



**Transcript for “Using Insights from Participatory Research to Inform Poverty Policy”
(12mins)**

Featuring Mariana Chilton

Hosted by David Chancellor

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[Chancellor] You’re listening to an April 2014 podcast from the Institute for Research on Poverty. I’m Dave Chancellor. In February of this year, I had the opportunity to talk with Dr. Mariana Chilton of Drexel University in Philadelphia. Chilton directs the Center for Hunger-Free Communities and founded a major, ongoing study called Witnesses to Hunger. She also runs the Philadelphia site of Children’s Health Watch, and a handful of smaller studies that focus on families with young children. Chilton started Witnesses to Hunger in Philadelphia in 2008. The project is built on the involvement of mothers and caregivers of young children who use photographs and stories to document and frame the issues that are important to them and to their children. The research is participatory in that Chilton and her fellow researchers work with people in the community that would normally be research subjects, but, here, they’re really partners in the research. Chilton says that this partnership is carried throughout the research process.

[Chilton] And, not only in working with them to learn about the topic, but also in terms of data collection, they help with data collection. Then they can also help with analyzing the results and double checking the results. Then also figuring out how to disseminate those results in a way that’s meaningful to people in the neighborhood, the people that you’re working with, and then also meaningful scientifically. So when we do participatory research with Witnesses to Hunger, we work with the women, we transcribe their interviews, we audio record their interviews we talk with them about their photographs. So, when it comes time for us to start to develop either an exhibit or to write a research publication or to get out a report, we double check. We check back with the women that we’ve been talking with to make sure we’re saying things that make sense to them, and our assumptions and our assessments are meaningful to them. And to make sure that we’re doing it in a way that’s respectful and has a lot of integrity from their perspective and also still has the scientific integrity. So they have been authors on manuscripts that we’ve developed (peer-reviewed manuscripts). They’ve also been authors on PowerPoint

presentations. And, I even travel to the Institute for Medicine with the women of Witnesses. So, they get invited now to scientific talks, right alongside of me. It's really exciting and it's very enriching. I think we learn a lot of things that we wouldn't learn otherwise if we were staying sort of very distant.

[Chancellor] Although Children's Health Watch isn't a participatory research-based study, it uses other methods to mitigate this "distance". Chilton and the Center for Hunger Free Communities partner with pediatricians and public health researchers to collect information on families with young children when they visit hospitals. The study provides a lot of information on the well-being of kids under the age of four and the ways that public policy changes influence that well-being. For example, Chilton says that, through Children's Health Watch, they knew that families were experiencing a lot of hardship and that it had an impact on their hospitalizations and that kids in families that didn't receive housing subsidies were more likely to be underweight.

[Chilton] **We did actually know a lot about how the welfare system is really inscribing itself into the bodies and brains of little kids and their caregivers. But, what we didn't know was what the caregivers, the moms/the dads, were really doing to try to get out of poverty. We collected data on how much they were making. But we often don't trust that data. We have a sense of the hourly wages and the kinds of jobs, but we know that a lot of the participants in our studies have very—have jobs that fluctuate all of the time. They have seasonal jobs or part time jobs that sometimes are full time and sometimes are part time. Very unpredictable hours.**

[Chancellor] When Chilton started to conduct her participatory research with the women of Witnesses to Hunger, she found that they were learning a lot about how active these moms were in trying to take care of their children, and in trying to get ahead.

[Chilton] **So what we've learned is really a lot about the wit, the grit, and the savvy that the moms and dads have in taking care of their kids. Actually, I think what we've learned is that the parents have a lot of really creative ways of trying to take care of their kids and bring in money. So they have an official job, they sort of know how to navigate the welfare system—that helps. But most of the time the jobs don't pay enough, the welfare system doesn't give enough support. So, we've learned a lot about how the participants will create a little business so, they can do hair and they'll do nails on the side. They'll make a little bit of cash money on the side, or they even do catering, or they do child care for other people. So they're trying to make extra cash to make ends meet, to buy shoes, to buy diapers and things like that. So we've learned a lot about the savvy, and the brilliance, and the entrepreneurship. That's been really exciting--their agency, and just the fact that the moms and dads are really powerful. They're doing a lot and we don't capture that in our quantitative work.**

[Chancellor] One major aspect of participatory research is building on strengths and resources that are found within a community. In recent years, the city of Philadelphia has instituted some really innovative ways to address poverty. Chilton points to the mayor's office on economic opportunity, developments to streamline public assistance programs and, especially, efforts to recognize the trauma that many people in deep poverty have experienced.

[Chilton] There's a really forward thinking community in Philadelphia that works on behavioral health issues. There's been a very strong push to get people who are working in the social services world to recognize that the experience of deep poverty is a traumatic experience. It's a violent experience, actually. Not only is deep poverty itself a violent [Chilton] experience, but a lot of families that are living in deep poverty are exposed to violence. That can be violence in the neighborhoods. It can also be violence in the home, violence in the schools, interpersonal relationships. For instance, among the TANF recipients (really, around the country), they have extremely high rates of exposure to violence. I think people are starting to recognize that people will not get well unless you can really address the trauma that they have experienced. There are a number of groups in Philadelphia that are working in homeless shelters that house families to help the families to come together and talk about their experiences with trauma and learn new ways of being in the world that is not so trauma-related. So one of the things that we work on is this concept of SELF. That's dealing with Safety (that's the S); dealing with emotional management (that's the E); dealing with loss and letting go, sort of letting go of old habits or letting go of people in your life that you need to let go of and move on from (that's the L); and also, developing a sense of Future, having a sense of future orientation and a sense of hope, kind of getting out of the same ruts.

[Chancellor] Chilton says that Philadelphia has several organizations that run these SELF-help groups. These groups are based on what's called the "Sanctuary Model" developed by health professionals who worked with people who had experienced a lot of trauma. From on what she has learned through Witnesses and other participatory research efforts, she believes that these groups can be very empowering for the participants.

[Chilton] It's not something that builds on itself, you can show up to a SELF [group] really at any time. Whether they're dealing with emotions or dealing with loss or future or self, they're also so interrelated that there's not like a set curriculum from beginning to middle to end. You can have a 12-week curriculum that continues to rotate and people can rotate in and out at any time. And we think it could be very transformative, especially for families that are experiencing homelessness. Also for families that have experienced, that have survived gun violence or community violence. That's why we're inserting the SELF program (the Center for Hunger Free Communities, the center that I run) with this new demonstration that we're doing for TANF. We're trying to put the self groups into the TANF program itself so that the families that are there, that really need a lot of help, can get to the point where they can find a good job and stay in that job. They need to do a lot

of emotional work. And so we think that this SELF work could be a very exciting way, and a very transformative way for low-income families to pull themselves up and out, and build a sense of mastery and control and self-efficacy.

[Chancellor] Chilton and her colleagues developed this TANF demonstration called The Building Wealth and Health Network in partnership with the Pennsylvania Department of Public Welfare. It uses matched savings accounts, financial literacy classes, and peer support groups—all components that were in some way informed by findings from her participatory research studies. And Chilton emphasizes not just that these findings are valuable, but that there's real scientific method to participatory research.

[Chilton] There is a lot going on scientifically that is really valuable and this reciprocal relationship, extremely valuable. And one of the things that I think is so wonderful is that it is very transformative for the people participating in the research as well as for the researchers. I would never have been able to come up with this demonstration if I wasn't doing this participatory research with the women and learning about their side hustles and learning about their struggles with trauma and how they manage their money. Because it wasn't always coming out in the recording. It may come out in our other interactions. So, I think that that interaction is really powerful and really important.

[Chancellor] Chilton cautions that participatory research isn't for everyone. Even though there are potentially large learning payoffs, this can be very challenging work.

[Chilton] You have to have a really strong sense of mutual respect and frankly, love, for other human beings. And a sense of nonjudgmental, of not judging others. I think that to do participatory research effectively you really need to have a strong conviction and willingness to transcend boundaries of race and class, and ethnicity, world view. And to sort of suspend your judgment and to be willing to love the people that you're working with. And, that doesn't mean that it's all singing Kum Ba Yah. There are a lot of things that are happening in the neighborhoods and with our participants that are really upsetting to me, and also, there are many things that I do that I'm sure upset the research participants that we're working with. But there's a sense of mutual respect that is so important in the sense of commitment to humanity and commitment to those social relationships. It's very, very powerful. It's palpable. And I think the more connected we are, I think the better the research is. The more powerful it can be when you're actually disseminating that and people can actually experience that sense of affection and that sense of humanity. It sort of brings the humanity back into our research on poverty. And for us who do it, it's so valuable and rewarding. I think we need to get more people involved in this kind of work.

[Chancellor] Many thanks to Mariana Chilton for speaking to us about this work. You've been listening to a podcast from the Institute for Research on Poverty.