsibility for many tasks concerning the project including researching topic areas and reporting back to the committee as well as their respective departments; the term "researcher" hasn't been used in the context of the project but it was implied that all steering committee members were considered to be researchers on the project; the author, herself, was a committed participant and learner in the process. One of Hall's (1981) characteristics was not met by the QWL

Project: based on the present study's findings, participants on the steering committee did not have control of the entire research process. However, this was partly due to feasibility issues previously discussed and the fact that participants did not appear to want control of the entire process. In a sense, the project was as participatory as it could have been. More importantly, it could be argued that the project was as participatory as the workers wanted it to be.

The present study demonstrates that there is room for improvement regarding participatory approach to the QWL Project. Trust issues on the committee between employees and management might be alleviated if the Terms of Reference for the project included an item stating that work on the committee could not be used as a basis for evaluating members' performance at their usual job. The composition of the committee is not static and therefore, needs to be continuously revised so that members can attend and participate in meetings, actively representing their employee groups. One consideration may be to include more than one representative from employees groups that experience personnel shortages when an employee is absent for a couple of hours. The committee needs to be careful that it does not attain an elitist profile at the centre. In addition, the committee could develop a strategy to involve its waiting list of potential members. The committee needs to focus on setting processes in place that will allow the QWL Project to continue to run smoothly as members leave and new members join. For example, how committee members solicit input from the employees they represent, how findings from the survey are relayed to management, what strategies are in place for management (decision makers at the centre) to respond and intervene based on the survey results, and how the committee deals with the turnover of committee members (e.g. how to give them ownership in the project) need to be made more explicit. A yearly retreat to discuss project goals and modifications to the survey may be one way to engage new members. The role of the committee should be clarified to maximize members' time, abilities, and resources. Some project responsibilities may better be addressed by groups or people outside the committee. However, these decisions should be made explicitly by the committee.

5. Conclusion

In 1992, Israel and colleagues (1992) reported that there existed little concrete analysis of the issues and dilemmas faced by researchers and participants alike as they learn to assume shared roles in the research process. Over 10 years later, this still appears to be a gap in the literature, especially in the context of QWL research. The present study found that: while the role of management in participatory research was viewed as being important, employees were uncomfortable with the physical presence of management at meetings; the desired composition of the participatory research team was more complex than simply ensuring representation from workers; involving employees in research about their workplace without subsequent action was not acceptable to them; and participation in all aspects of the project was difficult to achieve. These perceptions are significant because they challenge some existing notions in the literature about participatory research. Recommendations regarding trust issues, membership recruitment, and the role of members in the participatory process have been outlined.

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Table 1

Central Themes based on the Interviews with 12 Participants

Title of theme	Description of theme
1. The role of management was an issue 2. The desired composition of the participatory research team was more complex than ensuring representation from workers	The role of management in the participatory research process was viewed as important however, employees were not comfortable with the presence of managers at meetings. a. The team required more vocal members b. Members needed to be consistent about attending meetings c. The team required more 'workers' d. There was a transitional phase in which the team achieved a desired composition
3. Participatory research without action was not acceptable 4. Full participation in all aspects of the project was difficult to achieve	The success of the project was gauged by whether interventions occurred. a. Members did not attend meetings b. Members did not think they should participate c. Members did not want to participate d. It was not practical for all members to participate