Exploring the six elements of deep participation in some detail begins to answer the critical question of how any societal group or society—sometimes marginal and isolated from the centers of political and economic power, and sometimes right in the thick of it—actually reinvents and reconstructs, when necessary, its institutions in new and complex ways. To accomplish this endeavor, existing social compacts, guiding images, and cultural metaphors are revised and reorganized. As a result, the societal group itself must develop the capacity to socially reinvent existing social knowledge, legitimize the resulting new social conventions, and renegotiate existing power alignments, thereby re-creating stability. Certainly not an easy task, but still a possible one if deep participation’s elements and processes are used.

In this chapter, each of the six elements of deep participation is explored in detail. Isolating every element in its entirety is difficult, partially because all of them are multi-interactive and the interactions themselves are often, at least partially, hidden from view. So, working from the deep participation research hypotheses established in the previous chapter, the observed general activity of each element is first described briefly. The specific element is then analyzed from social theory perspectives and other literature; conclusions that can formulate the base for a participatory social theory are noted. Despite this analytical dissection, these elements remain the so-called small things by which the practice of participation is created. The six elements are as follows:

1. High differentials of culture and power create destabilizing conditions.
2. Iterative critical thought and resonating emotion generate new social knowledge.
3. Essential social and cultural legitimacy is created and applied.
4. Social-indigenous institutions provide the placement for these actions.
5. Social energy, featuring inclusion, takes root and sustains itself for the long term.
6. Integrative social power emerges and anchors the new social convention.

With these six elements, deep participation produces a dynamic wherein societal groups can reinvent and reorganize their underlying social structures or institutions. However, it is only in times of increasing instability and incoherence that these underlying guiding social institutions undergo this type of substantive “change-of-type” social change process.

Culture and power differentials

High culture and power differentials serve as the context within which deep participation can emerge. These types of extremely high differentials were identified in the majority of the 89 cases discussed in Chapter 4; however, only 10 of them were able to alter their participation dynamics to effectively surmount them. Every societal group and society is necessarily organized around varying amounts and types of differentials, but each has different dynamic paths and uses. While there can certainly be high power differentials among various groups in a society and still have stability, such situations, enforced by either physical threat power or a social compact, legitimate existing inequities. When either one of these two enforcers begins to change, stability can quickly begin to diminish.

Culture differentials are, however, not as easily perceived as power differentials. For example, they often exist in a complementary and positive fashion within the same society. However, when tolerance for these nuanced distinctions diminishes—on either side by even a small minority—the long-enduring culture variances can turn into negative culture differentials quite quickly. As a result, they become like patches of differently woven cloth on a wider swath. For much of the time the distinctions are not even noted because they clearly don’t matter; but when the tolerance for differences in a society begins to wane, instability is introduced and the situation can rapidly change. Then, the social fabric begins to tear around the previously unseen boundaries of difference.

This internal culture differential, in particular, is exacerbated through long-term and low-key domination. Oddly enough, these distinctions become less recognized over time, particularly among those that hold the power. However, scholars that study culture and power pointedly describe and analyze the stealth and corrosion of this domination. And as we will see in Chapter 10, culture domination can, and does, derail or diminish knowledge production by societal groups in ways that marginalize. And yet, it is quite difficult to trace back to the initiating threat or set of violent actions that initially began these negative divisions.