# Voices from the Field:

Documenting Community Voices: How Can Participatory Research Effectively Identify Local Ecological Narratives?

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An important measure of success in participatory research is the degree to which the voices of community members guide the research process and are represented in the results. Such research can therefore be approached as a discursive intervention—a process that in some way changes how participants communicate about a given topic—with the dual goals of enhancing a community's capacity for self-determination and answering a research question. Bearing this in mind, I have worked since 2001 with partners in five rural North Carolina communities to conduct research that characterizes local ecological narratives: shared stories through which community members articulate their relationship to the local landscape (see Cronon 1992, Rappaport 2000). The goal of these initiatives was to identify narratives that could help empower community members to assert more control over the fate of their local landscapes and achieve shared visions.

The initiatives' success, then, is reflected in the degree to which we successfully invoked narratives that can build community support for collective action toward locally-desired resource management outcomes. This evaluative criterion reframes the contrast posited by Argyris and Schön (1991) between "rigor" and "relevance" in action research; rather, the rigor of these initiatives lies in the degree to which they achieve relevance. My partners and I are now undertaking such an evaluation of our work. We see this evaluation as more than an analysis of what we have done, but as a way to enhance and extend it: my partners hope that the results of the evaluation will help them to better engage fellow community members in achieving management goals. These goals and the obstacles to achieving them vary among communities, so the evaluation process also varies accordingly. The case of Macon County, where one of the initiatives took place,
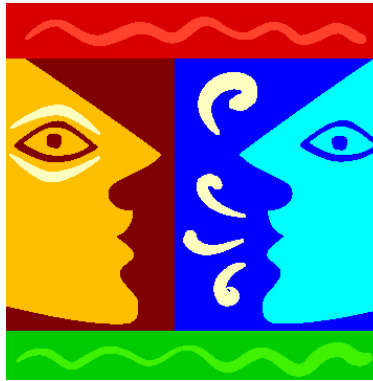
illustrates how discursive evaluative methodology emerges from community context.

Macon County, NC: Reflecting on a Participatory Initiative
"God, is this Macon County? Is this where I grew up?" Wilma Anderson's question is one that residents of this Southern Appalachian county frequently have to ask themselves. The rural landscape of this North Carolina county is being transformed by rapid growth and fragmentation: the county's population grew 33.5 percent from 1990 to 2003 (US Census 2002, 2005). Out-of-state residents now own 43% of the parcels in the county, which now average less than five acres in size (Macon County Tax Department 2005). Many Macon citizens are upset to see their forested mountainsides and agricultural bottomlands subdivided into luxury homesites: as Bob Scott complains, "Why should the view of the mountains for all of us be ruined by some rich cat that builds some obnoxiously huge house right on top of a ridge line?" Despite their misgivings, community members largely feel that they have no voice in decision-making regarding their local landscape. Can participatory research help enable community voices to guide land-use management decision-making? With a team of concerned community partners, I set out to explore this question through the Little Tennessee Perspectives project.

Last September at the Annual CFRF Workshop, I reported on the public process that community partners and I had just completed in Macon County—the culmination of Little Tennessee Perspectives. Our approach to discursive participatory research, which was similar to the methodology I had used in the four other study communities, was based in documentary ethnography: community members, my research partner Carla Norwood, and I conducted audio-recorded,

semi-structured interviews with fifty Macon residents about their connection to place, their perceptions of landscape change, and their attitudes toward the future. We also photographed the interviewees in places that were meaningful to them. Carla and I then coded the interview data to identify emergent narratives and used these narratives to guide the development of an audio-visual documentary. The documentary, Macon County Voices, combined interview excerpts with photographs to tell stories about Maconians' views of the changing landscape.

To pre-test whether our interpretation of local narratives was accurate and relevant to community members, we solicited and incorporated feedback from our community partners and focus groups. Then we presented the documentary publicly at four community meetings in August. Community members were invited to respond to the presentation through a facilitated discussion process, which culminated in developing visions for the county's future and considered ways of achieving those visions.

Both my partners and I were pleased with the success of the process: more than 300 community members took part, and many of these participants spoke out at a subsequent public hearing, calling upon the County Board of Commissioners to address the critical issues they had identified. Such public engagement is unprecedented in Macon County: for the first time in my community partners' memories, a broad coalition of citizens was demanding that the political leadership act more aggressively to plan for landscape change.

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This May, I interviewed each of my four community partners about what had happened since our public process concluded last summer, and what should happen next. Nearly a year has passed, and their outlooks have sobered considerably. The visions articulated in our public meetings received no response from the Board of Commissioners. The County Planning Board, which endorsed our project from the outset, has considered several planning measures that could address citizen concerns, but all have been tabled or stripped of any substantive provisions. A slight majority on both boards maintain that most Maconians favor unregulated development, and they refuse to listen to those who suggest otherwise. One planning board member dismissed the entire Little Tennessee Perspectives project (in which he himself participated), claiming that the project reflected the views only of "the kind of people who go to meetings" and was thus unrepresentative of the "silent majority" in the community. In this inverted discourse of public participation, anyone who participates in a public process is no longer deemed a legitimate constituent; instead, political leaders claim to represent only those who conveniently remain silent, and thus, uncannily, always seem to share the leaders' views.

Though the political leaders' protestations may be self-serving, they point to a real issue: how do we know whose voices have been omitted from our project? Are the narratives we identified resonant throughout the community, or are they just an artifact of the public process we undertook and the agendas that shaped that process? Beginning with the follow-up interviews last month, my partners and I are endeavoring to answer these questions.

Evaluation as Participatory Research

As Israel et al. (2005) note, evaluative techniques employed in a participatory research project should themselves be participatory. This means that community partners as well as researchers should shape the process and have a stake in its outcomes. In the case of Little Tennessee Perspectives, I am interested in testing the effectiveness of our participatory methodology at identifying ecological narratives that are broadly resonant in the community. My partners share this interest, but their goal is to be able to demonstrate enough support for the collective actions proposed by project participants to overcome the current political impasse in the county.

To serve our respective purposes, my partners and I have decided upon an evaluative approach that includes a sample survey and focus groups. Both methodologies will be used to ascertain whether the views expressed by Little Tennessee Perspectives

participants are shared by non-participants. Most participants opined that community members should take collective action to determine the future of Macon County's landscape through planning measures. Do non-participants share this perspective, and if so, why? Through first inductive and then deductive coding, we have identified several distinctions among the narratives that participants referenced to justify their positions. For example, narratives grounded in lived experiences can be distinguished from those based in creed. Some narratives derive a connection to place from heritage, while others derive it from affinity. Narratives differ in their construction of individual rights and responsibilities and in their attitudes toward change. Through evaluation, we aim to test the validity of these hypothesized narrative typologies, characterize the narratives that appear to motivate most of our respondents, and compare those to the narratives that emerged from last year's public discussions.

In order to measure support for the narratives articulated by community members, our evaluative instruments will largely retain those community members' voices. Drawing upon Q-factor analysis (Martin and Steelman 2004) techniques, we will ask respondents to rank their support for a range of direct quotations from last year's project. Responses and the correlations among them will enable us to test our hypotheses. The survey will reach a random sample of community members, which is important to my partners, while the focus groups will enable more in-depth exercises; triangulating the results from different methods will strengthen our conclusions.

My community partners will use the evaluation results to inform their efforts at community capacity-building; they will draw upon the broadly-resonant narratives identified to more effectively frame their appeals to political leaders and their fellow community members. Meanwhile, I will work with my partners in the other four communities to conduct their own evaluations. While each evaluative process will reflect the unique issues and goals of the community where it takes place, comparison among them will hopefully yield further insights into the design and evaluation of discursive, participatory research.

A participatory research project necessarily manipulates a community's stories about itself. The result is new, synthetic interpretation of local narratives as refracted through the particular biases of the researchers and community partners involved. This interpretive process should not be avoided, but it must be acknowledged and explicitly addressed in the research process. In Macon County, my partners and I have woven together a story through Macon County Voices. In an ongoing, iterative process of public engagement, we are endeavoring to hone that story until community members feel that their voices are represented in it. I believe that, as participatory researchers, helping those voices to be heard is perhaps the best service we can offer.

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