Editorial

Putting participation in the picture

Photographs are sometimes described as ‘studies’ of their subject matter. How would photographers portray ‘participation in healthcare’?

I am not about to use this editorial to review a new photographic exhibition, but think we could have fun and learn something by imagining one. If we imagine the photographs that would feature in an exhibition, we might stimulate fresh insights into participation in health care. If we imagine the ways in which the content of a photographic exhibition would be influenced by the nature of the brief given to photographers, the sources they turned to for inspiration and the constraints of the photographic medium, we might be prompted to reflect on how the pictures presented by our own non-photographic ‘studies’ of participation in health care are shaped by the contexts in which we operate, our ways of thinking and the constraints of our research tools.

So let us imagine then. If a group of talented photographers were given a brief to portray the ‘participation’ or ‘involvement’ of patients or members of the public in any activity relating to their own health care, health services, health policy or health-related research, what kinds of photographs would they produce? Who would appear in them and what would they be doing?

Do indulge yourself a little thinking time!

While drafting this editorial, I imagined photographs that reflected various interpretations of the words ‘participation’ and ‘involvement’. I thought, for example, that some photographs might focus on one person who is ‘involved’ in a health care activity in the sense

that they are intensely engaged in it. Images of children brushing their teeth or people with diabetes giving themselves insulin injections could fall into this category, as could an image of a person sitting at home penning a letter to a health service manager about the care she/he received during a recent hospital stay. This interpretation of ‘involvement’ is sometimes obscured by the current emphasis on involvement as encouraging and enabling health service users or members of the public to join in with health care providers, health service managers, policy makers or academic researchers in activities from which they have previously been excluded. However, I suspect that some photographers would still recognize that people who appear to be operating alone can be very ‘involved’ in health care – and not just their own.

That said, I think that many photographs would focus on communicative action between people (especially between health professionals and the people consulting them), and I think that some photographs would clearly emphasize visible diversity within groups of people working on health care activities. I could envisage a photograph of a health service committee with ‘lay’ members appearing in the exhibition, but suspect that a photographer who wanted to present this as a model of participation might feel obliged to identify the ‘affiliations’ of the people pictured in an accompanying note in order to explain the inclusion of a picture of a rather indistinguishable group of people in the exhibition.

I imagine that some photographers might choose to portray participation by its apparent absence. The exhibition might include photographs of empty chairs around a meeting table, or people sitting outside closed doors. This raises the question of what we can learn by thinking about the people who do *not* feature in the photographs. Why are they not there? Do they not participate in the activities portrayed, or do they participate but in ways that the photographer is not aware of or that are invisible to the eye of the camera?

Some thoughtful photographers might try to capture not just participation in process, but to reflect the goals and consequences of different attempts to promote participation. How might their photographs communicate the rationales for greater patient and public participation in health care? How might they communicate support for or cynicism about different activities?

As I said above, it might be useful to imagine the various factors that would influence the composition of a photographic exhibition as well as the images themselves. Imagine, for example, that we, a mixed group of contributors to and readers of *Health Expectations*, were given the remit and the resources to commission a photographic exhibition of 'participation in healthcare'. What kind of a brief would we give the photographers and how would this stimulate or constrain their vision?

Imagine the other sources that the photographers might use for inspiration. What kinds of image would a policy document or an issue of *Health Expectations* prompt them to seek? What kinds of advice would health service managers, clinical health care professionals or consumer advocates give them? I wondered to what extent the people in the health care organizations who

offered the photographers access to their subject matter would try to influence the content of the exhibition. If they were keen to be seen to be 'doing' participation according to current policy models, which activities would they consider 'photogenic'?

The photographic portrayal of participation will, of course, be shaped by the properties of the photographic medium. Some forms and aspects of participation will obviously be more easily captured in a photographic image than others. I derived some amusement from thinking about photographs of meetings of health service committees with 'lay' members. As mentioned above, the photographer might identify people's 'affiliations' in an explanatory note, but she/he could probably capture little of the nature or extent of their participation beyond the fact of their membership of the committee and their presence at the meeting. (What could we read into the closed eyes or open mouths that were captured in the photograph?)

Our thought experiment could, of course, be extended further. For example, we could imagine the contents of an exhibition of work by artistic photographers who had been allowed to enhance and manipulate their original photographic images. We could ponder how a competition to identify the 'best' photographic portrayal of participation in health care would be judged. For now, however, I hope that our short imaginative diversion has been fruitful.

Have fun with the musing – and perhaps with the camera!

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